

Introduction

More and more people find
themselves drinking
at the wells of each other's
spiritual traditions,
and engaging in a deep and
common quest.

—Jim Wallis

These words have found a nesting place in my heart, and the beautiful truth they contain is like a prayer shawl that I keep wrapping around my great longing for spiritual communion with all beings.

I am steeped in the spirituality of Jesus, deeply rooted in Christianity. This is where my home is. I believe that when roots go deep enough, eventually they entangle with other roots. This entangling, it seems to me, ought to bring us joy, but often it fills us with fear. I want to give up my fear of other religious traditions. I want to wrap my prayer shawl around our entangled and entwined roots in the lovely gesture of a blessing so that we may continue our spiritual quest together and learn from each other's sacred practices.

As a member of a Benedictine community I have been blessed by the practice of honoring “the hours” through conscious pausing for prayer at specific times of the day. When

I speak of the hours I am referring to those times of the day that the earth's turning offers us: midnight, dawn, midmorning, noon, midafternoon, evening, and night. Although every hour is sacred, these special times have been hallowed by centuries of devotion and prayer.

Seven Sacred Pauses is a book of reflections based on the themes of the hours that monastics have remained faithful to through the ages. It is meant to be a guide for those who would like to move through their day with greater mindfulness. In particular, I have in mind those who do not live in monastic communities yet are searching for ways to be more attuned to the present moment. It is possible to develop a kindred spirit with these rich historical hours that does not require praying specific texts or going to a particular place for prayer. Each hour has its own unique mood and special grace. You can learn to enter into the spirit of the hour wherever you are. No matter what you are doing, you can pause to touch the grace of the hour.

Living in harmony with the hours requires faithful practice in the art of mindfulness. Surely the reason monastic orders of all religious traditions have adopted the practice of pausing at specific hours of the day is for the purpose of practicing mindfulness, yet when I lead retreats, inevitably someone will ask me about the word *mindfulness* with a tone of caution, suggesting that this is a Buddhist concept. It is true that Buddhists have long been faithful to the practice of mindfulness, but striving to live mindfully is a universal quest and belongs to us all. Living mindfully is the art of living awake and ready to embrace the gift of the present moment.

When I pray the gospels, it is crystal clear that Jesus had a rhythm of prayer in his life. He lived mindfully. We see him withdrawing from the apostles and from his crowds of followers. He takes time for solitude at critical moments in his life. He goes away at significant times of the day—dawn, for example. Sometimes he spends the whole night in prayer. He seeks out lonely places where he can be silent and in communion with God. Often he slips away at crucial times of strife or moments when decisions need to be made, yet he always returns to his ministry of compassion and love among the people.

After Jesus' death and resurrection we see his disciples attempting to honor the same inborn need to pause in prayerful remembrance at specific hours of the day. The Catholic monastic hours grew out of the spirit of the early Christian households of faith, which continued to meet in the temple for prayer and celebrate the breaking of bread in their homes (Acts 2:42–47). These hours have been revised and expanded in many ways and have, in the course of history, been known by various names: the canonical hours, the Divine Office, the Prayer of the Hours, the Divine Hours, the Liturgy of the Hours.

An old book by Pius Parsch, *The Breviary Explained*, became a vital resource for me as I began to reflect on the value of pausing for prayer throughout the day. I was taken by surprise at the beauty of the hours and the immeasurable wisdom of moving to the natural rhythm of the days and nights. The daily and nightly dance of the hours is a universal way of honoring the earth's turning as well as the sacred mysteries that flow out of our Christian heritage. This

ancient tradition of inviting people to move through the day remembering their Source of Life is not a practice that has died. It is alive and well in many traditions.

Many people, even those who are not monastics, have tried to be faithful to these hours in a shortened form. The four-volume *Liturgy of the Hours*, a condensed version of the original monastic hours, has been an immense gift and support to many people who try to pray at least part of the hours of the day.

St. Benedict wanted his monks to pray through the entire psalter, all 150 psalms, in a week. In our modern world this is not feasible. The Prayer of the Hours has gone through many revisions, and the customs and traditions of various communities are not always the same. Although the intention of this book is to provide you with poetic reflection material on the *spirit* of the hours rather than the historical *text* of the hours, it seems important to give you a brief look at the historic hours that monastics have prayed throughout the ages. This will be especially helpful for those of you who are not familiar with the history of their use.

The Seven Sacred Pauses

“At midnight I rise to give you thanks . . .” we proclaim in Psalm 119:62, and in verse 164 of the same psalm we pray, “seven times a day I praise you. . . .” The early church and monastic communities have tried to honor the invitation of these scriptural texts in the following manner:

Matins or Vigils

Traditionally this hour was prayed in the heart of the night. However, due to the fragility of the human condition, it is understandable that in many communities Matins was moved to the early morning hours when it was still dark. It became a pre-dawn prayer. Even some parish churches honored the office of Matins. I recall my dad getting up in the wee hours of the morning on certain feast days to go to church for Matins. In some monasteries it is still the custom to pray Matins, more commonly called Vigils. The theme for this hour is vigilance. Those who keep vigil are sentinels of the night. I call this hour “The Night Watch.”

Lauds or Morning Prayer

This early morning hour, ideally prayed at sunrise, is the first of the day hours and has praise and resurrection as its central themes. The dawn, too, has its sentinels. Rising early, they watch for the coming of the light. Perhaps on some mornings you can join the sentinels of dawn, as you, too, wait for the coming of the new light. I call this “The Awakening Hour.”

Terce or the Third Hour of the Day

Terce, Sext, and None are referred to as the “little hours” because they are shorter and come right in the heart of the workday. They are simple efforts to turn our thoughts ever so

briefly back to God, to the dance of life, to mindfulness of the present moment. Pius Parsch calls them *breathing spells for the soul*, a little oasis for one's spirit in the midst of work.

If we remember to pause at midmorning, we may experience a holy presence emanating from within. The blessing we seek is already in us. This brief pause opens the heart to receive the Spirit's gift. We invite the Spirit into our work as we pause to remember the noble nature of work. I call this "The Blessing Hour."

Sext or the Sixth Hour

This is the hour of light. The sun, having reached its peak in the heavens, illuminates all things. This is the hour of courage, recommitment, and passion. It is a good hour to practice believing that peace in the world is possible. I call this "The Hour of Illumination."

None or the Ninth Hour

As day moves toward evening with wisdom in its wings, this is the hour to reflect on impermanence, aging, death, and transition. The dance steps may be slower, but there is also a keen insightfulness in those steps, along with a wise knowing of what is most important in life. I call this "The Wisdom Hour."

Vespers or Evensong

In this twilight hour it is time to move from the tumult of the day into the quiet of evening. However, due to the busy lifestyle of most modern-day people, finding their own Vespers path will be necessary. Vespers is the hour that is most often prayed festively and publicly; thus you may want, on occasion, to search out a monastery, church, or some other praying community with which to celebrate this beautiful hour. I call this “The Twilight Hour.”

Compline or Night Prayer

This is the last hour of the day and is often prayed privately or in small groups. In this night hour we are a bit more subjective, turning our thoughts inward. It is time to review your day by means of a gentle evaluation of your faithfulness as a pilgrim of the hours. Trust in God and personal sorrow for failures are partners in this last dance in the seasons of the day. This is the hour of intimacy. It is love rather than guilt that ought to enrobe us as we enter what monastics call “The Great Silence” of night.

These hours are important archetypal images of the rhythm and movement of the day. The wisdom of pausing at these sacred times is a treasure that ought not be lost. For this reason I am offering you a way of continuing the ancient dance of the hours. Hopefully you will be drawn to make these seven sacred pauses a part of your daily practice. Using

scripture, poetic prose, poetry, song, personal stories, and quotes from other seekers, I have tried to capture the spirit of each hour. May you be able to respond in a way that is authentic for you on your unique spiritual path.

What I Have Learned from the Hours

For many years I have prayed the Divine Office with my monastic community. One of the things I have learned is the importance of the bell. The bell calls us to the Prayer of the Hours. The bell is annoying. The bell is good. I have learned to change the annoying sound of the bell into an instrument of invitation. Just as the sun will not wait to rise if I am not there for the occasion, so too the community will not wait to pray if I am not there. What if God should choose to speak to the community and I wasn't present? What if the words I most needed to hear at this hour were, "Waste no energy fretting . . ." (Ps 37:7)? What if I wasn't there to receive them? The hours do not wait for me; they move on into eternity without me. I have learned that I truly want to be there—awake and mindful of the grace of each hour.

I have learned that no matter how much I want to be soulfully present at the Prayer of the Hours, the mind has a way of wandering. It can go back to the work I thought I had laid aside. The only way I know of dealing with this meandering creature is to faithfully practice bringing it back home to my heart.

I have learned in accepting the *new* never to totally discard the *old*. Although I have moved through many revised books

of the Prayer of the Hours, I have always kept the book of hours we were using when I entered the monastery in the late fifties close at hand. We were the first monastic community in the United States to change from Latin to English. That little monastic breviary containing Latin on one side of the page and English on the other is the book that goes with me on most of my travels. It is a good memory and a dear contact with the past.

From the hymns in that old book of hours I have learned that our early Christian ancestors were very much in harmony with the sacredness of the changing seasons and the symbols of light and darkness. They were surprisingly creation-centered, considering how long ago that prayer book was compiled. Reference was often made to the light of the new day that the circling earth offers us each morning. To give you a sample of this faithful presence to the light and darkness, a verse from Monday morning Lauds reads:

Glide in, thou very Sun divine;
With everlasting brightness shine:
And shed abroad on every sense
The Spirit's light and influence.

And from Friday morning Lauds,

The day-star's rays are glittering clear,
And tell that day itself is near:
The shadows of the night depart;
Thou holy Light, illumine the heart.

I have learned to be attentive to what speaks to the deepest ground of my being. When I was a young sister, one of my favorite parts of the Office was reflecting on the antiphons

that we prayed before and after the psalms. Antiphons are tiny prayers usually drawn from scripture. For example: “Hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Ps 17:8), or “O Lord my God, in you I take refuge” (Ps 7:1). The shortness of the antiphons makes them good material for meditation. When I am praying with the community, I often find myself gleaning from the psalms a few words to take with me into the day or the night. During Vespers recently, I chose from Psalm 25, “Release my trapped heart.” Those few words became my week’s companion.

In my past experience of praying the hours in community, I now realize that we sometimes sacrificed quality prayer by putting too much emphasis on quantity. I am referring to the duty of “getting all the prayers in.” There were times when we had to attend meetings or other events and could not be at community prayer. At times such as these it would surely have been wiser to pray one psalm slowly and with reverence rather than hurrying through all the psalms and readings assigned to that hour.

I recall religious of other communities sharing stories about praying two or three of the hours in one prayer period, just to fit in all the required prayers for the day. Listening to these stories with my mind wide open to the value and beauty of the Liturgy of the Hours, I believe one of the important elements we missed in the past was developing an attitude of mindfulness—a heart open to the spirit of the hour. The spirit lives in the space between the words. The danger in becoming too wordy is that we miss the space between the words.

Today I have learned to be more flexible. When I cannot be with my community, I pray alone, often trying to pray at the same hour they are praying. At these times I ordinarily choose fewer psalms and pray the Office more contemplatively with longer pauses for reflection.

Perhaps most of all, I have learned that way down underneath all the busyness, something (or is it Someone?) waits for us to come home to who we truly are. All it takes is a simple pause to get us in touch with the One who keeps vigil with us—the holy presence of so many names. Only you can name that which waits for you.

Perhaps it is your true self. Or, maybe it is one of the virtues wanting to make its full presence known in your life. It may be the Divine Beloved. Remember to pause so that you may be able to connect to that which keeps vigil in your heart.

The dream of creating a meditation book centered on the spirit of the hours has been stirring in me for a long time. Instead of dying, this dream continued to grow—thus, the creation of *Seven Sacred Pauses*. I would like for this book to help ease the violence many of us carry in our hearts due to a stressful, multitasking work environment. I hope it will offer you a practice that can assist you in living with greater attention and intention. I hope you will remember to pause.

The Importance of Honoring the Hours

For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all Abrahamic religions—bells, chimes, or tonal sounds are important for

calling people to prayer. For all these religions, the call to prayer is announced at specific hours. Special hours of the day are honored. For Islam the five daily rituals of prayer (*salat*) are pre-dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night. The three times of gathering for prayer in Judaism are morning, afternoon, and night. In the Jewish tradition the oldest fixed daily prayer is the beautiful *Shema*:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord Our God is one. Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:4-5)

The Shema, an assertion of faith in One God, is recited when rising in the morning and upon retiring at night. It is the first prayer a Jewish child is taught, the last words spoken prior to death. The faithful recitation of the Shema brings about an experiential awareness of the Eternal One.

When the early Christians began to detach themselves from Judaism, they kept the practice of praying at fixed times of the day. As monastic communities began to form, other hours of the day were eventually added to the monastic day.

Indigenous peoples of varied ethnic groups have honored creation's mysterious and sacred rhythms of the seasons of the day and night for ages upon ages. There is something in the cycles of the earth that speaks to the restless human heart. When we truly listen to the call of the seasons of the day and the year, our listening is transformed into what many people call prayer.

It is my hope that people of diverse religious traditions, as well as people with no religious persuasion, will feel at home

with this book. The division in our churches over what we call “religion” is heart-rending. I am deeply concerned about the increasing violence and fear in our world. The prayer of honoring the hours might be common ground for us. No matter what faith tradition we follow, we are pilgrims together on each day’s journey. We all have to get up in the morning and move through the day with as much grace as we can gather. Why not make this pilgrimage through the day with a heart for one another, pausing throughout the day whether this be for two, five, or ten minutes? If we do this, someone will be pausing at every minute of the day. There will always be someone who is summoning the holy, practicing silence, standing still for remembrance of God. Our own divine selves—so prone to being smothered and forgotten in the many tasks of the day—will be acknowledged and revered.

Honoring the hours through seven sacred pauses has the potential of unfolding as a spiritual practice for many faith traditions. I believe that the word *practice* is one of the most important words in the spiritual life. If you want to be a dancer, a pianist, a singer, a figure skater, you practice. If you want to make the team in any area of sports, you practice. Just imagine the many hours of practice given over to those who make it to the Olympics. Why should the spiritual life be any different? We practice pausing to remember the sacredness of our names, who we are, and what we plan on doing with the incredible gift of our lives—and how we can learn to *be* in the midst of so much *doing*. We have to practice loving and forgiving. We practice breathing and being careful with one another’s life. We practice nonviolence. We practice

enjoying what we have rather than storing up possessions. We practice silence.

In one of his poems, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke is talking to the “Great Mystery” that has haunted him throughout his life. He uses the image of “God’s hands cupped around our becoming.” With gentle eloquence the poet has God asking us to live, to die, and to be.

Seven Sacred Pauses highlights your call to *be*. Seven times during the day you are invited to reflect on the wondrous gift of being. Divine hands are still cupped around your becoming, and the best way to cooperate with those hands is to practice *being* present.

Our *being* is often crowded out by our *doing*. Each day we are summoned to be creators of the present moment. Artists know the value of white space. Sometimes what isn’t there enables us to see what is. Perhaps you are being called to the spiritual practice of bringing a little of the white space—of *nada*—into your workday. There in that white space you will find your soul waiting for you. Allow the anointing rhythm of the hours to touch and teach you each day.

Suggestions for Using This Book

In these meditations on *the hours* I have created a pilgrim path for you. My primary intent is to offer you some contemplative moments in the midst of your day. The sacred pauses are seven invitations to mindfulness. Even those of you who pray all or part of the Liturgy of the Hours, alone or in community, may find this a valuable resource. If you use these

meditations for daily reflection, you may be surprised at how blessings unfold in your life. This is not a guide book on how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. It is a rhythmical path of life that you can choose to walk each day. My suggestion is for you to use these poetic reflections for spiritual reading. Learn to live with the spirit of the hours in your heart. Take the themes into your memory. The medicine of deep listening taken seven times a day can be a healing companion in your workplace. Dream of a different way of approaching your work each day.

Understandably, you may not be able to consciously pray the seven hours every day. One way to approach these hours would be to make a cognizant choice about which hour you will focus on each day. Look at your schedule and decide which of the hours you might be able to fit into your agenda on any given day. This would be a time for you to intentionally pause from your work and remember the spirit of the hour.

At the end of each hour are some suggested prayers, poems, psalms, and antiphons for you to use as is helpful and according to your day's schedule. Let your creativity guide you. This book holds a variety of ways to assist you in living more mindfully each day. Live in a way that is kind to your soul. Keep vigil with your life.

A special CD, *Seven Sacred Pauses: Singing Mindfully Dawn Through Dark*, has been created by Velma Frye as a companion to this book (www.velmafrye.com). Some of these chants are traditional and may be familiar to you. Others have been created by Velma, gleaned from writings in this book or of her own creation. You may wish to let one of the

assigned chants fill your soul with music during your pause. If it is a chant you have memorized, the melody and words will quite easily echo through your being, drawing you into the present moment. The lyrics for the chants are found in a special section at the end of the book.

Another very fine resource for praying the hours can be found by going to Br. David Steindl-Rast's Web site (www.gratefulness.org) and clicking on the "Angel of the Hour." A prayer for each hour will be waiting for you along with a moving Gregorian chant.

These meditations on the hours are ideal for a personal retreat. Consider taking a day for reflection two or three times a year. Go to a retreat center, a cabin in the woods, or a lake. Practice living the hours with greater awareness. Be a conscious pilgrim of the hours for one day. A day of solitude is almost always valuable in bringing you back to your work with a renewed heart.

O Pilgrim of the Hours

Each morning
night's curtain
opens on a new day.
You are invited
to join the great opening.
Open your ears.
Open your heart.

Open your eyes
to the sacred path
you travel every day,
the path of the hours.

Greet the hours
with joyful awareness.

Greet the hours
with faithful presence.

Greet the hours
with a reverential bow.

Greet the hours
with a sacred pause.

Reverence each hour
as a small stepping stone
on your pilgrimage
through the day.

Receive the gift
of seven sacred pauses.

Practice waking up
seven times a day.

—Macrina Wiederkehr