

Prayers that question

By [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

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Alden Solovy's prayers touch on the times of life we most fear. He finds words for the moments in which most of us have only tears and groans.

When his wife of 27 years, Ami Braziel-Solovy, died after a traumatic brain injury, Solovy had "no desire, no ability to pray or meditate. I was just a blank," he told [Religion News Service](#).

From the blankness came a prayer for his daughters as he witnessed their grief for their mother. With echoes of Lamentations and Psalms, he wrote "[For bereaved children](#)":

Our children are lost in tears,  
Crushed in sorrow,  
Erased in loneliness,  
Bent and broken,  
Their hopes, dust...  
Their joys, cinders...

Then the prayer moves from naming that pain into asking for healing. Drawing from prayers for the bereaved in Solovy's Jewish tradition, "it echos the themes in the Mourner's Kaddish, recalling G-d's majesty and holiness," he writes.

In my work as a hospital chaplain, I usually craft prayers on-the-spot with patients, staff, and family members, using some familiar forms and weaving in pieces of what a person has told me about her dreams and fears, his longings and regrets.

Solovy's prayers tap into a similar skill to that of chaplains—to listen deeply and attentively to the particular struggles in a person's situation. But I was struck by how his prayers also do something that mine—and those in Christian prayerbooks—rarely do: ask questions.

His prayer [for parents who are ill](#) wonders how the illness or surgery will shape the lives of children:

What will they learn?

What beliefs will they take in?

The questions take on more of a tone of anguish in "[This watching, this waiting](#)," for partners of people with advanced Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's disease, or other sources of dementia.

This watching my [husband/wife/spouse/partner]

Slowly lose himself/herself to disease

Is a grief beyond my imagination. . . .

Who is this person inhabiting his/her body?

Where are your memories of our life together?

From Solovy's prayers and the [Hebrew Bible](#) come the reminder we Christians sometimes need that questions are perfectly appropriate in prayer. In the most harrowing times of our lives, questions may be all we have to offer God.

And sometimes words fail us altogether. Even those of us who pray for and with others as part of our jobs may feel too brokenhearted ourselves to piece together something to say out loud. Or perhaps the often-repeated words that usually bring comfort have a hollow ring this time.

That was my experience during a prayer service for a member of our congregation who is ill. Then the church reminded this writer-editor that our prayers are not restricted to the medium of words. An artist among us gathered children to "draw and color their prayers." We each took a candle home to light. And we prayed with our hands: we drummed a rhythm to one of the hymns we sang, we held hands in a circle, and we laid hands on shoulders and arms as we formed a radiating circle out from where the person who is ill sat.

Truly our prayers can have as many forms as the times from which they arise, times of needing connection with God.