

## *Practicing a Life of Prayer*

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“I used to have a prayer life.”

That’s a fairly common sentiment, sometimes spoken, but more often carried silently in the recesses of our hearts, arising in those harried moments when we feel far, far away from the riches of relationship with God. And therein lies a key to understanding the variable nature of spiritual life and practice: it’s about relationship.

We speak often, and, I think, far too glibly, of relationship with God. Relationship with a living God, like any committed relationship between two people, is organic. It begins with fervor, enthusiasm, not a little infatuation, and all the practices we associate with the first blush of love. We dote and are doted upon, sometimes to the point of obsession. We’re eager to please, and quick to search out all the little things that might endear us to the other. In the human realm this entails long letters or email posts, extravagant gifts, huge telephone bills, and that dumbstruck expression of total distraction. In the spiritual realm it can mean frequent attendance at worship, retreats, a fascination with ritual, incessant reading in the mystics and early church saints, exploration of rosaries, labyrinths, centering prayer and the Ignatian exercises—all those practices you might expect to read about in essays like this one (but won’t).

In the dating phase of human romance, we’re keen to put on our best face, show off our knowledge of good food, wine, the most interesting entertainments and, of course, our scintillating wit. But as the relationship grows and matures, formality gives way to greater ease, casualness, regularity. Things change, as they should. In the matter of human relationships, we have come to accept such alterations as normal. After all, none of us can sustain the obsessions of early courtship for long. Besides, we’d never get anything else done.

So why do we find it surprising that a relationship with God might be any different? Perhaps because we’ve never really been taught or encouraged otherwise. Yet the evidence is abundant.

Take Moses, for example. When, as an adult, he first encounters God, it’s at that famous burning bush. The encounter comes unbidden,

a surprise initiated by God. It's so disorienting Moses has to be guided through this rare moment in the presence of this amazing love that has sought and found him. Moses is thunderstruck, so smitten he does not demur when God demands he do a very intimate thing, at least for people of his time and culture: Moses takes off his shoes. There's a lot in that symbol, as in so many actions between people in the early moments of what may ultimately prove to be the relationship of a lifetime. Baring his feet, Moses signifies his respect and enters the intimacy of the moment. Removing one's sandals was one of the first acts upon entering another's tent or house, a sign of receptive vulnerability, that one accepts the hospitality offered, that one is there to stay a while.

But as Moses and God progress beyond that initial meeting, their relationship changes. Years later, while toiling thanklessly to encourage the people of Israel to abandon the familiar comforts of slavery in Egypt and enter into relationship with this wildly unknown God, Moses reaches the kind of exasperation any experienced partner will readily recognize. The unseen God has been big on encouragement but a little absent in the hands-on department and Moses has reached the end of his short tether. Uprooted and with no destination on the horizon, the people are tired, and Moses is most certainly weary of wandering the wilderness without benefit of Google Maps or GPS, much less fast food outlets. The same Moses who had once been awed by a dazzling desert fire is now ablaze himself. He unleashes a pretty hot earful for God which basically says, "I've had it up to the yin-yang with these griping, ungrateful people you claim to be so fond of. Get up off your holy hind end and pull your weight!" And God does.

So to anyone who says aloud or in the depths of the despairing heart, I used to have a prayer life, I suggest that you probably still do have a prayer life. It's just different now. As it should be. Because you are different, and God is different from that time you first locked metaphorical eyes and set off on this wonderful life together. One would hope that you've matured. Both of you. Yes, God matures. Read the Hebrew Scriptures. It's all there. God is a living God. God gets disappointed, and angry. A lot of water flows under Noah's ark and over Mount Ararat, but God does grow. And that's only one example.

The apostle Paul understood maturation in faith. He speaks of it often in his letters to the early believers. Some are essentially infants. Some have progressed to more solid food. And, presumably, some actually make it to adulthood. If your prayer life has changed, it's quite likely that you are no longer where you used to be.

Now it's true that this could mean that you have drifted away from God. That does happen, even as space sometimes expands between me and my partner when I grow preoccupied with my projects, or find myself away from home for weeks on end, or begin to take our relationship for granted, or all of the above. When this happens, a little self-discipline may be called for. I'll adjust or change my calendar, pay more attention to our life together, actually make a real date—a space and time devoted to enriching and renewing our relationship with one another. Sometimes we have to do the same thing in our relationship with God: go away on retreat, set aside time for prayer or worship, or whatever it is that brings us back into a centered relationship with our divine partner.

But you and God are never so far apart as it seems. Certainly, God hasn't gone anywhere. Likely it's just that you relate to one another differently now. At the very least, it's not all about you two anymore. That may be how it started out, just me and God. In those early dating days, in those first passionate embraces, we were caught up in the rarified realm of infatuation and romantic preoccupation. But the honeymoon's over. There's a mortgage, and maybe kids, and the laundry's piling up. Or to use another set of familiar images, there's a vestry, and maybe a youth group, and the list of shut-ins and hospital visitations is multiplying.

But you're still in the relationship. And you still have a prayer life, a rich spiritual repository. It's just different now. My partner and I have been together over thirteen years. Chris is a second-grade teacher, so we treasure our summers as a special time to be together. But this summer's been a bear. His mother's terminal cancer ramped up in May and took her life in June, so Chris was back and forth from Illinois to Oregon tending to his family, and more weeks were devoured by funeral preparations and family obligations. Then a large contingent of my family came to visit, filling every bed in our house for another week. No sooner had we washed all the linens than a longtime friend suffered the death of a family member in Chicago, calling upon our hospitality and filling all our beds for another week. Now we're hosting a European cousin, his wife, and their new baby daughter. Yet in every act of hospitality and grace extended to each other's families and friends, in every load of laundry and every meal prepared, every sorrow listened to and every joke relished, we've expressed our love for one another. As Jesus admonished, whenever we act with grace, generosity, and kindness to others, we're expressing love for God.

In my relationship with God I have rarely prayed in the traditional oracular sense. God knows (literally) the secrets of my heart; we long ago came to an understanding on that. But in every moment spent pondering the scriptures, sitting in thought and crafting sentences, God and I are in conversation. When I read, when I study the scriptures, I engage a conversation that allows the other to speak to me. When I write, I engage a conversation that includes those to whom I have listened, those who have spoken to me, and those to whom I speak or write.

When we distinguish too sharply between our daily activity and our prayer we indulge an unhealthy compartmentalization that diminishes both. Just as in human relationship we learn to express our very real love in small, even mundane gestures throughout our daily interactions, so in our relationship with God we may come to see, show, and speak the love between us in the ordinary. When we see the whole of our lives as an incarnate medium of prayer, we find integrity—wholeness—and fullness of life. We pray with the whole of ourselves, in the giving of our all to God, just as we promised in our baptism.

Indeed, integrity is the mark of life's fullness, the abundance promised in John 10:10, where Jesus claims to have come that we might have life in all its fullness. An integrated life saturated by the prayer of human action is a rich spirituality. And it is transformative. To see our daily activities not as tasks to be ticked off a to-do list but as opportunities and expressions of prayer, occasions to share communion with God, is to change—to re-value, literally to re-deem—every occasion. Activities are no longer valued for having been completed, but are treasured for what has been shared. A meeting becomes more than an agenda to get through; it becomes an opportunity to share with others in the stewardship of responsibility. A conversation with another person in counsel or direction or just in passing is an invitation into discourse with God, who may speak to us in what the other has to say, or in what we hear ourselves say in response to the question uttered by God's incarnation seated across from us.

I recall vividly and warmly an occasion when a young rector, totally exhausted and overwhelmed by the demands of a growing congregation and a growing family, confessed sadly the poverty of his prayer life. His sense of despair was palpable. I asked him if he'd ever stood by his child's bed, watching that sleeping child in the dim light, and felt the profound awareness of the beautiful mystery there before him. As though I had seen into the recesses of his most private thoughts, he nodded in affirmation. Then,

I suggested to him, “You have stood on holy ground and in that moment you have known the presence of God. Isn’t that what we pray most fervently to know? Are we not like the winsome friends of A.A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*, Piglet, when ‘sidled up to Pooh from behind?’

“Pooh?” he whispered.

“Yes, Piglet?”

“Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh’s hand. “I just wanted to be sure of you.”<sup>1</sup>

God gives each of us such moments as this young father knew, as Piglet knew in Pooh’s hand. Why, then, deny ourselves the experience of this gift of our deepest prayer answered?

Apparently, no one had ever made such a connection for the young rector. As his life and ministry had changed and grown, as responsibilities had expanded and the stewardship of time and energies shifted, no one had ever suggested that his spirituality, his prayer, might also take on new shapes, demand new practices. No one had ever thought to draw the line that connected this young father at his child’s bedside to Moses, or to the long journey of the magi who searched for ultimate wisdom and the fullness of divine power and found all that and more swaddled in a cradle.

Having written at length of the full integration of spirituality into our lives, I offer only two spiritual practices, each embodied in phrases common to our everyday experiences. They are homely, ordinary, and spontaneous. But don’t be fooled. These are two profoundly difficult disciplines to maintain, especially in our times and in our culture.

The first spiritual practice is this: pay attention.

This is genuine sacrifice, to pay something of real value. My attention is exceedingly valuable. Commercial interests are paying huge sums of money for it; billions are spent every day for ads vying for my attention. The phone rings, the email beckons. I’m bombarded. Lord knows I try to hold it all at bay. Still, I confess that I lose a little ground every day. I have to be more intentional about paying attention, about being a steward of the gift of attention God has given me.

A good beginning is just to embrace the value of attention. The happy outcome of the culture’s commodification of attention is that by assigning a dollar value to a minute of my TV-viewing or radio-listening time, measuring my attention to the web site, the newspaper, or the magazine in terms of money, I am more aware of how my attention constitutes a currency. My attention, which is made of my time, consideration, and talent directed toward someone or something else, is limited. I have only a finite

amount on deposit. Like writing a check or picking a stock, I want to be more judicious in how, where, and why I spend it. Annie Dillard wisely counseled, “Spend the afternoon. You can’t take it with you.”<sup>2</sup> We are spending not just the afternoon, but our entire lives. Time is the currency of God’s economy.

Moreover, paying attention is part of my giving to God, to neighbor, and to self. Am I paying attention to the people and concerns that have greatest value for me, that represent love for God, neighbor, and self? Am I giving the first fruits of my attention, the best of my attention to God? Or am I squandering it, throwing my precious attention away, tossing it down the proverbial rat hole, flushing it down the great cosmic toilet?

Pay attention. Pay it thoughtfully. Give your attention as you would your most precious gift, for indeed, it’s worth as much and more. It’s your life, the life God has given you, the only life you have in this world. Pay attention gratefully, out of love for the gift of attention itself, the marvelous gift of awareness that raises our stature above even the angels.

Pay attention to the present moment, to the child standing at your knee pulling on your pant leg. Pay it to the person sitting across the room hardly aware of your presence, that other child of God over there caught up in his own world, overwhelmed by her own distractions. Pay it to the clerk at the grocery checkout who hasn’t smiled all day, hasn’t smiled in so long because she’s so seldom seen a smile across the scanner.

Paying attention is not easy, not in a day filled with myriad distractions and demands and a culture that in so many ways encourages a self-centered sense of entitlement. Just as I must in some instances be especially careful of where I put my feet, lest I fall, stumble, or slip, so I have occasionally to remind myself to pause, to be mindful of where I put my attention, my heart. While a conscious effort may be required at the outset, like any practice followed regularly, the pause becomes familiar. So does the reward. When I pay attention, I don’t have to remind myself of God’s presence in my life; God is nearly always present and manifest, recognizable in the other, the one in whom and to whom I have paid my attention. Pay attention.

The second spiritual practice is this: take care.

It rolls off the tongue easily, usually as we part. Take care, we say. The inference, of course, is be careful, a reminder to be more mindful. Take care of yourself, and of others.

But I emphasize the verb “take.” *Take* care. Receive, reach out, and seize hold of care. That’s counterintuitive for us Christians; our vocabulary is

mostly about giving, sacrificing, doing unto. Taking feels somehow heretical. We're discouraged from seeking, wanting, or taking anything for ourselves.

And *that's* the heresy. The gospel is all about good news for us, about what God has done, is doing, for me and for you. It's about the gift of life freely offered to each of us. In a backward, upside down way, we've come to believe ourselves totally unworthy, undeserving of any gift. No matter that the unworthiness and undeserving were intended to impress upon us that what God gives us is a gift, not something we earn. What was said is not what we heard; what we heard was that it is only blessed to give, that there is no blessing ever in receiving.

Taking care is hard for us. We're fiercely independent, and proud of it. We hate any suggestion that we need anything, cringe beneath any and every concern directed our way. It makes us seem weak, needy, un-American, so we resist care.

But *take* the care that God holds out, offers in the hands of those who reach out to help. Take the care proffered in those friends God gives us, who manifest God's love in the flesh, the companions who are there for us, and with us in the inevitable dark nights, those who believe in us, love us even when we find it hard to believe in or love ourselves. *Take* the care that comes running to the door and leaps into your arms, happy that you're home, whether it's the love of your child, or the love of your dog. Take the care that comes your way, receive it as the gift of God that it is, and know that the blessedness of giving extends in equal measure to the blessedness of receiving.

Making these connections, discerning the ways that God continues to court us, to nurture us, to touch and hold us in all the mundane matters of our lives may be the most important spiritual discipline of the mature believer. Not learning a new or better way to pray, not seeking ever more archaic or clever or elegant or technologically sophisticated ways to speak to God, but discerning—which is a form of listening with eyes, ears, heart, and soul to the God who seeks to express the most profound love we can ever know. It's not something we find easy, or do well. I know.

But I'm getting better. Now the gift comes more frequently. Most often like it came to that young parent standing in the moonlight at the child's bedside. In those odd instances when I'm paying attention to my partner, a colleague, or a stranger, or any of the ways the incarnate God is present to us in the person and the moment. In the briefest of moments, it washes over me, that surprising, mysterious awareness and appreciation of what

it means to be in the heart of God, simply but profoundly loved just as we are.

Pay attention. Take care. Two spiritual practices. One invites us to give, the other to receive; each presents a challenge, and demands the sacrifice of something dear to us. But the gift is great; where once we used to have a prayer life, we find we have a life of prayer.



## Notes

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1. A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*.
  2. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 1974), 269.