

## The Prayer That Nurtures

God, the eternal healer, the eternal lover, offers to touch our tiredness, our stress, and our pain. The most direct response to this love, the widest door we can open, is through the relationship we call prayer. For it is a relationship and not primarily a discipline.

Most of our problems with prayer arise from our tendency to turn spiritual growing into a set of laws or a gymnastic exercise. I have seen great inner struggle, fatigue, and guilt result when we treat prayer like a discipline.

I recently talked with a young woman who had been trying diligently to turn her spiritual life into a set of rules. She had structured her whole prayer life. She had rules about what time of day she prayed, where she prayed, what position she would take when she prayed, how long she prayed. She felt she always had to begin with adoration, then move on to confession, and follow with petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and commitment—in that fixed order. She tried to exclude all distractions, because she considered the prayer invalid if her mind wandered, and she closely monitored every sign of progress. She was exhausted!

Being human, she would often fail to live up to her own rules, and then she would feel guilty. Or if she did live up to her rules, she got so tired and bored that she would skip prayer for several days and feel even guiltier. She constantly felt she was letting God down and betraying her deeper self.

As we talked together, extraordinary relief came into her face as she slowly realized that she was being much

harder on herself than God was. She realized that God is asking for relatedness, not rules.

“After all,” she told me, laughing, “I don’t feel that I have to sit down with my husband in the same place at the same time every day and bring up the same subjects in the same order! Sometimes we just sit in loving silence together. Sometimes we have a deep, long sharing. Sometimes we exchange a quick hug and a smile.”

“And sometimes,” I responded, “you want to share some interesting activity together, and feel the loving presence of the other. Sometimes you might want to take a walk with your loved one and see the world anew through the eyes of your companion.

“If you felt you had to move through a strict structure and order in each conversation before you got around to what was really on your mind, I suspect that your conversations would dry up and cease in a very short time.”

If this is true of our relationships, it is certainly true of prayer. When we pray, we are relating to Somebody—the supreme Somebody. But as with any healthy relationship, it can’t be turned into a set of laws, even good laws. Any relationship that remains whole is based on a commitment of ongoing trust, which expresses itself in varying and growing ways all our lives.

It is best to have some form of deliberate opening to God each day, but we need not be troubled if the form and expression change. That is as it should be. God’s love is a growing personal relatedness in which we are loved and challenged to love without limit. *This transforming friendship always nurtures before it challenges as well as during the challenge.*

In the previous chapter, we looked at Jesus kneeling before his disciples, offering them an act of personal service. Look now at the risen Jesus in John 21. Before he challenged Peter to feed the hungry sheep of the world, he filled the disciples’ nets full and cooked and served them breakfast on the beach. He fed those hungry, tired “shepherds” first.

Just as he knew they could not wash the feet of others, with all that implies, until they themselves had been ministered to, so they could not be sent as nurturing shepherds to the hungry, hurting world until they had been comforted, fed, given strength and the assurance of his presence, the Bread of Life always with them.

This is hard for us. It is hard to learn to receive. We like to be on the giving end. We like to be in control. It is not easy to admit that we are vulnerable, that we have needs, limits, and wounds. It is hard to admit it to others, and it is hard to admit it to God. Perhaps it is hardest of all to admit it to ourselves.

In a prayer group to which I once belonged, it was the custom to raise our hands during the intercession period if we felt the need for special prayers from the group and for the laying on of hands. It was literally years before I could bring myself to indicate to the group that sometimes I needed special prayers, special help. And yet, I often prayed for others and joined in the healing ministry for them. Was it pride? Was it the fear of being selfish? Was it the wish not to be conspicuous? Was it the feeling that no one, including God, ought to be bothered with my little problems? Was it a wish to be on the controlling end, to be the giver rather than the receiver? It was probably a combination of all these feelings. But whatever the reasons, until I could admit to myself, to God, to my loving group that I too sometimes felt weak and in need, the deep relationships could not grow.

How can we most directly experience the transforming nurture of God through prayer? There is a form of prayer I love to share especially with persons who are in deep stress, fatigued, drained of energy, ill, or convalescent. Indeed, I recommend it for everyone, no matter how healthy, if only for a few minutes every day. It is a prayer of deep healing, regenerating power. It is a prayer closely involved with the body as well as the emotions and the whole spirit. It can be a prayer of only a few minutes or a prayer of a whole hour or more. It is the most radical form of healing prayer I know.

There are two parts to this prayer, one I have known

about for many years and the other has just recently come to me as a strong, guiding gift from God. You may feel more drawn to one aspect than to the other. Or you may wish to combine them. Trust your feelings and your inner readiness; never push yourself into any form of prayer that does not seem right for you.

The first part of this prayer is often called “soaking prayer.” I personally use the image of light, but some people prefer the images of water, wind, color, healing hands, wings, and so on. In this prayer, we do not ask for anything special. We just rest, let go, breathe in, and soak up the healing light of God which embraces us. We may not feel anything special; nevertheless it is a profoundly physical form of prayer in which every cell and organ of our bodies is washed, filled, and renewed in the healing light of God’s love. Some people do feel warmth, waves of energy, a tingling sensation. Others have no such physical reactions. But the action of the light is a reality whether or not we immediately register it. We do not feel the ultraviolet rays of the sun, but they pervade us and affect our bodies whenever we go out into the daylight. Similarly, when we deliberately open ourselves to the healing presence of God, the deep action of divine love flows into every part of our lives. In this prayer we rest in it, breathe it, and allow it to work its transforming renewal within us. If thoughts wander, don’t worry. Let them play like children in the sun.

The second part of this prayer, the prayer that is a new joy in my life, might be called the “prayer of the heart.” It is a deeply incarnational form of prayer based on Jesus’ parable of the yeast expanding within the bread (Matt. 13:33). Just as the soaking prayer envisages the light surrounding us and flowing through us, so this prayer envisages the healing power expanding from within. The heart is the symbol of the central energy flow of our bodies, just as it is the symbol, through the ages, of the deep center of God’s love. In this prayer we are joining our physical and emotional need for renewal with the deep incarnational union between our hearts and God’s heart.

*Soaking Prayer*

How precious is thy steadfast love, O God!  
 The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy  
 wings.  
 They feast on the abundance of thy house,  
 and thou givest them drink from the river of thy  
 delights.  
 For with thee is the fountain of life;  
 in thy light do we see light.

—Psalm 36:7–9

Sit or lie in a relaxed position, and give thanks to God that “underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut. 33:27). Put this time of prayer under Christ’s spirit. Breathe gently and slowly, letting your hands remain open in a relaxed way. Image a cloud of light forming around your body. (Don’t expect to see this light with physical eyes. Very few people do. But by your inward imaging, you are claiming the healing light of God that is always offered to you.) Perhaps you may image the light strong and intense or perhaps gently luminous. Perhaps it may seem to have a restful or energizing color.

Rest, and gently breathe in this surrounding light. Picture it flowing through the top of your head, slowly flowing through your tight facial muscles, relaxing them, especially around your eyes and jaw. Picture it now as a river of light quietly flowing through your whole body, calming, relaxing, releasing every part. Think of every slow, light breath as if breathing the breath of life which God breathes into every living being. If you wish, repeat from the psalm quoted above: “For with thee is the fountain of life;/in thy light do we see light.”

If the light image is not right for you, think of God’s healing water flowing around your body or of a gentle wind blowing through you. These are also biblical symbols.

*Prayer of the Heart*

Place both hands, palms down, over your heart. (Your heart is central in your chest, under the breastbone.) Keep

your hands on your heart in a relaxed position for a minute or two, and then say aloud or inwardly in silence, very slowly, with long pauses between each phrase: "The living heart of Jesus Christ is taking form within my heart . . . filling . . . calming . . . restoring . . . bringing new life." (Take a quiet pause, while you envision a warm light glowing in your heart.) "And this new life in my blood flows peacefully, with full healing power through my whole body." At this point you may feel like gently laying your hands on any part of your body that seems to need special help, and you may envision the new current of life through the transformed circulation flowing into that area.

When it seems right, open your hands, palms outward, and say: "And the power of this new life flows into my actions and relationships with others this day."

Then return your hands to your heart, giving thanks in the name of Christ, perhaps praying the beautiful words: "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God" (Psalm 84:2).

It is important that this prayer is not hurried. Move through it as slowly as feels natural. As you grow with it, you will probably wish to let it form its own timing.

I have found in myself a spontaneous wish to pray the first part, the soaking prayer, at night just before sleeping, and the second part, the prayer of the heart, in the morning just before getting up and again just before some stressful task or encounter. You may prefer a different rhythm, or some other form of nurturing, restoring prayer may be suggested to you. For example, some people wish to speak aloud or inwardly a special word or phrase that seems to bring to them vividly the love of God. Others may wish to relax and gaze at some special picture or object that symbolizes God's nearness. Some may wish to relax in a chair, close their eyes, and say, "Loving God, I need you," and let the symbolic images or words form spontaneously.

Whatever form seems right to you in your prayer of

receiving, remember three things. First, you do not need to beg or plead with God. Prayer is a response to the love already forever given to us. God is far more ready to hear and to give than we are to speak or to receive. God loves us even when we cannot feel love for God. God hears us even when we cannot speak. God meets us even when we are not worthy to be met. God holds us in the healing hands even when we lie down helplessly on them. Our willpower, our articulate prayers, and our structuring do not heal us. Healing comes from our growing responsive trust in the limitless love that always embraces us, whether or not we feel and wish for it.

Second, remember that because this is a living relationship with God and not a set of rules, your forms and methods of communication with God will change, evolve, expand, flow in new ways. Don't make a prison out of any method or let anyone else (even if that person is someone you admire and consider to be spiritually advanced) impose on you any method or symbolism that does not seem right, natural, or helpful to you. Listen instead to the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit within who searches the deep places in your heart and prays for you and through you.

Third, be gentle toward yourself. Sometimes you will have wandering thoughts, distractions during prayer. Don't fight them or force them down. Perhaps they are signals of deep wounded areas within that will need attention as you move into the prayers of memory healing. If they surface during nurturing prayer, envision yourself lifting them lovingly and putting them into the healing hands of Jesus Christ. If they seem trivial distractions, don't use force. Smile at them as you would at a little child or animal at play, and return to the Center while they play at the edges of your consciousness.

You won't always feel deep love for God or deep longing for prayer. There are seasons of the spirit just as there are seasons during the year. As with any committed friendship, there will be times when you feel much emotional concentration on the other and times when you feel blank and

dry. This does not weaken or invalidate the prayer in the least. Some of the most powerful times of prayer are the times when with humor and honesty we admit to God that at the moment we feel dry, bored, not in the mood, and yet, nevertheless, we are willing to be reached and nurtured. Great miracles of opening and change within can happen in these times.

If every day, no matter what your mood, you allow the love of God to feed you deeply through some form of soaking prayer, if only for a few minutes, I believe amazing changes will happen in your life. God, whose name is love, offers us—with every breath we take—a new, transforming energy for our tense, stress-filled bodies and an inner healing that reaches depths we had not dreamed!