

Life of prayer

by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*The Shaping of a Life: A Spiritual Landscape* by Phyllis Tickle

Phyllis Tickle's spiritual memoir opens with a fanfare announcing its themes: "My father taught me to love words, and my mother taught me to pray. " In the beginning there were words, which were to be shaped into prayer.

Tickle is the author of more than two dozen books, most recently *The Divine Hours*, and an authority on religion and American culture. For many years she was the religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*, where she is now a contributing editor. In this latest book, she explores how the threads of youthful experience came to be woven into the tapestry of her identity as a writer and a person of prayer. "I have spent my life as a pray-er. It has been, from the beginning, my vocation in the religious life," she states.

The book is much more about the evolution of Tickle's spiritual awareness and practice than it is about the external trajectory of her life. She spends only 25 pages on her childhood, lived in a large house in the mountains of east Tennessee. More detailed is the account of her time at Shorter College in Rome, Georgia, where she enrolled in 1951--a rite of passage marked by her purchase of a package of cigarettes, which she smoked almost ritually in an unused dormitory bathroom.

Many significant women in Tickle's life have one thing in common: they pray. Prayer is a kind of hidden practice in which one is "caught" out, as Tickle caught her mother praying in bed and, years later, found her beloved professor using the Book of Common Prayer, a textbook for the spirit that Tickle had already discovered. By the time Tickle began her first job as a high school teacher of Latin and English she, too, had been captured by the practice, and was then "caught" in it by a colleague who became a trusted friend. Words plus book plus practice add up to a discipline.

Tickle tells us early on of her love for story and her belief in its totemic power, a belief deeply rooted in the east Tennessee mountains where she grew up. But her book is far too light on story and too heavy on commentary. I wanted to see the scenes move of their own accord rather than have them filtered through a discursive

consciousness. I gladly would have traded cerebral reflections on the Christianity of T. S. Eliot for more folksy East Tennessee-isms such as "too much praying don't get the wood chopped," and a larger number of colorful characters like Tickle's chain-smoking, henna-headed landlady, Mrs. Jim, who introduced Tickle to the popular sacrament of 1950s television.

Reticence is commendable when it preserves the privacy of people who have walk-on parts in Tickle's story, but sometimes her elegant and well-chosen words wrap round her experience like a muffler, cloaking it from view. It was difficult for me to perceive, for example, an episode of youthful depression. The conventions of autobiography don't require graphic intimacy, but verbal veneer should highlight rather than hide essential features.

Still, this is her shaping and weighing of the influences that made her what she is: a woman who lives with reverence for the Christian tradition of prayer. Prayer shapes and is shaped by the natural rhythms and events of a life lived fully within a hurry-up-please-it's-time contemporary world that disregards tradition and spares no time for reflection. Tickle's accounting testifies that God's quiet call can be heard and heeded in depth in this secular world.