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 Arlington Street Church  
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### **Please, Thank you, OMG: Prayer**

When I say, “I’ll pray for you,” I get a range of responses. Friends from other faith traditions – or of no religious persuasion – say something like, “You’re kidding, right?” or “When the Unitarian Universalist is praying for you, G\*d knows it’s serious.”

When I say, “I’ll pray for you,” I mean it. When I say, “I’ll pray for you,” I mean I am keeping you in mind, paying attention, holding you in my heart, keeping the faith that love will prevail.

Here is poet David Whyte’s *Self Portrait*.

It doesn’t interest me if there is one G\*d  
 or many gods.  
 I want to know if you belong or feel  
 abandoned.  
 If you know despair or can see it in others.  
 I want to know  
 if you are prepared to live in the world  
 with its harsh need  
 to change you. If you can look back  
 with firm eyes  
 saying this is where I stand. I want to know  
 if you know  
 how to melt into that fierce heat of living  
 falling toward  
 the center of your longing. I want to know  
 if you are willing  
 to live, day by day, with the consequence of love  
 and the bitter  
 unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in *that* fierce embrace, even  
the gods speak of G\*d.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not we speak of G\*d, we can pray. We can pray when we're in need – that's Please. We can pray when things are great – that's Thank you! We can pray when we're in awe – that's OMG, whether or not you believe in a god.

Author Anne Lamott advises that we take a moment to focus and breathe; the point of prayer, she says, is “communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding;” to get in touch with “the Real, with Truth, with the Light” and ask for help – what she calls “the first great prayer;” to give thanks, even for hard truths and steep challenges; and to make a joyful noise when life astonishes us: *Help, Thanks, Wow*.<sup>2</sup> Please. Thank you. OMG.

Mother Teresa believed that silence was the vehicle of prayer. “We need to find G\*d,” she said, “and [G\*d] cannot be found in noise and restlessness. G\*d is the friend of silence. See how nature ... grows in silence. See the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence.... We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

I'm a big fan of silence and stillness ... but there's more than one way to pray, and sometimes, the louder it gets on the outside, the quieter we need to get on the inside. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, our friend Luke called and left me a frantic voicemail as he ran away from the finish line where he'd been watching the Boston Marathon. His voice was ragged with his hard, frightened breathing; in the background, people were shouting ... and then the second bomb went off. Reflexively, listening-in on the chaos, I began to pray: *Deliver us from evil*.

That's *Please*.

*Thank you* is my favorite prayer. It's not always obvious that we should be grateful. Some gifts come masquerading as the damnedest things! A few

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<sup>1</sup> David Whyte, “Self Portrait,” Fire in the Earth, Many Rivers Press, 1992

<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow*

autobiographical paragraphs by screenwriter Justine Blau come to mind. Here they are:

“Two years ago, ... I was waiting to be seated at Manhattan’s Café Lalo,” she wrote in 2014, “... when I noticed, inscribed on a tile wall, a poem titled *To Be Alive*. It was dated 1976, and signed by my mother.

“As a child,” she continues, “I’d lived in fear of her uninvited appearances. She was a restless, troubled soul, a volatile force in my life at the best of times. As kids, my brother and I moved in and out of hotels, occasionally spending nights in 24-hour coffee shops or on the subway. Once, my mother and I slept in the ladies’ room of a funeral parlor.

“When I was 11, a court took me away from my mother, but she disobeyed visiting rules, showing up unannounced at the group homes where I was placed, demanding to see me. After she kidnapped me from one of them, she was arrested and briefly placed in a mental hospital. For decades, she wandered New York City, bartering poetry for coffee and slices of cake.

“And here she was, almost ten years after her death, arriving unannounced once again.

“I spoke to the café manager and was stunned when she told me her fourth-grade daughter had memorized the poem for a class assignment. I called the owner, who said he had never met my mother and wasn’t sure how her work had made its way to the restaurant. He told me his name was Haim, the Hebrew word for life. It’s also my grandfather’s and my son’s [name]. Life – its wonder, its beauty – was something my mother cherished. Her poem begins, “It’s good to be alive/To laugh and love and thrive.” On my way out, I noticed that *To Be Alive* is printed on the café’s take-out menu. I searched for the poem online and found that it also lives on many inspirational blogs and cancer-support websites.”

Justine Blau concludes, “My mother often left me shaken and afraid. But discovering that, to some, she is a source of wisdom reminded me of the gift she had given me: a passion for life. And it’s good to be alive ... to laugh and love and thrive.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Justine Blau, “The Writing’s on the Wall,” in *O: The Oprah Magazine*, December, 2014, p. 144

That's *Thank you*. Thank you, even in the face of suffering. Thank you, hard-won. *Please. Thank you.*

Maybe we don't think of *OMG* as a prayer, and maybe it's just the exclamation point on *Thank you!* But sometimes, when something happens that feels like magic, like grace, like a blessing, our spontaneous expressions of appreciation are prayers – our reflexive astonishment at the way the universe surprises us.

I love that passage when Alice Walker's Shug is talking to Celie about the color purple. G\*d gets mad, she says, "if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing G\*d is all G\*d cares about. But any fool living in the world can see [G\*d is] always trying to please us back."<sup>4</sup>

Two years ago, a regular guy named Alex Banner wrote a great piece called *Bed, Bath, and the Great Beyond*. Here's a little bit of it:

"Before my dad died," Alex Banner says, "... he wanted two things: for me to get into jazz; and to own a tingler – one of those spidery, metal-pronged head scratchers. After he got sick, the tingler fell down the priority list, but jazz – that was important....

"When my dad was near the end, his best friend, my brother, and I sat with him while he played us the Duke Ellington and Mahalia Jackson [symphony] *Black, Brown and Beige*. It was a profound thing – us men, listening to this woman's voice. We knew we were saying goodbye. The last song we heard was *Come Sunday*, and I thought, *This is the most beautiful song there ever was.*

"[Not long after he died,] my mom called, laughing through tears. She had found a tingler in the discount bin at Bed Bath & Beyond. She took it to the counter. The clerk told her Bed Bath & Beyond didn't carry tinglers. She could just have it, he said. My mom didn't call it a sign, but it was *something*, she said, something from beyond – ... the 'beyond' part of Bed Bath & Beyond....

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<sup>4</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

“Two months later, I got laid off [from my job as a mason]. For weeks, I walked around San Francisco asking for work at every job site I saw. I must have left a hundred résumés. One day, I was so beat up, so broke and broken, I put on *Come Sunday*, which I hadn’t heard since that day with my dad. As it played, a guy called to offer me an apprenticeship as a woodworker. I had no experience, but I said yes....”

Alex Banner concludes, “I own my own woodworking business [now].... I still think *Come Sunday* is the most beautiful [piece] ever recorded, though I don’t listen to it much.... I prefer to save it.... [But] I use Mom’s tinger a lot. It feels so good – like a gentle hand, reaching out to touch you.”<sup>5</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let us pray, and let’s mean it.  
 Pray when we’re in need: *Please*.  
 Pray when we’re grateful: *Thank you*.  
 Pray when we’re in awe: *OMG*.

When we say, “I’ll pray for you,”  
 let’s keep one another in mind;  
     pay attention;  
     hold each other in our hearts;  
 keep the faith that love will prevail.

“I have heard, in that fierce embrace,  
 Even the gods speak of G\*d.”<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Banner, “Bed, Bath, and the Great Beyond,” in *O: The Oprah Magazine*, December 2014, p. 149

<sup>6</sup> David Whyte, *op cit*