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BAREFOOT PRAYERS

A meditation a day for Lent and Easter

Stephen Cherry

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For Rachel: daughter, friend and companion

The voice of prayer is never silent.
John Ellerton

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An introduction in three parts

The voice of prayer

Prayer is an extremely common human activity. As John Ellerton put it in a famous hymn, 'the voice of prayer is never silent / nor dies the strain of praise away'.[1] It takes myriad forms and transpires in countless contexts. Yet it is also strange and riddled with paradox. We associate it with our deepest peace, but it is often anguished – and edgy.

Prayer happens at the boundaries of meaning, and often comes from us when we are at our wits' end. We pray when we would like to take control of events but know we cannot. We pray when we would like to get a grip on something quite uncontrollable. We pray when we are perplexed and when there is no convincing plan. These are not the only times we pray. But it is at such times that we are likely to pray in the spirit of handing over to God what in truth we care about deeply.

Personal prayer often has something of an anarchic quality about it. It lives beyond the scope of the doctrinal, metaphysical or rational police. It is informed by the less tameable parts of our person – our will, our desire, our fear, our imagination and both our worthy and our less worthy longings. Prayer can also spring from the compassion and anger that happen when we see the suffering of others. Empathy is the driver of intercessory prayer – empathy in the company of hope. These are beautiful parts of human nature, but they are not safe. Rather they are lively and, where there is injustice, discontent. Protest

is an important part of the honesty of prayer – and we should expect to hear its discordant notes from time to time.

* * *

The word 'spirituality' is a highly attractive one: infinitely more attractive than 'religion' and more liberating than 'prayer'. To pin it down by definition is perhaps to miss the point of the word, to forget why the word itself is so compelling today. It is about the undefinable, the untameable, and the unorganizable. Inasmuch as God is all these things, spirituality can be about God. More importantly, anything that is, as it were, about God must be touched by something of these qualities. There is no God without spirituality in some sense, for, as Jesus says in John's Gospel, 'God is spirit' (John 4.24).

One traditional and wise way of seeking to avoid the error of suggesting that we can control things of the Spirit is to think and talk *negatively*. Such an approach makes me want to suggest that spirituality is the task of *not* inhibiting the grace – or Spirit – of God. Much prayer is a huge exercise in getting over yourself. In a famous sermon Paul Tillich urged his congregations to 'simply accept the fact that you are accepted'.[2] If acceptance would only come about as a result of ministerial instruction, then life would be a lot more straightforward than it is. Walter Brueggemann was nearer the mark when he realized that human beings are not changed by ethical urging but by transformed imagination.[3] Prayer is in part the project of letting our imagination be transformed by God's Spirit acting in us and through us. As such it involves a special kind of effort: the effort of not making an effort.

The paradox involved here is well expressed by Robert Llewellyn, who talks about the value, when dealing with distractions in prayer, of two sentences: 'Do not try to think' and 'Do not try not to think'.[4] It is the space, the poise, between these two

sentences that I am trying to describe: the effort of spirituality is the effort of getting yourself out of the way.

This is the opposite of what we might first think when we embark along a spiritual path.

Typically, people today see spirituality as a way towards personal fulfilment. As they do so, one of the images that might be in their minds is that of Albert Maslow's well-known 'Hierarchy of Needs'.[5] Maslow suggests that human beings have several layers of need, the lowest of which is biological – food, water, shelter – rising through layers such as 'safety', 'belonging' and 'esteem' to 'self-actualization', at the top of a pyramid.

Authentic Christian spirituality does not see it like that. It sees spirituality as something that pervades the whole of life and is there within the material level of need as well as at every other level. In fact, Christianity's disagreement with Maslow is most intense at the very top of the pyramid. To frame life as the pursuit of 'self-actualization' is far too individualistic and, to be blunt, selfish to square with Christian values in general and the gospel of Jesus Christ in particular. At the top of the Christian pyramid is not self-actualization but *self-giving*. What exactly that is and why it is *more than fulfilling* is something that is hard to explain – something we only realize through spiritual intuition and faithful and generous living. Living out of that intuition is what we call faith. It is not the pursuit of self-fulfilment as if that were intrinsically good, or of 'peak experiences' as if their value was self-evident and self-contained.

* * *

When St Paul wrote of praying with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8.26) he revealed something constant about the human spirit: we do not have the words to contain our prayers. We never have and we never will. True prayer breaks the bounds of language. It always has and it always will. There can be prayer

in instrumental music and I know people who deliberately and wordlessly dance their prayers. Maybe this is why some of the most common prayer-words, like 'Alleluia' and 'Amen', are happily used by people who have little or no sense of their literal meaning.

Prayer is not something we do. It is what God does in and through us. It is the Spirit in our hearts. It is the Spirit's inarticulate groans and sighs, which are often too deep for words yet somehow, sometimes, verbal.

We pray in the same way as a clarinet sounds: as the breath of another passes through us. We pray in the same way that a harp sings: when someone plucks our strings. We pray, sometimes, as the drum declaims when struck by hand or stick and we make a bang or a boom. To pray is to make a sound, more than, or before, it is to make a thought. The voice of prayer is never silent: but it is often without words.

Poets speak of the muse that may or may not be there for them. This is an apt metaphor for the Spirit. It cannot be conjured up. It blows where it will (John 3.8). There is no possibility of controlling it; the best we can do is cooperate and collaborate. And that is absolutely the best we can do. To be in tune with God's Spirit, to let God's Spirit call the tune from the instrument that we are: this is the height of Christian spirituality, Christian living, and Christian service.

Prayer requires a strange blend of dispositions: self-forgetful presence and absorption. It is self-aware but not self-conscious. As soon as the self becomes interested in itself, or drawn towards prideful self-regard or abject self-loathing, the moment of prayer has passed. Only the self-accepting person can pray, and yet it is the person who cannot accept him or herself who most needs to pray.

Although prayer itself is not self-conscious, people who pray will often experience several layers of self-consciousness. This is normal and natural and not to be worried about, though it is

also, to be frank, a bit of a nuisance. God is very close to us and yet not manifest in any obvious way. So when we go looking for God it is very likely that we will find not God but ourselves, or some aspect of ourselves. It may be our recent memories, it might be a digestive problem or headache or the realization that we cannot get comfortable. As we get beyond that we encounter our worries – what we have yet to do today, what we did not do so well yesterday. Beyond them, we encounter our desires and the dream world of our fantasies. All bets are off as to what might happen now. And yet true prayer is neither about settling at any of these levels nor battling with them, but rather letting them all fall away: forgetting them as we pay calm attention not to the trumpet-call of our now rather irritated self, but to the breathy sound of the Spirit that has always been praying through us but which we have drowned out by the cacophony of self-regard that is our normal waking state.

It follows that prayer requires of us real patience. 'Be patient and without resentment,' wrote Rilke to a young poet in the days leading up to Christmas.[6] The same advice might be passed to someone who wants to pray or to develop in Christian spirituality. Resentment can get in the way of prayer, especially if it's self-regarding and petty – which it often is. But patience is the main thing. Some things can't be hurried. We need to wait for them to happen. They cannot be forced. Prayer is not a strain, but a response to grace. It is not us rolling up our sleeves to get on with it, but us waiting patiently and expectantly and inviting God to do God's thing in God's time. We can only pray when we let go of the desire, deep-seated in us though it is, to control; when we remember that we are not God.

* * *

Poetry is the natural idiom of any prayer that has become verbal. Prose prayers are possible, so too are list-prayers. But it

is the poem-prayer that is the most natural and comfortable form – which is why Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs are so central in the Christian tradition (Ephesians 5.19). What the Psalms achieve over and above the hymns and songs is to remain in touch with the wildness of the grace of God and the actual pain of the human soul. They do so in ways that are not tidied up to fit in with the disciplines of metre or rhyme or to sound nice when sung in worship.

A good poem, it is said, is felt, is experienced, before it is understood. In this way a poem is like a person. We can enter into a relationship with it, finding it unfathomable and inexhaustible and irreducible. A poem is not a code. It is the shape and sound as well as the meaning of the words of which it is made. Poetry is language understood sacramentally: it conveys not just meaning but grace, and therefore speaks of plenitude and peace.

A poem that is also a prayer has inevitably been invested with a certain amount of subjectivity by the one who made it. The fact that the making of it was not experienced as a deliberate, controlled or planned act of creation, as the exercise of power or authority, is neither here nor there. The poem that lives was living even as it was conceived.

This is also true of our everyday, unwritten and unreflected prayer. It is out there, prayed, done, before we have got the meaning, the thought, even the intention, straight in our minds. It's not that we have a lofty thought and then struggle to find the right words. Or if it is like that, then it's the exception. More likely the word – or even the sound – comes first. Like when we drop something heavy on our foot and hear ourselves spitting out an exclamation we are not proud of. So it is with prayer from the heart, prayer in the Spirit. It has to be, for it is only in this way that we give voice to rough protestation, raw praise and unfettered lamentation. True prayer is necessarily

unguarded and unrefined. It *is* rough and raw, and reveals to us something about what is going on at the deeper level where God connects with us.

If this sounds very different from the effort of writing a sonnet or even a limerick, it is. To pray is an art and to make prayers is a craft. But it is the most artless of arts, the least crafty of crafts. To use a very different metaphor, it is like a baby crying. No instruction is needed. No forethought is required. Need and expression are connected. 'Let my cry come before you', said the Psalmist (Psalm 119.169). Whatever else prayer is, it is rarely the controlled and controlling use of disembodied language.

True prayer is the poetry of the Spirit.

Barefoot praying

Prayer is what happens when humility meets grace, or rather, when humility is met by grace. People today shy away from the virtue of humility for fear that to get close to it will make them weak in the face of hostile others, or in the fear that thinking themselves humble, they might slip into pride. Yet humility is the least negotiable of the Christian virtues. It is the basis of spirituality, wisdom and ministry.[7]

Like many virtues, humility has two opposites. True humility is found midway on the spectrum that begins in self-loathing and ends in arrogance. It is self-acceptance without self-obsession, self-awareness without self-regard. It is no friend of either self-congratulation or self-pity. Humility is a calm and calming virtue, and necessary for the kind of practical attentiveness we call *poise*.

Spiritual traditions and the guides who interpret them are often concerned with the question of *posture*. For those locked into a form of spirituality that is, in essence, a kind of gnosticism

(an excessive concern with knowing things or thinking) or emotivism (a disproportionate emphasis on feelings and moods), posture is an unlikely aspect of spirituality. It is much the same for people caught in the web of individualist consumerism (the assumption that what is most important about me is my own individuality and personal gratification together with my self-understood strengths, aptitudes and preferences). For gnostics, emotivists and consumers, the question of posture is irrelevant because posture is of the body, and prayer is all in the mind.

Rather than being irrelevant to spirituality, however, posture is a form of spirituality. This does not mean that you cannot pray apart from certain postures. Some are impossible for some people and there is definitely nothing magic about any particular configuration of arms and legs. Personally I feel that the invitation to prayer which begins with the invitation to bow the head is not always satisfactory. Nor is the instruction to children, 'hands together, eyes closed', quite good enough. But these are quibbles with the way in which people are invited into prayer, not with the fundamental point that bodily posture is a spiritual issue.

Kneeling is a posture of prayer, and so is sitting on the floor, as is standing, as is opening the palms or raising the hands. Pilgrimage is prayer in motion, but it is one thing to go on a journey and another to say it is a pilgrimage. There is an amusing scene in the film *The Way* about the Camino to Santiago de Compostela where the practices of a true or authentic pilgrim are discussed. The absurdity of being too macho about this is brought to light and the question is left unanswered. The reality, however, is that there *is* a difference between a trip and a visit, a pilgrimage and a journey, just as there is a difference between having a relaxing snooze in a comfy chair and spending time in silent prayer. Either may be needed, and I certainly like

the first; there can be graceful receptivity in many leisurely activities. But to call it all prayer is to risk sliding into a spiritual life that is all about me being cosied by the Spirit on my own terms. This is the most common spiritual mistake of people who live in a consumer society.

Prayer and pilgrimage involve two potentially uncomfortable components of humility: vulnerability and openness to learning and therefore change. The bow of the head, like the bending of the knee, is intended to reflect and encourage that self-forgetful presence and absorption which sincere and deep prayer requires.

'Prayer is a physically intimate matter',[8] observes Rowan Williams when reflecting on the way Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jewish writer who perished in Auschwitz, engages with the business of learning how to kneel in her diaries. Although it is a theme to which she repeatedly returns, it is not an easy one for her to dwell on. As Williams observes, she finds it more embarrassing to write about her prayer life than her love life. Maybe that would be true of many of us. We sense that true prayer exposes our deepest being, our soul, and makes us vulnerable. Our prayer is an expression of our integrity.

We fear, I think, that prayer confronts us with what Hannah Arendt once called 'the predicament of irreversibility' in an acute form.[9] Once we have prayed something – in words or groans, gestures or sustained silence – then that is it: there is no unsaying a prayer, whether it is a shout of praise, a cry of lament or a long silent attentiveness to the possibility of grace. We may grow in prayer, learn to pray in ways we feel are rather better, but we know that fundamentally a prayer is a prayer is a prayer: there is no hierarchy. Indeed, you could say that our soul is the sum of all the prayers we have ever said. It's certainly not the edited highlights. It's the lot. Our prayer defines us before God – though mercifully, God always knows us yet more deeply