

The poem I need most this time of year

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It's that time of the year: the time when I need to carry my favorite poem in my pocket and read it frequently. I do this to inoculate myself against the fantasies that come up about now. Not Christmas fantasies of sugar plums dancing in my head—New Year's fantasies.

As a new year approaches I begin to imagine that I will finally grab the reins of my life and get things under control. Thomas Aquinas prayed, "Put my life in good order, O my God." This time of year I start conceiving how *I* will put my life in good order.

Here's how it begins: I enter Barnes & Noble to finish my Christmas shopping, but before I can walk to the children's section to find the perfect puppet for my daughter, I see the conspicuously displayed table of self-help books. I've never met a self-help book I didn't like. Instantly, I've forgotten the puppet as I mindlessly peruse books like *The Mindful Diet*. Yes, I think, this might be the one to help me put my life in order next year.

Thus begins the annual season of "self-dramatization and fantasy," as Rowan Williams has put it.

The impulse is not all bad. These books play on our fantasies of self-improvement through control, but they do sometimes help. Thirteen years ago I bought a book called *It's Hard to Make a Difference When You Can't Find Your Keys*, and to this day I rarely lose my keys. The jury is still out as to whether I'm making a difference.

The danger is when people of faith let these fantasies of order-through-control slip into our thinking about life with God—when "get my spiritual life in order" finds its way onto the list of resolutions. Because the virtues necessary to sticking to a new exercise regimen—initiative, resolve, perseverance—are secondary in the spiritual life to virtues like openness, receptivity, and responsiveness.

And that's why I need my favorite poem. Denise Levertov's "The Avowal" is the perfect poem for a new year. Its image of life with God can serve as a corrective for

those times when a self-help, seize-control mentality slips in.

The poem begins with two images: swimmers floating in water on their backs and hawks being carried on drafts of wind. Two metaphors for a life with God. Like the swimmer and the hawk, the poet wants to “float / into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace”—an image not of grabbing the reins but of releasing them.

Yet releasing the reins—giving up control—feels, paradoxically, like hard work. The poet wants to “learn to attain,” with the word *attain* ending a line and implying effort and initiative. “Learn to attain”—it’s a phrase we might find in a New Year’s resolution. But the first word of the next line surprises the reader with what she wants to attain: freefall. For freefall is attained precisely by giving up on trying to attain. And that’s not easy.

Levertov offers in metaphor, line, and meter what Carmelite sister Ruth Burrows states more directly:

On our side prayer is simply being there: open, exposed, inviting God to do all God wants. Prayer is not our activity, our getting in touch with God, our coming to grips with or making ourselves desirable to God.... We must bear in mind that all we are trying to do is to help ourselves be present for God to love us.

Nothing helps me bear this in mind better than Levertov’s “The Avowal.” I don’t actually have to put the poem in my pocket, for I carry it within me, recalling its images whenever I need them—like when I’m standing before that tempting display of books and thinking that this year I’ll get my prayer life in order, this year I’ll seize the opportunity a new year affords.

Don’t seize, the poem says to me. Just freefall into the Divine’s ready embrace.