

The Practices of Prayer: And It's Always Practice

It would be delinquent of me to write a series on the spiritual practices without including a bit on prayer. Yet it *was* tempting. I struggled between 'what more is there to say to those who've been praying for years?' and 'how can I talk about prayer practices in an short essay when it's like a book a thousand pages long? Yet no matter that it is as old as those who first believed, and has taken more forms that can be counted, prayer is a spiritual discipline that can't be taken for granted or ever perfected. It is the thing that is new each day; ever creating us into something a little re-formed.

The writer, Anne Lamott, says the three essential prayers are: Help. Thanks. Wow. (in her book by the same name.) As one reviewer remarked, "it's the Cliff Notes on prayer." And when I go over a quick inventory of my prayers, they pretty much fall in one of these categories.

In this posting, I'd like to talk about the first one: the prayer of HELP. I'm including in this also all the grumblings and complaining and questions Why? that go along with asking for help. That would be the 'Laments.' "How could you, God, let: that child die, that storm destroy, that stroke maim, that business fail, that war go on for twenty years, that famine starve thousands, that cruel leader stay in power..." Those are the gut, telling-the-truth-of-it prayers that fire up to God in despair, anger, rage or simple hopelessness. In that vulnerable, dark, wild place we still turn to God, knowing we often won't get an answer, and if we don't lose faith even then, we just say: Help.

When I was ten, I was told my two year old brother was going to die within three months of a rare cancer in the muscle of his arm. Zero chance of recovery. I went up to my room, knelt down facing the little window over the roof and asked God to heal him. I remember to this day that unlike most prayers, I 'heard' an audible answer in back of me. A loud deep voice said, "He will not die." And I *knew* that God had answered my prayer. I told everyone it was okay now. Davey wouldn't die. They patted my head and said nothing. And yet, he didn't. He is alive to this day. Unfortunately, it set up some high expectations for prayer on my part! I never again got an answer like this to my prayers for help. Yet like most of us, when I asked for help from God, I knew not only what I wanted, but I knew exactly how God should answer the prayer. It was years later, and a lot of prayer practice and guidance from spiritual teachers later, that my prayers for help grew quieter and quieter and quieter, until one day, I realized, I didn't know WHAT to really pray for anymore. I knew WHO to pray for. I knew who to pray TO. But gradually prayer re-formed me into letting God determine the outcome, for who was I to know what was really best in any situation? How could I know what was the answer for anyone else? So my prayers for help through long practice, have become prayers of naming the person, the situation, or the need and holding a big space around my prayer that I fill with love and allow for God to work. At first it felt a little hollow to pray that way, but with time, it felt like trusting God in a new way, a surrender of my will to the Divine way of things.

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In my high school Sunday School class, there was a story of Wild Horses. The story may be familiar to you, but it reminds me that I was introduced to this idea of not holding on to an outcome in prayer long ago. The story goes something like this:

There was a farmer out working in his field with his son, when suddenly a small herd of beautiful wild horses stormed over the hill. He and his son were able to corral them and all the neighbors said, "What good luck!" But the farmer just said, "Good luck, bad luck, who knows?" When the son then tried to break the horses so they could be ridden, he was thrown from a horse and broke his leg, now unable to help his father in the fields. The neighbors came to say, "What bad luck!" But the farmer said, "Good luck, bad luck. Who knows?" Then the army came sweeping through the area, conscripting any good healthy young men for the war. Of course, the farmer's son was left behind due to his broken leg. The neighbors came again to exclaim what good fortune it was that the son had a broken leg. To which the farmer said, "Good luck, bad luck. Who knows?"

As a child, I had a fervent prayer answered in the way I hoped it would be. And that certainly does happen at times in our prayers for help. But now as an adult, practicing prayer all these long years, my relationship with God has been reformed by the same grace that answered a child's prayer. Only now, I try to pray without my agenda or conditions or timing imposed. We are slowly led in our practice of prayer to that place where God is always coming to us. A place where, as we love others and love the world, God meets us there with a greater Love. It is not a love we always understand. And certainly the way that God chose to enter the world and show the way to our saving, was not a script we would write. Come as a baby? Die on a cross? Rise and then leave us with a charge to tell others? Yet here we are—two thousand years later---praying to that Love beyond all Love for help in our daily lives.