

Prayer¹

Ruth Haley Barton

Deepening Our Intimacy with God

Prayer is like love. Words pour at first. Then we are more silent and can communicate in monosyllables. In difficulties a gesture is enough, a word, or nothing at all—love is enough. Thus the time comes when words are superfluous. . . . The soul converses with God with a single loving glance, although this may often be accompanied by dryness and suffering. —Carlo Carretto

Spring has finally come to Chicago, and today, in the midst of writing, I have been pining for beauty and color. And so, even though it is a bit early in the season, I have planted flowers. Pansies to be exact. Deep purple. Bright yellow. The colors of Easter, a friend reminds me. Thanks be to God.

As I pull the vibrant clumps of color out of the plastic cells where they have been cultivated for selling, I notice a familiar phenomenon: the plastic containers are packed with roots. There is little to no dirt left in the containers, and some of the roots are even dangling through the water holes, desperately searching for water and nutrients. I wrestle the flowers carefully from their tight, overcrowded holders, careful to do it gently enough that I don't mangle them or rip them from their roots. Part of the pleasure of it all is setting them in a larger space where there is fresh dirt and room for the root system to spread out, and knowing that this spaciousness will produce mounds of flowers throughout the season. I imagine that the pansies are relieved to be released from such cramped quarters, and I am pleased.

It is the same with the human soul. Like a plant that has become potbound, its roots searching for nutrients that have long since been used up, the human soul gets to the point when it is ready for a more spacious way to pray, one that provides more room for the mystery of growth in intimacy with God and more depth for the roots to sink into. The forms of prayer that were preferred and taught in the context of our religious upbringing or in the early days of our Christian experience no longer contain our experience of God or take us any further in our quest for intimacy with God. We long for something more.

Beginning Again

One thing I know for sure about prayer these days is that we do not know how to pray. It is only the young in Christ who think they know how to pray; the rest of us know we are just beginners. So let's try to begin together, which is really all we can do.

Simply put, prayer is all the ways in which we communicate and commune with God. The fundamental purpose of prayer is to deepen our intimacy with God. Early in the spiritual life we

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experience this intimacy primarily through the words we say to God, and there is deep satisfaction in it.

Words pour out to begin with. . . . Mostly a soul speaks a great deal at the time of its conversion, during the period of its novitiate, that is, the first years of its discovery of God. It is the easiest time for the soul. Prayer has a certain novelty; it seizes the imagination. And God, for his part, encourages the soul; everything pours out as in the beginning of a happy marriage.

In the next stage, we need to know what others have said about God, so we study a lot and reflect deeply on theological truth. This is a time of great joy and great reward, when many things about God seem clear and our response is glad service. It is good to receive and enjoy these gifts for as long as they are available to us.

But eventually there comes a time when prayer just doesn't work as it used to. Our intellectual considerations of the mystery of God and our wordy responses no longer feel very satisfying. For a while we may try to work harder at prayer the way we have always known it, or we may try to find a better method, but no matter how much effort we put into it or how faithful we are, nothing happens. While we have surely experienced times of dryness before, they always seemed to pass, and experiences of intimacy with God would return. But this time is different. This time we seem to have no control over what does or does not happen in our life with God.

This is very traumatic for the tender soul and may send us spiraling into doubt about our spirituality, wondering if we have completely lost our way. As time goes by, we may even become angry at God for not making himself known to us in ways that are as "knowable" as they were before—especially since we are trying so hard to be faithful. Confusion and questions about how to connect with God set in, and the emptiness seems too much to bear. We wonder if we have somehow fallen off the spiritual path. There has to be more to the spiritual life than this! the soul cries out in deep disillusionment. The ability to pray eludes us, and for the first time we know—really know—that we do not know how to pray as we ought.

A Deeper Invitation

The experience of having our prayers go cold, as distressing as it is, signals a major transition in the life of prayer and thus in our relationship with God. It signals an invitation to deeper levels of intimacy that will move us beyond communication, which primarily involves words and concepts, into communion, which is primarily beyond words. If there are any words at all, they are reduced to the simplest and most visceral expressions.

In Christian tradition, there are several signs that indicate we are transitioning into a new phase in the life of prayer:

1. What you are doing isn't working, no matter how much effort you put into it. You find yourself asking, Is this all there is?

2. Your desire for God continues to be strong even though you have no desire for anything external—words, images, previous structures for prayer, including the Scriptures. While these things may still be present to some extent, you are not attracted to them anymore. Words fail. The hunger for intimacy—to just hang out with God—is all there is.
3. You find yourself enjoying being alone, aware of God’s presence without structured activity. In the deepest part of your being, you know that God alone can satisfy the longings of the human heart, and other things fade in importance. There is no attraction to thought, meditation, or any other human activity or achievement. This last condition is most important, for it justifies the other two and indicates a readiness to leave words behind and remain with God alone in an act of love.

This transitional place in the life of prayer can be frightening, because it requires us to let go of what we have known in order to open ourselves to something new. It can feel as if we are being ripped from the safety and familiarity of a known space and our roots are dangling in midair. Whereas the old space held us snugly and we felt secure there, now we are being transplanted to a space that is less protected and less structured. We are left feeling vulnerable and unsure, like a tender sapling exposed to the wind and the elements.

Prayer as Intimacy

This deeper invitation is unsettling for another reason as well. It requires letting go into that relational free-fall that we call intimacy, giving ourselves fully and openly and vulnerably to another. And the truth is, most of us have at least some ambivalence about intimacy; we cry out for intimacy with God, but we resist it at the very same time. In most cases, the reason we prefer to talk about prayer and read about prayer but don’t actually pray has more to do with our ambivalence about intimacy than with anything else. Why does this ambivalence arise?

Instinctively we know that intimacy requires something of us. One of the most consistent metaphors in Scripture for God’s relationship with us is God as an intimate lover—a jealous lover, even. Sometimes Scripture’s language describing God’s love for us and pursuit of us is erotic and passionate. Sometimes it is emotional and gut wrenching. Other times it is quiet and tender or plaintive and haunting. Always it engages all of who we are.

When we read God’s story in the Old and New Testaments we are confronted with a God who is always after us, looking for us, and who cries out each time he finds us with a divine despair. . . . He wants us here, now, totally, unconditionally. As long as we continue to reduce prayer to occasional piety we keep running away from the mystery of God’s jealous love. . . . Looking at prayer as a generous response to a jealous God helps explain why we may have serious reservations about prayer. . . . Prayer means letting God’s creative love touch the most hidden places of our being and prayer means listening with attentive, undivided hearts to the inner movement of the Spirit of Jesus, even when that Spirit leads us to places we would rather not go.

Intimacy also requires risk—the risk of allowing someone to see me in my nakedness and vulnerability as well as in my strength and beauty. The dynamics that accompany the nakedness

and vulnerability required for sexual intimacy are the very dynamics the soul experiences as it moves deeper into spiritual intimacy with God. It involves bringing more and more of myself into God's presence and receiving more and more of God's being into myself.

Perhaps the deepest reason we are ambivalent about the intimacy of true prayer is that intimacy always leads us to a place where we are not in control. When we give ourselves over to another person in the act of love, we are not in control. When we give our heart and our life to another in committed friendship or marriage, we know that we give them the ability to do us great good or great harm. While we choose our intimate ones as wisely as we can, there are no guarantees. We can never fully control another human being.

Our patterns of intimacy or nonintimacy with other human beings are the very same patterns we bring to our relationship with God, whether we are conscious of it or not. Depending on what our previous experiences with intimacy have been, relinquishing control can be difficult or even impossible. If we have a high need to be in control in our human relationships (and most of us do), intimacy with God will be very challenging for us. If we are afraid of intimacy or hold ourselves back in human relationships, that will be our pattern with God as well.

Prayer gives form to our quest for deeper levels of intimacy with God, providing us with a path for moving beyond our ambivalence.

Prayer Beyond Words

If we let go of what's not working, we can begin to acknowledge that wordy prayers fail to capture the depths of our longing for God, the emptiness we feel in the absence of the soul's normal consolations, the darkness of not knowing. The effort to capture these depths in words feels difficult, if not impossible, like a violation of something that is deeply intimate. We are almost afraid that the experience will dissipate if we try to impose words on it. At this point prayer is much less about technique and much more about the beyond-words intimacy that is developing in our relationship with God.

There are many terms that seek to capture this dynamic—*silent prayer, centering prayer, contemplative prayer, interior prayer, prayer of the heart*. Each one carries a slightly different nuance, but they all are attempts to capture the same thing: the movement beyond words to an intimacy that requires no words. This intimacy is the kind that lovers know when they give themselves over to the act of lovemaking, the kind a mother experiences with a nursing baby, the kind that intimate friends know when they have said all there is to say and settle into a comfortable silence, content to just be in each other's presence. If you have had the joy of any of these experiences, you know that this is much more intimate than the noisy chatter that usually fills our social interactions. This silent “being with” is full and satisfying.

The reason this kind of prayer is so satisfying is that it is about knowing God experientially rather than just knowing a lot *about* God. The Greek word *epiginōskō* implies an intimate knowledge involving the whole person, not just the mind. This kind of knowledge perfectly unites the subject with the object, and it can be attained only by entering into a love relationship. The apostle John's leaning against Jesus' chest at the Last Supper is a poignant picture of this

kind of love and intimacy. Even by today's standard, the intimacy pictured here between John and Jesus is striking and compelling: two people who are comfortable enough with each other to commune beyond words. One gets the impression that this intimacy was so satisfying for John that he was almost disinterested in the wordy conversation that was going on around him.

The Old Testament also refers repeatedly to a kind of knowing that comes in the absence of words or in the stillness of waiting. *Be still before the Lord and wait. Be still and know that I am God. In silence my soul waits for you and you alone, oh God.*

This is a prayer of self-emptying that enables us to receive whatever it is that God wants to give. We come to him with empty hands and empty heart, having no agenda. Half the time we don't even know what we need; we just come with a sense of our own spiritual poverty. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Emptiness is the prerequisite for receiving.

The story is told of a learned professor who went to visit an old monk who was famous for his wisdom. The monk graciously welcomed him into his temple and offered him a seat on a cushion. No sooner had the professor sat down than he launched into a long, wordy account of his own accomplishments, his own knowledge, his own theories and opinions. The monk listened quietly for awhile and then asked politely, "Would you like some tea?"

How can we possibly expect anyone to find real nurture, comfort and consolation from a prayer life that taxes the mind beyond its limits and adds one more exhausting activity to the many already scheduled ones?

—HENRI J. NOWEN, THE WAY OF THE HEART

The professor nodded, smiled and kept right on talking. The monk handed him a teacup and began pouring tea from a large pot. The tea rose to the brim of the cup, but the monk kept right on pouring while the professor kept right on talking. Finally the professor noticed what was going on, leaped to his feet and demanded, "What are you doing? Can't you see that the cup is overflowing?"

To which the monk replied, "This cup is like your mind. It can't take in anything new because it's already full."

Eventually, when we stop the flow of our own words, another gift comes to us, quietly and imperceptibly at first: we find ourselves resting in prayer. Rather than working so hard to put everything into words, we rest from the noise and stimulation that are so characteristic of life in our culture. We rest our overactive, hardworking mind from the need to put everything into words. We rest from clinging, grasping and trying to figure everything out. The soul returns to its most natural state in God. In returning and rest you will be saved.

The Intimacy of Breathing

In the stillness we make yet another discovery: the Holy Spirit is the One who really knows how to pray. We discover that prayer is truest when it has passed beyond words into the realm where the Holy Spirit groans for us with utterances that are too deep for words (see Romans 8:26-27). The silence becomes a time when we listen for the prayer that the Holy Spirit is praying deep within us as he moves between the depths of our human experience and the divine will, interceding for us beyond words.

Words, when they do find their way to the surface from these depths, carry with them a whole new power and meaning because they are forged in the caldron of our deepest longings for God.

In this period, the so-called liturgical prayer thrives: that is, repetition of identical expressions, poor words but very rich in content . . . Jesus I love you . . . Lord have mercy on me . . . my God and my all. And it is strange how in these ejaculations, monotonous and simple, the soul finds itself at ease, almost cradled in God's arms.

Another name for this way of praying is breath prayer. At times, this is the only prayer that works. This prayer does not come primarily from the mind, which is where most of our words come from; the breath prayer arises from the depths of our desire and need. In fact, it could more accurately be called a "gut prayer," because it comes from a deep gut level. This prayer is so simple that it requires no thought to remember it once we really know it is ours. It is so short (usually only six to eight syllables) that we can pray it rhythmically with the inhalation and exhalation of our breathing.

Breath prayer is powerful because it is an expression of our heart's deepest yearning coupled with the name for God that is most meaningful and intimate for us at this time. Usually our breath prayer will remain with us for quite some time, and we get to the point where it prays itself without our even having to think about it. Breath prayer does not replace other ways of praying; rather it is foundational to our whole prayer life, supporting it and making it possible for us to pray without ceasing. The breath prayer helps us to pray when we don't know how to pray. It gives us a way to pray even when we cannot pray formally. It can be used to usher us into times of contemplative prayer, and when our mind wanders, we can be brought back from distraction by simply repeating our breath prayer.

There is nothing magical or mystical about breath prayer. It is not the same thing as a mantra of Eastern meditation practice, nor is it the "heaping up of empty phrases" that Jesus warned against (Matthew 6:5). Rather, this prayer arises from deep within our being as a personal response to

When you pray, do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. Do not strive for verbosity lest your mind be distracted by a search for words. Single words by their very nature tend to concentrate the mind. When you find satisfaction in a certain word of your prayer, stop at that point.

—JOHN CLIMACUS

God at work within us. Breath prayer is to the spiritual life what oxygen and the pulmonary system are to life in the body, a way for us to breathe rhythmically and reflexively with the Spirit —the very breath of God.

Discovering Your Breath Prayer

You don't think your way into your breath prayer; you discover it by listening to your deepest longings and desires in God's presence. Sometimes our breath prayer will be a simple phrase that expresses the truest thing we know how to say to God at that time. At other times it may be a word or a phrase from a biblical prayer or a prayer of the church.

When I first started entering into silent prayer, it was all so new to me that the phrase "Here I am, Lord" was the simplest and truest way I could express my desire to be with God. These words really did capture the truth of my soul's longing at that time. More recent is the breath prayer I have already mentioned, the one that came during a time when I was aware (yet again!) of my need for deeper levels of transformation: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." The Jesus Prayer (as some call it) brings together what I know I need most these days—mercy—with the powerful name of Jesus Christ. This has been my breath prayer for several years now; it is the one that prays itself most naturally in me and connects me with something so deep inside that I honestly wouldn't know how else to access that place and bring it into God's presence.

The more I have prayed this prayer consciously, connecting it with my breathing, the more it has begun to pray itself in me before I have given it conscious thought. In moments of stress or fear, at times when sadness threatens to overwhelm me or awareness of my sin presses in, this prayer finds me, rather than my having to search for a way to pray. It grounds me in spiritual reality that is deeper than what is going on around me and keeps me from being swept away by my emotions or my circumstances. Furthermore, it connects me with spiritual seekers down through the ages, reaching all the way back to blind Bartimaeus, who have cried out to God from the deepest place within them.

The breath prayer is the prayer of the beggar and carries with it the intimacy of asking for what we need. To ask for what we really need is hard to do, but Scripture encourages us to make our requests known to God. Sometimes only desperation makes us willing to be that vulnerable. Praying the Jesus Prayer reminds me that I am not alone in these from-the-gut cries. It reminds me that to such cries Jesus responds with compassion and healing, and it gives me courage. This is a very different way of using words (or allowing God to use words) from what most of us are familiar with, but it connects us with God in the most intimate places of our lives and relieves us of the need to figure out how to pray.

Prayer in Community

One of the most natural results of a developing a vibrant personal prayer life is that we begin to notice a deep desire to enter meaningfully into prayer in community with others. We long to experience Christ among us, to offer our worship, to confess our sins and receive assurance of God's forgiveness, and to seek his help for our own needs and the needs of others.

There are many ways of praying together with others. What has been most meaningful for me in recent years is the opportunity to pray with others at regular intervals throughout the day. In Christian tradition this is known as “praying the hours” or the Daily Office. I have had opportunities to pray this way most consistently with the communities of the Transforming Center, and it has anchored and shaped our lives and our work together in profound ways. Whether we are on retreat together, working together or even getting together socially, our steadiest commitment is to regularly turn our hearts toward God in prayer in ways that are appropriate to the part of the day we are in. In the morning we begin with praise, affirming God’s presence with us and his loving care toward us and committing the work of the day to him. At midday, when tasks and to-do lists are pressing in and human effort is at its height, we stop to renew our awareness of God’s presence, rest in him for a few moments and ask for his peace and guidance regarding the things that are concerning us. In the evening we place the cares of the day in God’s hands and offer up general intercessions for ourselves and others, as well as bringing needs that are specific to us and burdens we are carrying for ourselves and others.

We are purposely not very wordy in our intercessions, because we realize that this is another place in the spiritual life where human striving and fixing can easily take over. As our own spiritual journey leads us to a greater capacity to be with God with what is true about us, to rest there and let him be in charge of what happens or what doesn’t happen, so we are able to be with others and their needs quietly in God’s presence as well. Intercessory prayer is not primarily about believing we know what someone else needs and then trying to tell God what the answer is. It is not about wrestling some result from God. Intercessory prayer is more about recognizing that we do not know how to pray for others—or ourselves for that matter—but the Holy Spirit knows. Since we understand that the Holy Spirit is already interceding for us before the throne of grace, we can bring a name or a need, express it simply and in the silence experience our own groaning and Holy Spirit’s groaning for that person. We can listen for the prayer that is already being prayed for that person before the throne of grace, and without struggling hard to put things into words, we can enter into God’s caring love for that person and wait with them and for them in God’s presence. This is a wonderful way to release our burdens to God at the end of the workday.

When our community is together on retreat, we close the day with night prayer, confessing our sins, celebrating God’s presence among us during the day and asking him to be with us as we rest. Our prayers are written in a liturgical format, so there is nothing to figure out. Scriptures are taken from the lectionary—a reading schedule that follows the Christian calendar—and are read without comment, giving God the opportunity to address us directly through his Word. The Gospel readings in particular help us to stay connected to the person of Christ as the model for our life and work.

In this way we give the Spirit of Christ access to us throughout the day as a community. We have been amazed at how the prayers and the Scriptures give us perspective, assurance and guidance according to our need, in ways that could not have been orchestrated by human planning. Many of us seek to pray the hours when we are alone as well, but we have discovered that a special power is released when two or three (or more!) gather in the presence of Christ and find ways to open their hearts to him together. It has been one of my deepest longings and my deepest joys to

pray regularly with others who are also seeking God. Such prayer in community is profoundly life changing and worth any price one has to pay to find it!

All of Life as Prayer

It has become increasingly difficult for me to distinguish prayer as a spiritual discipline from all the others. The longer I journey in the spiritual life, the more I experience all of life as prayer and the other disciplines as different ways of praying. Solitude and silence help me experience the more contemplative elements of prayer. Lectio divina is a way of praying the Scripture. Self-examination is the prayer in which I invite God to search me and reveal those things I need to know about myself. Discernment is the listening part of prayer: sitting with a question or decision in God's presence and waiting for the wisdom of God that is given as pure gift.

Any approach to the spiritual life that sets up false or awkward distinctions between prayer and life, or prayer and the other disciplines, seems to unnaturally rip apart elements of life that belong together or to unnecessarily complicate something that is in its essence quite simple. And so it happens that all of life becomes prayer. From prayers that are more formal and structured to those that are informal and spontaneous, from prayer with words to prayer that is beyond words, from the most intimate expressions of love expressed privately to God to words spoken in unison by God's people when they gather, from the eloquent written prayers of the church to the breath prayer that is nothing more than a gasp of need or a sigh of love or a groan of longing, from the prayers uttered in beautiful cathedrals to prayers offered on the side of a mountain—every breath we take can be a prayer, uniting our heart to God and harnessing the energy of our life to his great purposes.

May we ever be mere beginners in the life of prayer, always crying out, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Practice

There are several components to this practice so it could take one day or it could take a week. Do not rush. Take as long as you need to feel that your breath prayer really captures your heart's deepest need or desire at this time. Begin by spending time quietly in God's presence, allowing yourself to settle into that beyond-words place of comfort and intimacy, receptivity and restful repose.

Then, imagine Jesus calling you by name and asking, "_____, what do you want?" It may help you to go back to your reflections on desire from chapter one. Allow your truest answer to this question to come up from your heart, and express this to God.

If it helps, you can begin by writing the following phrase in your journal and then just letting your response flow. "God, what I most want from you right now is . . ."

Work with the words or the phrase that comes until you feel that it captures your desire as truly as possible right now. This word or phrase will become the heart of your breath prayer.

Choose your favorite name or image for God as you are relating to him right now, such as God, Jesus, Father, Creator, Spirit, Breath of Life, Lord, Shepherd—whatever best captures your sense of who God is to you at this point in your relationship. “My most meaningful name for God is . . .”

Now combine your name for God with the expression of your heart’s desire. Place it where it is easiest to say in the rhythm of your breathing. If various possibilities come, write them down and eliminate or combine until you have a prayer of about six to eight syllables that flows smoothly when spoken aloud and captures the core of your deep yearning for wholeness and well-being in Christ. Your breath prayer could be a phrase from a biblical prayer or a Scripture passage. Just make sure it is short enough that it prays easily in the rhythm of your breathing.

Once you have chosen your breath prayer, pray it into the spaces of your day—when you are waiting, when you are worried and anxious, when you are needing some sense of God’s presence. Over time, learn to pray it underneath all the other thoughts and words that swirl around you throughout your daily interactions. In times of solitude, pray this prayer as a way of entering into silence and of bringing your mind back to your desire when it begins to wander. Use the breath prayer God has given you consistently until you feel this prayer no longer captures your deepest need or desire or until God gives you another one.



Ruth Haley Barton founded the Transforming Center, (<https://transformingcenter.org>) a ministry for growing pastors, Christian leaders, and those they serve. She has served on the staff of several churches including Willow Creek, and is also Professor of Spiritual Transformation at Northern Seminary.

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