

“On Prayer” by Billy Amoss

June 23, 2015



The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
Amen.

This was the prayer I was taught to say as a child every evening at bedtime. I don't think I knew what it really meant. The first four words, Now I lay me, were strung together in my mind to form the single word "nowilayme." I did not think of the possibility that I might die in my sleep, nor that it was important that if that happened, God accept my soul into his eternal realm. I say "his" realm because, of course, I thought of God as male.

I'm not sure when I stopped saying this prayer, but it was sometime before the age of 10, I believe. I also don't know exactly why I stopped saying it. Developmentally I had

probably reached the stage where it seemed childish, notwithstanding the prayer's underlying – and hardly childish – truth that when we go to sleep we might not wake up; indeed, that we don't know from one moment to the next when we might go to sleep forever.

The truth of our very precarious condition often is not driven home to us until we are adults, and sometimes we are well passed our prime before we come face to face with our ever present mortality.

I have a friend, a well-respected scientist, who at the age of 80 was diagnosed with a potentially deadly form of cancer. He was lucky and made a full recovery. He said one of the lessons he learned from the experience was that he was going to die. At 80 he had never confronted that reality before!

The reality of our mortality can inspire deep fear. But there are other aspects of being human that can make us deeply fearful – the loss of livelihood, which is one I struggle with; debilitating illness; the slow but inexorable loss of our mental faculties to dementia as we age; shame and the loss of our reputation; the loss of loved ones, including our children; rejection in our personal and professional lives – the list is long.

Fear is a powerful motivator for prayer, and prayer is often a desperate call for help.

What do we do when we reach the point of complete despair, of utter hopelessness – when we know that we alone cannot remedy a situation and cannot find inner peace?

When we are in darkness and feeling utterly alone, prayer offers a way of bringing us into relationship with the Beloved.

“Out of the depths I cry to you.” (Psalm 130)

In our culture, which values so highly resourcefulness and individual success, this cry for mercy is not one we can readily learn. In fact, there can be shame in contemplating surrendering completely to God -or to anyone – our own abilities to help ourselves.

But the surrender I am talking about is driven by intentionality, not passivity. And here the readings from Mark about the woman who had suffered for 12 years from bleeding that could not be stopped, and of the leader of the synagogue whose daughter was at the point of death, can be instructive. Both the woman and the synagogue leader had given up on the conventional modes of healing and were clearly looking for what we today would call a miracle. But in fact they each took a giant leap of faith and brought clear and unambiguous intention to their surrender to a power greater than mere human power. Imagine how determined that woman had to be to make her way through the crowd pressing in on Jesus so that she could simply touch his cloak and be healed? Or the deep-seated faith of the leader of the synagogue who, after being told that his daughter had already died and witnessing the mourners laugh in contempt when Jesus said the child was merely sleeping, still trusted Jesus to bring his daughter to life.

So surrender to what is is an important part of prayer. Help, help, help! But the important point here is that the cry for help is intentionally directed at something, at someone: God, the Source, the Beloved.

To me there is actually a wonderful sense of freedom when I realize that the course of my life is not entirely up to me and I turn things over to the Source. Suddenly fear leaves me, and I can believe again that with God, all things are possible, including my ability to accept and handle whatever is before me.

The other morning as I was walking to the office I was weighed

down by an issue at work on whose positive resolution our most important children's health program depended. Suddenly I thought: Why do I think it's all up to me to solve this problem? So I invoked the Beloved and announced I was turning the problem over, it was just too big for me to handle. The simple admission that I needed help and asked for it almost immediately lightened my step and allowed me to breathe deeply and release the tension that had been building in me. When I got to the office I called on some of our board members to help in ways that I couldn't, so, again, I did not sink into passivity. And though the outcome is still unclear, my prayers directed to the Beloved are giving me the faith that I can live with the outcome, even if it's not the one I am seeking at the moment. And so I released the hard focus on the problem of the day and opened up again to seeing the enormous good in being alive, in recognizing beauty in everyday things and opening my heart to loving the world and all of creation.

So here's another aspect of living that gives rise to prayer: the recognition of the miracles imbedded in ordinary everyday experience. To me this recognition is always a moment of grace, an unsought and unearned experience of lightness and joy that overtakes me, as when I hear in our garden the full-throated call of the diminutive Carolina wren, or exchange a smile with a passing stranger, or gather, as I did yesterday morning, with two close friends to dance and tell the stories of our lives that seek expression.

Here is Walt Whitman on the everyday nature of miracles:

Why, who makes much of a miracle?

As to me I know nothing else but miracles,

Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,

Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,

Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge

*Of the water,
Or stand under trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with anyone I love, or sleep in the bed
At night with anyone I love,
Or sit at the table at dinner with the rest,
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
Or watch honeybees busy around the hive
Of a summer forenoon,
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of the stars shining
So quiet and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon
In spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles...*

(Walt Whitman, "Miracles" in [Leaves of Grass](#), Random House Publishing, 2004, p.324)

So where does prayer begin? In fear and hopelessness when we cry out for mercy? In moments of grace when we want to drop to our knees in gratitude for being alive? How about when our lives have none of the intensity of joy or sorrow and we're just going about the business of the day with its multiple tasks and responsibilities?

It's actually possible and, I believe, important to pray in every situation, because in essence prayer is a way of

cultivating our relationship with the divine, with that mystery that is the source of all of creation. And as we know, relationships take practice and need to be tended with mindfulness if they are to thrive in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, and all of the in-between times in which our lives unfold.

I want to end by inviting several of you to come up to do an embodied prayer to a Leonard Cohen prayer-song. The piece you are about to hear was recorded at a concert, which is why you will hear some applause at the beginning and end.

(Embodied prayer to Leonard Cohen's [If It Be Your Will](#))

AMEN.