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First Resort

When I was 27 years old, newly minted in the ministry, my phone rang in the middle of the night. The caller was a beloved older member of the congregation – a vivacious activist and single mother of five adult children whom she had adopted out of the foster care system. One of her sons, Tim, was in jail on drug and alcohol charges; the situation, which involved many tragic twists and turns, was a source of heartache and deep anguish. For years, he had refused visits from his family.

So the phone rang and my parishioner said, “Tim is outside. He says he’s been let out, and has nowhere to go. I’m afraid to open the door. What should I do?”

And I said, “I’m coming.”

I appreciate that you might think they taught us about this in divinity school, and I hate to disillusion you: I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I got into my fifth-hand green Volkswagen Rabbit, pulled out into the empty street, and began the short drive one town over to step into this crisis, with no idea what I would do when I arrived. And somewhere out along Route 28, I called in the reinforcements: I began to pray.

I was not raised with much prayer, except maybe a little something on Thanksgiving. I was pretty sure that what I knew about other people’s G*d or gods – something above and beyond us – was not useful to me. Nonetheless, I proceeded to hedge my bets. If you’d asked me then to what I was praying, the most accurate answer would have been “To Whom It May Concern.” It was heartfelt, and unadorned; I think it began, “Help!”

But I did go on, invoking what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature,”¹ which, as far as I knew, was some deep reserve of wisdom and guidance inside me I fervently hoped was there. I asked for help to help them.

I have very little memory of the rest of that night; I know we sat together, we three, in my parishioner’s living room. And I know that, years later, Tim was the best man at a family wedding I officiated, and, as we prepared to enter the church, we held hands for a moment, streaming with gratitude, acknowledging the miracles that had brought us to that day.

I’m not proud to think of myself as a foxhole convert, but there it is: my love affair with the power of prayer began that night. I fell in love with prayer, not only as a measure of last resort, but as a measure of first resort: a means to face something frightening and perilous. I fell in love with prayer, not as something that necessarily changes anything “out there,” but absolutely changes someone “in here.” Prayer changes people, and people change things.

I was seated on a panel presentation for ministerial students next to my friend and UCC colleague, Mary Luti, when she said that when we tell people we’ll pray for them, we should do it. Her emphasis was on being faithful to our word, but what I heard was the unapologetic directive to pray. I was captivated by the thought that it might do us as much good as them ... if not more. I’m making the case for prayer today – maybe not to a god, and certainly not to a god in whom you do not believe, but prayer for the sake of concentrating and articulating our deepest longing to be instruments of transformation and healing, both for others and for ourselves.

In 1973, Peter Matthiessen – writer, explorer, and Zen student – undertook a trek² into the remote mountains of Nepal, in the hope of glimpsing the rare and exquisite snow leopard. Before he left, he spoke to Zen master Eido Roshi, who told him to anticipate both a death and a rebirth on his journey.³ He instructed him to treat the trip as a pilgrimage, and to recite a prayer as he walked.

¹ President Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, Washington, DC

² with field biologist George Schaller; please see Peter Matthiessen, *Nine-Headed Dragon River*, p. 72ff

³ Zen Master Eido Roshi in Matthiessen, *op cit*, p. 85 “The snow,” he said, “may signify extinction and renewal.” And after a pause, he added, “Expect nothing.”

Peter Matthiessen chose *Om Mani Padme Hum*.⁴ *Om* is the sound of the vibration of life. *Mani* is the indestructible diamond essence of existence. *Padme*, meaning “in the lotus,” is the world of life and death as we know it. And *hum* – well, nobody knows about *hum*! It’s kind of Tibetan for *Amen*! Peter Matthiessen proceeded to recite one word per step in his slow trudge: *Om ... Mani ... Padme ... Hum!* With the Bheri River far behind and below, and a snowy peak of the Kanjironbas rising ahead, *Om ... Mani ... Padme ... Hum!*

Perhaps twenty years later, Kem and I set out on a backpacking trip in the Sierras. I cannot recall what terrible event had just unfurled on the world stage, but I remember that I was utterly bereft at the depravity of it all; in particular, the news had specifically reported the number of children that had died. In the face of absolutely nothing else to do, inspired by Peter Matthiessen, I prayed as I walked the day’s steep, uphill pitch, one prayer per labored breath, counting to something over one hundred – one prayer, one breath, for each of the children who had died – and then started again ... and again.

It is not my theology that these prayers helped the children. But I found that to pray steadied my mind, and pushed me forward, away from the abyss of despair, and onto the path of compassion and healing.

Speaking of theology, many of you have shared with me the strange sensation of recalling a prayer from your childhood, and finding that, while the theology was a travesty, the prayer was strangely comforting. I felt this way about the Twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Basically, I gave out at “the Lord, He” and it was downhill from there.

So what if we tidied-up the theology and leaned in to the comfort? My friend and colleague, Anita Farber-Robertson, noticed that halfway through, the prayer switches from “He” to “you,” from the third person to the first person: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures” becomes “I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” *The prayer changes*⁵ when we begin, “You are

⁴ pronounced *Aum ... Ma-Ni ... Pay-May ... Hung!*

my shepherd; I shall not want.... You restoreth my soul.... You are with me.” And now, when I recall this reclaimed prayer, heading into something hard or heartbreaking, it fills my spiritual reserve, and gives me something to go on.

Across the spectrum of Americans, from religious to not, from devout to irreverent, most of us say that we pray.⁶ We say that, but what do we mean? I missed this class in divinity school, but Rev. Catie Scudera is always invoking – usually hilariously – Rev. Dr. Charles Adams’ acronym for how to create a good prayer. I think we’re supposed to memorize this, and then, when the moment comes, all we need to do is get it straight, and we’re good to go. Ready? The acronym is ACTS: Acknowledge, Confess, Thank, Supplicate.

That would make this a great prayer:

Hi. (Acknowledge.)

I’ve been a total jerk, stealing from my employees. (Confess.)

Thanks for all the help hiding the money. (Thanks.)

Please make me richer so I can buy even more stuff,
and keep the IRA from sniffing around. (Supplicate.)

Amen.

You can try it, if you like – acknowledge, confess, thank, supplicate – but I think not. Let’s try this: Author and translator Stephen Mitchell – one reviewer wrote that he “translates G*d into English” – loves French philosopher Simone Weil’s definition. She said,

*“Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”*⁷

“In that sense,” says Stephen Mitchell, “prayer has nothing religious about it.... [Simone Weil isn’t saying that] prayer is absolute unmixed attention; it’s the other way. The attention itself is the quality that she ... [calls] prayer. So whatever context you’re putting it in ... that’s the quality that is the sacred one, where there’s nothing else in the world.... A mathematician working at a problem or a little kid trying to pick out scales on the piano is a person of prayer....”⁸

⁶ Krista Tippett, host, *On Being*, “Approaching Prayer.” Please see onbeing.org/program/approaching-prayer/transcript/615#main_content

⁷ Simone Weil’s last words

⁸ in Krista Tippett, *op cit*

We can pray in stillness, or talk our prayers, walk our prayers, dance our prayers, sing our prayers. We can pray alone or together. Prayer is “about everyday life,”⁹ and about showing up for our lives. Stephen Mitchell speaks of being attracted to praying with a Hasidic community in Brooklyn. He says, “...[W]hat attracted me ... was the fervor and the wholeheartedness of the experience. It was a social experience, too, which was quite wonderful. Later, when I began to experience the texts of Hinduism – ... the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* – my whole sense of G*d blew to smithereens. There was something much vaster than what I had thought that I was praying to....

“In this larger sense of prayer, there don’t have to be words to it. It can be just that everything [we] do from moment to moment is an expression of [our] gratitude, and [we’re] just expressing life as it comes with such clarity, with such open arms, that there’s nothing left but prayer.”¹⁰

Beloved spiritual companions,

Prayer changes us, and we change things.

Step by step,

prayer steadies our minds and fills our spiritual reserve,
moving us away from the abyss of despair.

May we be instruments of transformation and healing,
both for others and for ourselves.

May our last resort also be our first resort:

May we be wholehearted.

May we open our arms to life.

Let us pray.

⁹ theologian Roberta Bondi

¹⁰ in Krista Tippett, *op cit*