

One skeptical woman hesitated to put her hands together but opened her heart and found the words she needed

About five years ago, I started to pray. I didn't know what I believed. I didn't know if I believed. But one morning, during a period of anxiety and confusion, I walked into my neighborhood parish in Berkeley, California—drawn as much, I told myself, by the cyclamen planted out front as by the fact that the parish belonged to the Episcopal Church, which had baptized me as an infant. Church, I figured, couldn't hurt. (And, as my mother said, I might meet some nice people there.) Little did I know that what I would find would lead me not just through my own struggles but also into the wider world.

That first Sunday, I sat in the back, knelt when everyone else knelt, and followed along in the Book of Common Prayer, my hair-trigger skepticism attuned to each leap of faith, each reason to think, *This isn't for me*. And then something in the sermon—something about being open, about intimacy—got past my critical mind and spoke to my heart. I wept. I didn't take Communion—I didn't think I believed enough for that—and I didn't stay for coffee hour, but I went back the next week and the week after that. And when a priest named Pamela invited me to come by for a chat, I said, "Sure," even as I wondered what we would possibly chat about.

Plenty, it turned out. We were both writers, and we had each lost a brother. And she made me feel it was OK to have my doubts. "You know," she said, "God finds us at the end of our

After moving across the country, giving up a nine-to-five job, and launching a career as a freelance writer, the author [opposite] felt an acute sense of dislocation. Prayer, she says, helped get her grounded. Now she takes time every day to sit quietly with her rosary beads or to read from her grandmother's prayer book. "Learning to pray has meant learning to let go," she says.

WRITTEN BY LINDSEY CRITTENDEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANGELA WYANT

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rope." And then she asked if I'd tried prayer. I squirmed. Here was the kind of talk that made me nervous. The only prayers I knew were the Lord's Prayer and the one I had recited kneeling next to my bed in my jammies with my hands pressed together: "Now I lay me down to sleep." Pamela suggested I had already been praying—by asking for help, by being honest. Tears came to my eyes. I knew she was on to something, and I wanted more. I wanted the CliffsNotes, the Kaplan guide.

Pamela taught me two simple prayers—"O God, you are here. O God, I am here" and the Jesus prayer. I started saying them in bed in the early morning and whispering them in the gym (or the car or the produce aisle) when my anxiety got particularly pitched. Sometimes I sat or stood still, and sometimes I matched the words to the rhythm of walking or swimming laps. I didn't do anything in particular with my hands (clasped palms seemed too reminiscent of flannel pajamas), but I usually closed my eyes (well, not while driving). And I began to see that the words didn't matter as much as saying them, as giving voice to what had been kept too long inside. No gruff voice, no revelation from on high, answered me, but I did get used to voicing in the simplest of pleas what had been kept inside to fester and stew: *Help. I hurt. Please.*

At times I felt silly and self-conscious, as though I were asking to win some emotional lottery. I knew that in order to feel better, I'd have to do some work, too. But sometimes we want deliverance—and what's wrong with admitting that? What we pray for, if it's honestly felt, speaks of who we are. (And if what we want most is to win the lottery, then perhaps prayer will answer us by redirecting our focus. After all, successful prayer doesn't mean we get to dictate the response.) I'd find, a few minutes or hours after praying, not the voice of guidance or the erasure of all worry (or Mr. Right at my doorstep with a bouquet of ranunculus) but a sense of expansiveness, a letting out of tight seams. In moments when I used to get tangled in knots worrying about tomorrow's appointment (or recasting yesterday's argument), I began to stay in the present. I began to stumble into quiet corners. I began to feel less alone.

I started praying every morning over coffee (a Buddhist friend raised his eyebrows at the caffeine factor, but, hey, making coffee is my first act of the day). I prayed for people close to me and for people I didn't know, for the planet we all call home, and for those who were my enemies (even if I didn't have a particular name in mind).

A woman at church introduced me to the tradition of the Anglican Rosary, and I strung myself a rosary from cobalt blue beads and a simple silver cross. I held it, fingering the beads and repeating words from the prayers I already knew and new

prayers I wrote myself, and I started carrying it around in my pocket when I wanted a talisman, a touchstone. Some days I sat for 30 minutes with a lit candle or my rosary. And others I sat for two minutes fretting about my taxes or whether to go to the supermarket before or after lunch. I didn't always enter quiet corners, but knowing they were there kept me coming back.

As prayer became habit, it became demystified—and remystified too. I began to notice the healing beauty in a blossom or a stranger's smile. I still wondered about the "holy mysteries," but I began to believe in and trust a presence greater than myself, a presence that had met me deep inside and led me out into the world. The divine, I now knew, was that presence—and prayer the recognition and

UNCOMMON PRAYERS

I was angered for I had no shoes; then I met a man who had no feet.
Chinese proverb

"Live in the present. Do the things that need to be done. Do all the good you can each day. The future will unfold."
Peace Pilgrim (1908 to 1981), peace activist

"Without opening your door, you can know the whole world."
Lao-tzu, Tao-te Ching, mid-third century B.C.

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."
Dame Julian of Norwich, 14th-century English mystic

"The world is new each morning—that is God's gift, and a man should believe he is reborn each day."
Israel Ben Eliezer (1698 to 1760), known as Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement

celebration of it. Thank you, I added to my repertoire.

A year and a half ago, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer, stage IV, metastasized to the liver, lymph nodes, bones, and—I learned one morning on the phone with her radiation oncologist—brain. After hanging up the phone, I screamed: “Don’t you dare do this to her!” I was alone in my kitchen, but I knew whom I was talking to.

Once I would have considered my reaction too raw for the propriety of prayer. But prayer and I have moved beyond the careful politesse of a blind date and are now in a committed relationship. I don’t have to be on my best behavior anymore. I can be seen in uncombed hair and surly moodiness and out and out terrified anger and know that I won’t scare anyone away.

Prayer didn’t keep my mother from dying, but it gave me a way to be with her through the diagnosis, the chemo, the hospital stays during which I visited her nightly to talk and rub her feet, and her death. Sometimes it fell short, as when I whispered “The Lord is my shepherd,” the Twenty-third Psalm, and her eyes fluttered open. “Why are you saying that?” she asked, frowning, as if to remind me she was still alive. And sometimes it helped enormously, as when I held her hand at the end and felt her love and strength pass into me.

On September 11, 2001, when I heard the news, I called my friends in New York City (all OK, all accounted for) and walked, trembling, to the blood bank. Heading uphill, I started to pray. Without thinking about it, I returned to the prayer that Pamela had taught me five years earlier, when I wasn’t sure what, if anything, prayer could do. Now I knew. “Have mercy,” I said. “Lord, have mercy.”

When we don’t know what to say—when there is nothing to say—prayer gives us a forum for the simplest of words, the most basic of pleas. That evening, as I looked around my crowded church (the six o’clock service usually has two or three attending; on the night of the 11th, 30 stunned people sat in the pews), I found solace in voices united in reading the Forty-sixth Psalm (“Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea”) and speaking the familiar Liturgy. And later, in bed, I repeated the words I’d prayed when my mother was sick, the prayer that begins, “Keep watch over those who watch and wait and weep this night,” and continues, “Soothe the suffering and bless the dying.” I felt connected, through praying alone and with others, to my neighbors and my nation, friends and strangers.

Prayer hasn’t answered all my questions or wishes. I still ask for quick fixes (an ideal part-time job, a kind and funny guy, a parking place), but I don’t pretend that’s why I pray. I’m clearer on what I believe but still tuck the cross I wear under my



blouse. I used to respond with skepticism and intellectual smugness to those who talked about “the presence of God.” But now, in prayer, I’ve heard voices and had visions that some would say are divine and others would insist are products of a malleable imagination. I’d like to believe the first explanation, while I acknowledge the second.

But I don’t need to know. Whatever the image—the memory of my mother’s smile or a freeze-frame from the Passion Story—I know it’s a gift, irreducible in its message. Prayer has given me greater tolerance for what a writing teacher used to call “good ambiguity,” and a surer confidence in the unknowable.

My childhood cat used to sit around my neck like a stole as I read or colored in a coloring book, a palpable presence that I’d sometimes forget was there until she leapt off. Whether I pray for a half hour in the morning or a split second during an afternoon errand, a steadiness like that cat’s stays with me all day, too sure to be shrugged off. It leeches comfort and warmth into my bones, and rides the movement of my muscles. It stays put. This presence never leaves.

A Sanctuary at Home

At first I just needed a place to keep my rosary, my grandmother’s red leather prayer book, and the Sunday readings I began to accumulate. But then I found I was thinking hard about each object that found its way there. All had to hold significance, some overtly religious (my aunt gave me a porcelain angel, and in Italy I bought a wooden icon) and others purely personal (seashells from a favorite beach, sage from a trip to Wyoming, a sandstone pendant my brother carved). Having one small surface (an old sewing-machine cabinet covered with cloth) that is all about belief, and its mix of the quotidian and the precious, helps keep me on track. —L.C.