

YOURS, MINE, AND OURS:

AN INTRODUCTION



This book is for you if you consider yourself a Christian who prays. It is also for you if you do not. You may be active—newly or lifelong—in a congregation, church, parish, meetinghouse, or other assembly for worship. Or you may have left behind the church of your childhood and adolescence, but not your spiritual yearning. You may find comfort and inspiration in religious institutions, or they may evoke in you little besides anger and frustration. In any case, you pray—or in some deep part of your being in the heart of your heart, there is a longing for relationship with God, or for a state beyond those words, what several Christian and Jewish friends of mine call “standing in the Presence.” This book is also for you if you live outside the Christian tradition and are exercising the virtue of curiosity. I hope it will speak words of welcome to all those who read it. It is meant to offer an experience of hospitality, just as I believe that God extends to human beings a divine and inexhaustible welcome: the door is always open, the table always set, the arms flung wide, outstretched.

This is not a proselytizing book, but an experiential book, aimed at enhancing your life of prayer, whether you pray daily, have stopped praying, have just begun praying, have recently returned to prayer, or have never prayed in your life. I am a theologian, but this is not a book of theology, though my theological biases will be apparent. It is a book about the practice of prayer, including its struggles. Of course, there is a link. The old Latin saying *lex orandi, lex credendi* is often in my mind when I do my theological work: first come the prayers of the people, later the doctrinal formulations. Not the other way around. First things first.¹

I began this book alone, or imagining I could write it alone, and soon found that I could not—partly because I am by temperament

an extrovert, but mostly because prayer lives inside community even when we do not know it, because we are carried by the prayer of others, and because my own life is graced by friends, colleagues, and strangers whose insights and experiences of prayer accompany and nourish mine. My experience of prayer is shaped by, and grows in conversation with, family and friends, tradition and experience, book knowledge and body knowledge, study and intuition, solitude and community. The grace of God moves and sustains my prayer, but this grace is often mediated. Mediation—encountering God through intermediaries—is no less an occasion of encounter with the Holy One than what we imagine to be “direct encounter.” As a Christian I believe in God’s incarnation: literally, in God’s flesh in the world. Again and again, I meet God in the faces, voices, and actions of others. The writing of this book confirmed me in this experience and in that belief.

Conversing about prayer is not a new experience for me. As a journalist and writer, I have interviewed people of varied backgrounds and ages about both religious and secular matters. As a pastoral minister and spiritual director,² I am accustomed to listening to women and men speak to me about their prayer and its relation to their daily life. A few months into the writing of the book, I began asking friends informally about their experience of prayer. Soon after, I devised a short questionnaire letter and sent it out. Answers began to trickle in in the form of written stories and telephone conversations.

In Berkeley, as a new PhD student in my early forties, I happily reentered academia but missed the inner-city neighborhoods of Boston where I had worked just before moving west. I began attending St. Columba, a church on Oakland’s broad San Pablo Avenue, where stained-glass windows memorializing Irish- and Italian-American parishioners of generations past look down upon a mostly African American congregation. Gospel music and Catholic liturgy have become one at St. Columba, as they have in many urban parishes in the United States, from Chicago to New Orleans. Three years later, I am still there. My solitary prayer is often in conversation with this communal experience.

Berkeley is in bloom virtually year-round, with less fog and more sun than San Francisco, just across the bay. My relationship to

nature changed when I moved here. On my walk to school and back, I spend much of my time gazing—often gaping—at flowers in a perpetual riot of color. I live with the exuberance of nature and with its fragility on a daily, even hourly, basis. Looking at the hills, coast, and vegetation that soothe my eyes and remind me of the Mediterranean of my childhood vacations, I remember that the beauty of the Bay Area topography and the earthquakes to which we are subject here have the same origin. I also spend more time outdoors, and the outdoors come to visit indoor living space in the form of ants and long-legged spiders. Rose gardens and hot tubs offset the rigors of academic boot camp. Yoga classes, acupuncture, and massage therapy are as easy to locate as the neighborhood coffee shop. Creation, nature, and the body have moved to the fore in my life of the past three years. Naturally, this has affected my prayer.

Prayer, life experience, and book research have merged. The year I moved west, the funeral of a friend, more than a decade younger than I and dead from cancer after a remarkably rich life, tore open the places where grief and prayer meet, deep in the heart. My Jewish cousins' eldest son became a bar mitzvah, and I watched him lead the Saturday morning Shabbat service with humor, reverence, and aplomb. Classmates and friends invited and accompanied me to Baptist, Episcopal, and Melkite Catholic worship services, and later to Presbyterian, Russian Orthodox, and Lutheran celebrations. I became a regular at my aunt's Seder table on the first night of Passover with the West Coast branch of my mother's family. The circle grew. Having gone online in late 1995, I joined several "lists" (subscribers' discussion groups on the Internet), a few Christian and one Zen Buddhist, and in 1996, using the same informal questionnaire I had sent to my friends, I asked my fellow list members to send me their experience of prayer if they felt comfortable doing so. A wave of stories arrived on my computer screen from as close as Oakland and as far away as South Africa.

Somewhat hesitantly, I wrote my Unitarian Universalist parents, who remain puzzled at their odd duckling of a child's conversion to Catholicism two decades ago, and asked about their prayer, or whatever held its place in their lives. They wrote back with seriousness and care. A Greek Orthodox colleague told me how he and his wife used icons in their prayer and which images they chose to hang in

their young daughter's room as a sign of God's blessing and presence. In a seminar on "Theologies from the Underside of History," I read excerpts from slave narratives that spoke of secret gatherings of the "Invisible Institution," where prayer was inseparable from the hope of freedom and the plotting of resistance and escape. In the same class, I heard a South African theologian speak of his companions' arrest for praying in an era—all too recent—when simply holding vigils for those imprisoned for protesting apartheid was a crime. I asked Jewish friends about the meaning of their Sabbath celebrations and the significance of repeating traditional blessings. Liturgical dancer Carla De Sola and I spent a morning on the floor of her dance studio, designing sequences of movements that might help people pray with their bodies.

And, of course, I prayed, prayed as I walked, prayed as I wrote, prayed the gospel music at St. Columba. As most people do, I also had difficulty praying, experienced dry spells, and yes, forgot to pray.

Bringing into this project friends and strangers from near and far has made me even more acutely aware of the importance of the life of prayer of what my religious tradition calls the communion of saints, all those people of faith, dead and alive, whom distance and time cannot separate from me or from each other. Like the rest of my life, prayer lives inside a matrix of friendship—the friendship of human beings, which is sacred to me, and the friendship of the One who creates and sustains us daily, and whom I as a Christian worship in the name and spirit of a Jewish man named Jesus. This Jesus, the Gospel writers tell us, told his followers that he would always call them, not servants or slaves, but friends—a radical statement in occupied territory ruled by the Roman Empire.³

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the research and writing of my first book, *Generous Lives: American Catholic Women Today*,⁴ I pored over thousands of pages of notes and transcripts from hundreds of hours of interviews. I remember realizing, on the fourth or fifth draft of the chapter speaking of the women's understanding of God and prayer, that I needed to go beneath their words to the assumptions underlying what they said. It may be easier for readers to enter this book knowing *my* assumptions. I hope that my naming them will give the reader more freedom in relation to them rather than less, precisely because I have been clear about where I stand.

I write as a person who prays, a practitioner of meditation, an intellectual, minister, activist, and theologian. I write as a white woman who has spent a great deal of time in African American communities, and as an American born, raised, and educated in France. I write as a Catholic Christian of Jewish ancestry who was raised a Unitarian Universalist, spent seven years in the girl scout movement associated with the Reformed Church of France, attended Friends (Quaker) Meeting on and off during my adolescence, and began practicing Buddhist meditation in college. While I am unapologetic about being a Christian believer, I am also deeply committed to, and involved in, interreligious dialogue, and my parents' agnosticism keeps me in close and respectful touch with perspectives and experiences other than my own. In many ways I am typical of the baby boomers depicted by Wade Clark Roof in his book *A Generation of Seekers*—eclectic in spiritual practice, accustomed to pluralism, influenced by the therapeutic culture of the United States, and concerned with the restructuring of religious community.⁵ From my family, my undergraduate years at Oberlin College, and my Catholic Christian faith, I have received a strong commitment to social change. I cannot live this commitment apart from the practice of prayer.

I assume that anyone can pray and that prayer can be taught, although the source of our yearnings and learnings is God. I assume that prayer can best be learned in community and with the help of a community—even a community that is not physically present. My developmental bias—that one can grow in the spiritual life—is typically Catholic. One can make progress in prayer. Not all Christians hold this assumption, though all have fervent practices of worship.

In many ways I share assumptions about prayer with the Catholic women I interviewed for *Generous Lives*. That spiritual development is possible in this lifetime is one of them. Four others stand out: the spiritual life is real; God is accessible; God is generous; and the imagination is a good thing, useful to spiritual development, part of a mature religious life.

The spiritual life is real. I do not mean only that God to me is real, but something even more basic: the spiritual life, the life that prayer punctuates and sustains (though it is not identical with it), is its own reality; it cannot be reduced to something else, such as a

subset or dimension of psychology. This is not to deny the connection between spiritual life and mental health, between psychology and religion—or between religious and social or sociological realities. But the spiritual life is *itself*—and it is not a projection, not an illness, not something one outgrows after coming of age.

I believe, with the biblical witnesses, that God is profoundly Other. I believe with these same witnesses, and with much of the Christian tradition, including my own Catholic religious family, that God is with us inside the world: that God is accessible. To ordinary human beings, not just to saints. Other, but not unknowable. Creator, but not averse to conversation. Mystery, but also Presence. With presence comes hospitality: the God to whom I pray is a generous God, “merciful and slow to anger,” as the psalmist writes. It is not that I spend every day full of trust and peace; the chaos within and the state of the world prevent this. After the Shoah,⁶ how can we not wrestle with the question of the absence of God? And in the exhaustion and confusion of contemporary life, how can we not lose a sense of God’s presence or the will to pray? In times that starve for hope, it is often memory that saves—memory and community: I know that God is generous because of my own experience but, thank God, not only through my own. I can look back and look around, and in the history of those who have prayed and struggled before me, in the life and prayer of my broader family of faith, I meet the generous and present God and renew my hope.

All religious traditions have a particular form of imagination, but not all treasure openly the use of human imagination in prayer. Mine does, and rather blatantly. From the use of images to focus one’s prayer to the use of the imagination or of sensory memory to enter into biblical stories, the Catholic Christian tradition encourages the imagining self; it does not fear imagination nor seek to outgrow it. I sit comfortably within this tradition, practicing a prayer that includes not only the imagination but the senses, the body, the emotions. It is our whole self which prays—heart and mind, body and soul, spirit and flesh. *When in Doubt, Sing* is anchored in this belief.

The language of prayer includes silence, song and gesture, tears and groans, but also words. The words I use in prayer are different from those I used as a child and those I spoke three or seven years

ago. Many parts of the Christian tradition wrestle today with the use of male and female images for human beings and for God, but also with the languages—spoken, sung, and danced—that reflect the world’s many cultures. As a woman who was raised in two cultures and the name of whose field, theology, can be translated as “knowledge of the divine,” but also as “language about God,” I am passionately concerned about this question of the language of worship. I know also how much it divides and pains sincere people who pray. In the prayers from many sources that accompany the text of this book, I have included both prayers whose language calls and comforts me and prayers whose language does not, but which I know comfort and call other women and men. I hope readers will ponder these words in the spirit in which I have offered them—and hold them close or let them go, as the Spirit moves.

At the end of almost every chapter of this book is a section that includes Christian prayers old and new, poetry, and some prayers and meditations drawn from other religious traditions. In this eclectic age, such a choice is not unusual, and in the context of my own life, it feels natural. It can raise some problematic questions: Can one really take a Sabbath prayer out of its Jewish context? Can a Christian practice Buddhist meditation without knowledge of the Four Noble Truths? If any find the mix offensive, I ask their pardon. Honoring the integrity of religious traditions is a delicate matter these days, as many of us live on the edges or at the intersection of several communities, or simply learn to appreciate and treasure the gifts of other religious bodies with what Lutheran bishop and biblical scholar Krister Stendahl has called “holy envy.”⁷ Religious traditions themselves are in flux, and within each of them exist varied perspectives on what constitutes integrity and legitimate boundaries. My goal has been simply to help others pray. I hope that readers will receive the mix of prayers, spiritual exercise, poems, and meditations in that spirit.

The title of this book, *When in Doubt, Sing*, is taken from one of its chapters, which speaks of the role of music and singing in prayer, and with singing *as* prayer. Nearly every person who spoke to me about prayer talked about music. Music, especially song, has nourished my own prayer all of my life. As for doubt: I have found that doubt and faith are not as separate from one another as one may

think. Hence the juxtaposition. One can be uncertain what one believes and still pray. First sing; then believe. Or sing your doubt—alone, or better yet, with companions in the struggle.

I speak here of many forms of disciplines and habits and ways of praying. Like the language of prayer, they are only a means to an end, which is drawing closer to God—or letting God draw nearer to you. This is the only thing that matters. If an insight or suggestion in this book is helpful or useful, enter into it. If not, leave it behind. It is the living relationship between you and God that is important—not whether this technique or that, this approach or that, this word or that, has “worked” for you. These are only—let me say it again—a means to an end. But on the path, too, you will meet God. Not just at the end.

Above all, if you can, read the book actively. Make it yours.

What is prayer? A sentence, paragraph, or page of definition would not bring us much closer to the doing of prayer. I keep hearing Jesus’ words to his would-be disciples. Curious about this compelling person, his teaching and his life, wondering for what and for whom he was willing to live and die, they asked him, “Where do you live?” “Come and see,” he answered. Come and see.

The Experience of Prayer: Memory, Attention, and Hope



In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

MARK 1:35

Enslaved Africans took the remnants of their traditional religious structures and meshed them together with their interpretation of the Bible. All this occurred in the Invisible Institution, far away from the watchful eyes of white people. Only in their own cultural idiom and political space could black slaves truly worship God. . . . White folks . . . sought to whip and kill slaves if the latter met secretly to praise God. . . . To belong to God's realm of rule meant African American chattel professed themselves children of God. . . . Under slavery, the children of God secretly hoped for the day of Jubilee, the inbreaking of heaven's Kingdom on earth.

DWIGHT N. HOPKINS

I wonder if I could ever describe what my heart feels. Could it be in words? I couldn't do it justice. In music, in painting? *Pas question*, at this point in my life. So I praise the glory of what I see—a silent hymn to a moment of complete at-one-ness and humble gratefulness.

Last evening I went outside to pick some flowers. There were the wild yarrow or Queen Anne's lace growing by the raspberry bushes, yonder were the phlox. White and fuchsia would be the two colors. I have a gorgeous bouquet in the living room, which fills me with halleluyahs each time I go by them. . . . And then, as I picked the flowers, the most brilliant sunset, which left my heart full of exultation and wonder . . .

JOAN REDMONT (MY MOTHER)

My friend Miriam is fifteen years old. On the day of her bat mitzvah, the Jewish ritual celebrating her coming of age as a religious adult at the age of thirteen, she stood in the synagogue her family attends and chanted in a clear voice the Hebrew text of the day's assigned reading from the book of Genesis. During the traditional speech she gave after her reading, part scriptural interpretation, part reflection on the occasion, Miriam observed, "Today, as I chanted from the Torah, I was doing what I have watched all my life, and what Jews have been doing for thousands of years. When I hear the eerie tones of the chants, I feel related to all Jews everywhere." Relatedness, community, and memory cropped up again and again in her remarks: "I am very intrigued by the fact that today and every day I pray in Hebrew, I am repeating words sung or said by people who lived centuries before me," she said. "I was a link in the chain of centuries," she wrote that night in her diary. "I feel so new," she added, "as if a spring has glowed over my soul."¹

Two months later, on the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday weekend, St. Columba Catholic Church in Oakland resonated with the sound of keyboard, drums, clapping hands, and raised voices. During the Prayers of the Faithful, which move from formal, prepared petitions to spontaneous prayers from the community, a woman whose face I could not see spoke up from the choir. Using language familiar to generations in the African American Christian community regardless of denominational affiliation, she prayed "in thanksgiving for our ancestors. It is because of them that we have come this far by faith. It is their faith, their lives, that help us to 'keep on keeping on.'" A few minutes later we celebrated the Eucharist,

listening as we do each Sunday to Jesus' words: "Do this in memory of me." A man who is chief financial officer of a local hospital and another who spends much of his time on the streets were among those who wished each other peace and shared the bread and the cup.

Ancestors. Centuries of believers. Biblical stories heard and retold by aging men and teenage girls, by slaves and exiles, by the settled and the homeless. Jesus' gestures and words. Words of thanks. Hope in hard times. "This far by faith." Hope for our children. "Keep on keeping on." History and expectation met in both these celebrations, converging into the present. Memory and hope are the twin engines of biblical religion. Both Judaism and Christianity are fueled by them, religions not chained by belief in fate but convinced of God's active presence in history—of the possibility of change. We pray inside history, consciously, to the Holy One whom we meet there, God inside our lives and our lives inside God's.

We live by memory, embodied in stories, scriptures, rituals, and festivals. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, there is no prayer without it. Think of the Passover Seder, where the telling of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt—the "coming out of" the country whose name in Hebrew, *Mitzrayim*, means "the narrow place"—is so alive that the language accompanying the ritual meal is in the first person as well as the third. Think of those Christian traditions whose Sunday liturgies follow a lectionary, a set of biblical readings heard by believers all over the world on the same day, in Africa, Asia, the Pacific islands, Europe, and the Americas. Think of the bodily, communal memory-in-action that Christians bring forth when they celebrate communion (the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist), or the washing of the feet, the gesture by which Jesus confirmed his radical statement "I no longer call you servants, but friends."² Think of the stories of the saints, canonized and uncanonized, grandmothers and desert mystics, wanderers and householders, scholars and farmers, whom Christians recall and honor in varied ways, pondering texts, lighting candles, venerating icons.

Worship, communal or solitary, is a work of memory. Even the quick prayer many of us toss up or sigh out—at work, on the subway, in the seconds between waking and sleep—is born of memory, a pause in time, to remember. It is also a pause to be mindful, to pay

attention to the present. Memory and attention: both hallow our time, make it sacred by knowing it *as time*, not as a commodity to be consumed or conquered. Our society's structures do not encourage this kind of pause, much less the longer, more sustained ones, the Sabbaths of our lives. Contemplative spaces are scarce. Much of our life is speedy, geared toward production, mesmerized with flashing images—not icons whose visual grace we savor, but split-second pictures on a screen with sound bites to match.

And yet: "Presence" was the most prevalent word or metaphor for God among the Catholic women I interviewed a decade ago for *Generous Lives*, before "Father" and every other traditional and less traditional name for the Creator God, the Holy One. The same word cropped up again on the road to this book among Episcopal men, Methodist women, and others; I heard it from Jewish friends as well; it has become a constant in my own life of prayer. "Presence," but also "being present." Edward, a friend in his late forties who is a member of the Episcopal Church, wrote to me, "I suppose that my personal prayer would fall under the rubric of 'standing in the Presence.' Prayer in my life is an ongoing, though at times disjointed, internal conversation. During the course of the day as well as often in the middle of the night, my thoughts are turned to and in God. The prayer of sighing is an essential element. These are not sighs of a disgruntled soul or an angry person, but the expression of a constant sense of the divine, ineffable Presence. I never expect any kind of direct response from this internal prayer, but hope somehow it makes some kind of sense to the divine if not to me."

Being present and knowing that God is present: sometimes that is all prayer is. It sounds almost too simple, but I have found it infuses a day with an attention that charges—or buoys—each moment with layers of complex mystery, a wonderment that stops speech. During the year preceding my decision to enter the Catholic Church, which also happened to be my first year in divinity school, I read Thomas Merton almost constantly. I read not the well-known early autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which never "grabbed" me, but the later *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton's journal from the 1960s, as full of social concern as it is of prayer. I also read the very short *Thoughts in Solitude*, which taught me rich lessons about prayer and the Christian life, different as my own

circumstances were from Merton's. In *Thoughts in Solitude* Merton writes, "The spiritual life is . . . first of all a matter of keeping awake."³

Christianity has always sustained a focus on the present—the reign of God, said Jesus, is among us⁴—but the present has sometimes gotten squeezed between honor of the past and hope for the future (in this life or the next). In this generation, the encounter with religions born in Asia, especially Buddhism, has given us, among many gifts, a reminder of the *now* of spiritual practice. "Mindfulness practice means that we commit fully in each moment to being present. There is no 'performance.' There is just this moment," writes Jon Kabat-Zinn, whose work in behavioral medicine, teaching, and writing draws on the long tradition of Buddhist meditation.⁵ It seems these days as if my prayer as a Christian has blended with the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, or at least received a transfusion. Jewish-Christian dialogue is also helping Christians enhance their focus on the present, since Judaism, grounded though it be in remembering, also celebrates the present moment with reverent intensity. At a bar mitzvah I attended last year, relatives and friends of the young man and his family converged upon Oklahoma City from around the United States, Canada, Mexico, Germany, and Scotland to celebrate—religiously at two services, but also with food and dance and conversation and song. Being in the present moment, together, in joy: for nearly three days that was our only charge.⁶

Although the narrow definition of "prayer" that comes to many people's minds is that of petition, entreaty, or supplication, most persons who pray—and the Christian tradition from which I speak—understand prayer much more broadly. Among Christians today prayer takes countless forms, from contemplative, wordless sitting in the presence of God to the ecstatic songs of Pentecostal gatherings, from tearful begging to "Thy will be done." Memory and attention inhabit all these forms, but so does hope. Visions of what biblical texts call the heavenly city and the reign of God permeate the present. Some of these visions concern the hereafter, others life on earth in this time, a new social order. The "day of Jubilee" to which slaves looked and of which they sang in spirituals was never just the otherworldly realm their masters thought they heard described in the songs; it was freedom in this life, in this country, in

their own time. Bodily freedom, spiritual freedom, economic freedom, communal freedom.

“All will be well, and all will be well,” fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, “and every kind of thing will be well.”⁷ Her words, written in an age of plague, have the ring of certainty, but not that of the “power of positive thinking”: Christianity is not so much a religion of optimism as a religion of hope. Christine, a professional woman in her late forties working in Atlanta, recently found herself in a situation of intense stress and distress, caught in a maelstrom of institutional evil and ethical dilemmas so complex that she could not speak of it to anyone but her husband and a clergy counselor. Though she is a close friend, I still do not know the details of her ordeal, only the signs and the language of her distress. An active member of the United Methodist Church, Christine spoke to me about the changes her work situation had wrought in her understanding of hope, and in her prayer. “I thought I knew what hope was about before all this,” she said, “but I did not know. I have had to discover hope in hard times—to hope against all odds and without the hope of public accompaniment.” Alluding in few words to the professional crisis in which she found herself, Christine began speaking of Jesus and the cross. “I don’t wish to dramatize my own situation at all—I mean in many ways I haven’t suffered: I have a comfortable life, I’m straight, I am married—except to say that in my grief I have come as close as I ever have to understanding some of the agony of the cross. I had always wondered about the language in Evangelical churches about the shame of the cross and the whole business of Jesus dying accused and not defended. There’s a particular kind of hope born out of situations like that.” She mused, “It’s like Paul’s image of the whole world groaning in labor and the Spirit sighing in us when we can hardly breathe ourselves.⁸ The agony of my isolation in this terrible time has pushed me out into the agony of the world; and the miracle is, I am no longer alone in my pain, and that is the beginning of hope for me. Prayer,” Christine said, “is what got me here.”

I thought of the starkness of the Gospel of Mark when Christine spoke, a text with which both of us have prayed. It is the least ornate of the Gospel accounts, still raw with the trauma of Jesus’ death, the disciples grieving with apparent failure and defeat, and in the midst

of this, not outside it, finding hope. Out of this kind of hope comes Christian prayer. And, as Christine learned, to this kind of hope prayer also leads. Suffering is real. Death is real. But they are not the final word.

Often this is where community surfaces: church as friendship in the present, church as communion of memory, church as bearer of hope. Christine said to me after speaking of her loneliness and struggle and of the prayer that emerged out of them: “The only way out of those situations, or through them, is through community. In some ways, it’s the only salvation; the only hope is community. Without their even knowing it, you rely on communities to carry out and do the hoping for you. And there is the community of memory as well as the community living today—not just their witness and what they have lived through but sometimes their simple presence. Sometimes you can’t have people know what you’re going through,” she added. “So you have the silent company of the communion of saints.”

Christine was speaking of believers past and present in her reference to the communion of saints. As she spoke, I remembered sitting in my church in Boston in the middle of a liturgy during a particularly painful time in my life, praying and crying—which came first?—when the friends sitting on either side of me, noticing my tears, reached out and held my hand, wrapped an arm around my shoulder, did not ask, simply held me and continued to pray, and sing. There was room in the pew for suffering and friendship, for praise and lament—no need to check any part of our lives at the door. In this communal acknowledgment, before God, there was hope, inside the tears.

We pray inside the world in which we live: the world of work and love, transportation and institutions, consumption and longing. Context matters: our friendships, families, and other relationships, the state of the economy, whether our country is at war or at peace, the land and the culture of our ancestors. We pray today in a world riven with division and violence, where the gap between the rich and the poor grows daily in the United States as well as overseas. We pray in a religiously pluralistic society where our neighbors may or may not pray, and where, if they do, they may pray as Episcopalians or Quakers, Mormons or Baptists, Muslims, Jews, or Hindus. We

pray in a culture where the roles of and relationships between women and men are undergoing changes that trouble some, encourage others, and challenge all. We pray on a planet encircled by electronic networks of communication that make conversation across continents easier than ever before, where travel is frequent and staying in one place for life has ceased to become the norm.

Our context is not just our social world. We pray also as inhabitants of planet Earth and participants in nature. The mountain ranges, the corn, the grass pushing up between the cracks of an urban sidewalk—they are part of our community.⁹ My mother has taught me about this, perhaps more than any other person. She has taught by example, through her stubborn gardening work, year after year, in back of our old vacation house in Vermont; her hikes in the woods and love of swimming outdoors; her conversations with animals settled and stray. My mother is a decidedly social person—“irrepressible Joan,” my father calls her—involved in the lives of organizations and of families beyond our own, but in a deep sense she understands the world of nature as her community. It is there she feels most at home. Our parents, whether they intend to be or not, are our first teachers of prayer. My mother taught me to gaze and to walk on the earth. Decades before the environmental movement, she picked up litter and lectured children she saw leaving candy wrappers and paper on the ground—embarrassing me mightily, as she embarrassed me the day she lectured our French greengrocer about apartheid when she saw he was selling oranges from South Africa. “Don’t you know what they are doing to people there?” she said in her American-accented French. “How can you support them?” “Don’t you see what you are doing to the ground?” she said to the children, my contemporaries, when they littered the grass in the summer camp her parents had founded in Vermont.

I have come to realize only recently that these two actions of hers—her small economic boycott and speech to the grocer, and her picking up of trash on the ground—were part of the same awareness of the relatedness (our Buddhist friends would call this “interbeing”) of all beings on earth and with the earth—an awareness that both leads to prayer and is the consequence of prayer. Gazing at creation, walking on the earth, knowing our relationship with all beings—all are part of prayer.

Writing on the subject of prayer in a post-Einsteinian universe, David Toolan, a Jesuit friend, notes a shift in our contemporary awareness of nature and the cosmos, both a return to ancient ways and a jump forward beyond the mechanistic views of the Age of Enlightenment: “Today’s Christians, like yesterday’s, will want to sense in their bones that the blessing of God is not something apart from, but latent in the very energies of the stars, the planets, and the earth.”¹⁰ True. I cannot count the number of people—including active, churchgoing Christians of all communions—who spoke to me of praying outdoors, of being moved by the creation around them to contemplation of its mystery and power and awareness of their relationship with God.

Nature and society are not the only settings for our prayer. We pray—many of us—in the context of our religious community, physically present as mine was in Oakland on that Sunday in January, or absent as it is when Bruce, an economist in his thirties, in Washington, D.C., prays the Anglican Morning and Evening Prayer service by himself, but knowing that around the world people are doing the same. “It is the prayer of the church,” he wrote me, “and we are praying together as a church even if we are praying in different places and at different times. It is a form of prayer that rolls on without ceasing; someone, somewhere, is always saying Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.” Our church contexts vary. They may be more or less conducive to prayer than social reality and the natural world. Christians live between the necessity of the church and the sins of the church, but we cannot pray without community. We find it in many places: in cathedrals and in storefront churches, in living-room prayer meetings and public vigils of witness and protest, in twelve-step groups, at weddings and funerals, at special-occasion gatherings of two hours’ duration in congregations two centuries old.

Church as community of interpretation shapes our perceptions and our prayer. I passed a magnolia tree in bloom on a crisp day in December, just before sundown. I was walking two streets away from home in the late-afternoon glow, the temperature dipping from the fifties to the forties; the tree was a surprise. I stopped and drank in the sight of it. A grateful moment: presence was everything; only the present was there. I remember thinking, in the next moment, that the magnolia tree with its gray branches and pale flower had a certain

Zen look, reminding me of the sparse beauty of Japanese gardens. Beyond the ecstasy was simply the Zen “only seeing.” Almost simultaneously, more layers appeared: I am simply too biblical not to think of Moses when I see a tree with a halo of light. Trees aflame do not exist outside of time for me—not only the time of the cycle of the seasons, but the time in which God and humans meet inside history, the time we learn about in the community of belonging.



B'FEH MALEY SHIRAH—THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

A Sabbath Day blessing

Our mouths filled with song,
our tongues overflowing with joy—
We bless the source of this life
and so we are blessed.

MARCIA FALK



Lord, oil the hinges
of our hearts' doors
that they may swing gently
and easily to welcome
your coming

A PRAYER FROM NEW GUINEA

REMEMBERING IN HOPE

Possible Settings

- A quiet moment at home, alone.
- During a walk outdoors.
- On a train, bus, or subway ride.
- In front of a sheet of paper or computer, pen in hand or keyboard at your fingertips.
(You can either write or type, or draw if you are not a “word person.”)

Begin

Is there an event, a story, a ritual,
 that for you is a bearer of both memory and hope?
 Think especially of events, stories, rituals
 that are not yours alone,
 ones that have a community dimension,
 whether the community is religious and cultural
 or some other grouping that has shaped your life.
 Scan your memory for these bearers of memory and hope.

Focus

Asking the Holy Spirit for guidance, pick one.
 One event, story, or ritual that is for you a bearer of memory and hope.

Dwell

Dwell with it.
 Recall the memory. Remember the hope.
 Why is the memory so powerful for you?
 Which community has helped carry it into your life?
 Has any community helped to sustain it?
 Why does it give you hope? How?
 Which hope?
 What have been its fruits?
 Take your time.
 If you feel drawn to staying
 with only one of these questions,
 and/or one answer only,
 dwell in it.
 It is enough.

Give Thanks

Remembering this hope-bearing event, story, or ritual,
 give thanks to God for its presence in your life.
 Take your time.
 Your prayer may lead you to further conversation with God.
 Talk to God,
 but also listen.

Listen to both the memory and the hope.

Listen for the Voice.

Holy One, how have You been present to me in this treasure I remember?

What are You kindling in me through this hope?

Go Forth

As time allows and as you are moved,

return throughout the day

to this event, story, or ritual

and to the insights of this meditation.

How can you continue to keep alive

this hope-bearing memory?

How is God already helping you to do so?

Is there a community that can help to sustain this hope?



This prayer is a favorite of one of my beloved teachers, Krister Stendahl, Lutheran biblical scholar, retired Dean and Chaplain of Harvard Divinity School, ecumenist and worker in interreligious dialogue, and retired Bishop of Stockholm. The prayer's source is unknown.

O thou eternal Wisdom

whom we partly know

and partly do not know;

O thou eternal Justice

whom we partly acknowledge

but never wholly obey;

O thou eternal Love

whom we love a little

but fear to love too much:

Open our minds

that we may understand;

Work in our wills

that we may obey;

Kindle our hearts

that we may love thee.



PRACTICE DOES NOT MEAN REHEARSAL
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We use the word “practice” to describe the cultivation of mindfulness, but it is not meant in the usual sense of a repetitive rehearsing to get better and better so that a performance or a competition will go as well as possible.

Mindfulness practice means that we commit fully in each moment to being present. There is no “performance.” There is just this moment. We are not trying to improve or to get anywhere else. We are not even running after special insights or vision. Nor are we forcing ourselves to be non-judgmental, calm, or relaxed. And we are certainly not promoting self-consciousness or indulging in self-preoccupation. Rather, we are simply inviting ourselves to interface with this moment in full awareness, with the intention to embody as best we can an orientation of calmness, mindfulness, and equanimity right here and right now. . . .

The spirit of mindfulness is to practice for its own sake, and just to take each moment as it comes—pleasant or unpleasant, good, bad, or ugly—and then work with that because it is what is present now. With this attitude, life itself becomes practice. Then, rather than doing practice, it might better be said that the practice is doing you, or that life itself becomes your meditation teacher and your guide.

JON KABAT-ZINN