

Prayer and poetry

By [Diane Roth](#)

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I'm not that good at either one.

I know, this is an odd confession for a pastor to make. You don't like to hear your pastor saying, "I'm no good at praying." And don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't pray. It's just that I am apt to compare myself with people who seem to be able to go on and on, pray aloud for hours with no notes. When I pray aloud, I admit, I'm always afraid I'm going to get myself into a sentence I can't get out of. My prayers tend to be short, inelegant, a little undisciplined.

I love both poetry and prayer, even though I confess to being good at neither one. I love the formal prayers in my prayer books, eloquent and elegant. I notice that some of these prayers are poetic, using literary devices and structures: metaphors, allusions, alliteration. I love all kinds of poetry, too: from the deceptive simplicity of Robert Frost and Mary Oliver, to the complex rhymes and dense metaphors of Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Donne. And I have tried writing a little poetry too. Though I admire sonnets from a distance, and have even memorized a few, the complexities of rhyme and meter have so far eluded me. Like I said, I am not good at it.

Some of my favorite poets (though not all by any means) have been the devotional ones. Some of John Donne's Holy Sonnets were really prayers, addressed to God—the same can be said of Mary Oliver, Denise Levertov, and others.

For the past year or so, I've been writing occasional haiku prayers—not quite "sighs too deep for words," but at least trying to pray using as few words as possible. It has made me think that perhaps prayer and poetry have some things in common, some things beyond the eloquence of the prayers in my hymnal: something more basic, more elemental than literary devices, something that goes beyond tradition or eloquence.

1. Both prayer and poetry have a necessary honesty. A good poem is, above all, honest. It doesn't pull punches. It tells the truth. In fact, poetry is one way of getting

deeper into truth, an expression of joy or lament or love that strips off artifice and reveals the depths of pain and hope.

2. Both prayer and poetry are elliptical. They are honest, but they leave some things unsaid. Perhaps there are 'sighs too deep for words.' Poems make you read between the lines. They do not say everything. Prayers do too, but in a different way, and perhaps for other reasons. Prayers are elliptical because it is impossible to say all that is on our hearts. The apostle Paul has it right, "We do not know how to pray as we ought," and so prayers will always leave some things unsaid. And yet, not saying everything, a poem or a prayer somehow becomes more than the sum of its parts.

3. You don't have to be good at it. That's right. You don't have to be good at praying to pray. Just say a name. Cry. Rejoice. Stumble through a few words. Don't let the eloquent prayers discourage you. You don't have to be good at poetry to write a poem either. In this era of the professional poets with their bound books, we have forgotten. In the past writing poetry was a hobby for some, like knitting or collecting stamps or playing the piano. But you didn't have to be good at it to enjoy writing limericks, or rhymed couplets, or blank verse.

Prayer and poetry. I am not good at either one. Still, I will lift my voice, my heart, my pen. I don't have to be good at it. Just honest. That's the harder thing, anyway.

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