

# Learning to pray: Always a beginner

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Prayer. We read, write, talk and agonize about it, resolve to do it, wish we'd done it more than we actually do it. In this it resembles other pursuits of which people overestimate the intensity, frequency and duration—such as reading, writing and sex.

Prayer is archaic, anachronistic, against the grain of modern life, solitary and often heartbreaking, embarked on without the certainty of fruit. It demands an expenditure of time that sometimes seems like a waste of time, a waste of self. Bill Gates recently pronounced, “In terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There’s a lot more I could be doing on Sunday morning.” Of course, of course. Prayer does not promise fame, money, and the love of beautiful people. It’s working with blind faith, stubborn hope, dumb love.

The tiny, stunted wings of the flightless cormorant of the Galapagos are useless. Yet with hazy, ancestral memories of flight, it spends much of its time standing on rocks near the shore spreading its vestigial wings out to dry in the sun, just as flying cormorants do. Flapping our wings with a sense of futility, a foreboding of failure—that’s how we feel on the brink of something difficult but exhilarating like prayer. But if the wind suddenly lifted the bird and it sailed through the skies, effortlessly, beautifully—well, that’s like flight into the realm where, in prayer, “so great a sweetness flows in the breast that we must laugh and we must sing, we are blest by everything, everything we look upon is blest,” as William Butler Yeats says in another context.

These blessed states are partly a free gift and partly earned: we travail to forge the metal which lightning may strike. As both a writer and a person who prays, I’ve learned that both writing and prayer take a quiet life, hard work and sacrifice. Henry James captures the pain: “If one would do the best he can with his pen, there is one word he must inscribe on his banner, and that word is solitude.” Though there have, of course, been people of prayer who were also gregarious—one thinks of Teresa of Ávila or Dietrich Bonhoeffer—and though friendships bring insight, knowledge, self-

knowledge and growth, my own experience echoes what T. S. Eliot says in “Ash Wednesday”: “Where shall the word be found, where will the word/ Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.” Too much extroversion robs me of the inner quiet necessary to view my life sanely. Conversations echo in my head, a dissonance drowning out my own thoughts. In fact, my writing, thinking and praying are inversely proportional to my social life.

“Be still and know that I am God,” echoes an Old Testament imperative. In the Book of Kings the Lord appeared to the prophet Elijah not in “the great and powerful wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rock,” not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in “a gentle whisper.” A whisper, easily drowned in the tumult of an overambitious schedule. The Quaker writer Richard Foster extols the *otium sanctum*, the “holy leisure,” of the Church Fathers. “If we expect to succeed in the contemplative arts, we must pursue ‘holy leisure’ with a determination that is ruthless to our date books,” he says.

Holy Leisure. It is indeed the best soil for prayer: a considered, underscheduled life with fallow hours and pruned activities, commitments and friends. Prayer requires a strenuous attempt at detachment from our distracting world of dollars, demands, the telephone, mail, friends and extended family. It’s important especially for women, trained to be “nice,” to resist the blandishments of busyness—“giving back to the community,” taking your turn, doing your fair share.

To live a life of prayer is to live with “the broad margin to life” that Thoreau praises, thus making space for the new idea, the transforming insight. When I look at Vermeer’s paintings of young women, pausing in the midst of quiet work to gaze out of the window and muse, I think: “That’s how I want to live my life—softly, meditatively, reverently.” I must tiptoe into the world of prayer leaving behind the nagging old world of people and their irritations, mess in the house, to-do lists, the jagged edges of life jabbing me—slowly, gingerly, like an immigrant unsure of the language, the customs, the geography of the country. The quietness has a cost, of course, the cost of a sometimes wrenching loneliness. Yet that loneliness is precious and holy.

Here we enter the realm of paradox. Though we need solitude to pray, prayer returns us to the engagement of love. As the refrain of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” declares, “He prayeth well who loveth well/ Both man and bird and beast./ He prayeth best who loveth best/ All things both great and

small.” The Gospel of John gives us two yardsticks to gauge our spirituality—growing love for God and growing love for the people in our lives. Real prayer doesn’t so much change God’s mind as it changes us. And in the quietness of prayer we learn the arts of kindness. Thomas Merton writes, “It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.”

A fierce yearning—“God-hunger” —launches spiritual growth. “You shall seek me, and you shall find me when you seek me with all your heart.” These words from Jeremiah were engraved on a plaque on our dormitory wall when I was a novice with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Yearning and seeking—but also making time to meditate on scripture, and to exercise discipline in following its wisdom.

When practicing the art of prayer, as in practicing any art, discipline must channel the streams of sweetness, of insight, that may strike and surprise us. In this, as in mastering a craft such as writing or making music, there is no substitute for the long hours of practice and learning. In prayer as in many other human endeavors, quality springs from quantity. “If you want to pray better, you should pray more,” Mother Teresa said.

When we train ourselves in the scriptural precept to pray constantly, trying to be continually aware of the quiet presence of Christ, a radiance, a luminosity, like the silent, ever-present ghost in old movies, a quietness begins to sink over our beings, the quietness that engenders creative thought. We must persist in the discipline until it becomes instinctive, until we convert every thought, desire and frustration into a prayer, turning to God as naturally as a flower turns its face to the sun and the butterflies. We must pray until this inward work becomes as necessary as thinking, so essential that a day in which we have not prayed will seem a day in which we have not fully lived.

Often we yearn for acceleration. But spiritual growth is slow and gradual. The good man in the Psalms is compared to “a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in due season.” Yet, though nothing but time can turn a sapling into a large tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch on its branches, there are organic fertilizers for one’s tender spiritual life that will help it grow stronger, lovelier and, yes, faster.

Spiritual directors suggest rituals to nudge the spirit into the presence of God—praying in the same place, at the same time each day, reading scripture, or breathing deeply to calm the body and concentrate thought before floating free. The memories of the previous times we have met with God on our habitual holy ground usher us into an expectant quietness. Thomas Merton describes this experience: “My chief joy is to escape to the attic of the garden house and the little broken window that looks out over the valley. There in the silence, I love the green grass. The tortured gestures of the apple trees have become part of my prayer. . . . So much do I love this solitude that when I walk out along the road to the old barns that stand alone, delight begins to overpower me from head to foot, and peace smiles even in the marrow of my bones.”

Like a shadow behind the bright yearning for perfection is the inevitability of failure. Failure—or, theologically, sin—is the antiphon to our yearning for goodness—our yearning to be loving, to be righteous. But through it all, through the valley of failure, emerges a faint, pointillist likeness to Christ. We are changed as we seek to imitate Christ and, more, to be merged with him, to be blood brothers in the ancient sense and have his sweet life flow through us as sap through a vine.

Praying is like talking a foreign language. The nouns and verbs in this holy terra incognita are in a softer, lower timbre—patience, humility, self-denial or turning the other cheek. When I read the New Testament, I’m struck by the “upside-down kingdom” it presents, its reversal of the values even of good people. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you. Give secretly so that your right hand does not know what your left hand is doing. Invite those to your home who cannot invite you back.”

We trust in our ability to work, network, charm, maneuver. But “the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight,” Paul says. In God’s world, the person who trusts in God will be blessed as “a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought, and never fails to bear fruit.” Our world values action, quick success—grabbing our desire from the jaws of hostile fate, battering down doors with our will. In God’s realm, we work quietly, knowing that success will come according to God’s will and in God’s perfect timing. When we glimpse the quietness and wisdom of God and even momentarily take a God’s-eye view of our lives, our internal chatter of anxiety and annoyance is silenced as our perspective shifts and our spirits sing in worship.

Humility, an acceptance of unknowing, is a shortcut on the path to God. "If the angel comes, it will be because you have wooed him by your grim resolve to be always a beginner," Rainer Maria Rilke muses. And the support of a community strengthens one in the quest. We invest much time in seeking God without any scientific certainty that God exists. Our only proof is the knowledge of the heart. It helps me to believe when I see Jesus' great insights proven true, not only in the wrinkles of my own life but in the lives of other Christians.

In my Christian friends I often observe increasing goodness and a slow deepening. And though I do believe deeply, as one does when faith is verified by experience, I am an existentialist Christian when assailed by doubt. I choose to believe like Puddleglum, the Marshwiggle in C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, who says, "I'm on Aslan's side, even if there isn't an Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia." And so I go to my small church most Sundays to pray and worship with other believers, refiring my distracted heart with others' fervor.

But being nourished by the faith of others does not necessarily mean imitating them. Writes Thomas Merton: "Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by all the circumstances of their lives. . . . They wear out their minds and bodies in a hopeless endeavor to write somebody else's poems or possess someone else's spirituality."

Prayer is therapeutic in its search for the difficult truth that frees. The very act of praying calms and focuses us. Often the difficulty lies in just settling down and doing it. As with sex or exercise or good conversation, it can be hard to get going, but once we have we'd like to keep going indefinitely. Good prayer, like good sex or good mothering, demands self-forgetfulness; it means losing ourselves in the other, our subject, our Lord. And the flow of prayer can be jammed and dammed by anxiety, hostility, anger, cherishing untruths, saying no too many times.

We are lured into prayer by the promise of joy. The cost turns out to be more than we ever imagined: "not less than everything," as T. S. Eliot says. We learn the rending cost of denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily, breaking out of the prison of the self and its incessant needs and demands, choosing small deaths, in a sense, so as to transcend ourselves and have a richer, more fruitful life. Jesus understood it: "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains

alone. But if it dies, it yields a mighty harvest.”