

Feeling and Pain and Prayer

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Like many Christians, as a child I was taught that church was a place in which to keep quiet. Pinching my younger sister was not allowed; neither was incessant wiggling, waving at my friends, or climbing over the pews. Although these rules no doubt ensured a relatively peaceful worship experience for the adults, they served to reinforce my general impression that God liked people who were well-behaved, obedient, and quiet. When I was five or six years old, I wrote a message to God and threw it out my bedroom window so that it would get to heaven. My mother retrieved the letter and kept it for some years in her file cabinet. Not surprisingly, the letter to God was a plea that I be good. For a child who longed for contact with the divine, the only way that I could imagine God was as a giant version of my parents: someone who loved me best when I was “good.” And so I tried to pray accordingly: I dressed up in my Sunday best. I offered God my good and holy thoughts. I showed God my warm and loving feelings. I put my best foot forward: here was my nicest, kindest, loveliest self, the self that it seemed my parents liked best, the self that I liked best, the self that surely God liked best, too.

As grace would have it, God would not settle for this, and my journey in prayer has moved over the years from the desire to be good to the desire to be real. When we are driven by what Thomas Hart calls the “pseudo ideal” of prayer as a place to express only our “good” self, how much of ourselves we then shut off from God! Hidden away are exasperation and anger, shame and sorrow, frustration and fear, and our relationship with God takes on a rather formal, predictable quality. We offer to God a false self, a partial self, and then we wonder why our prayer life seems unbearably boring and dry.

But what if God is longing to encounter not only our best selves, but our whole selves? What if God yearns to know and to enter not only our warm and loving feelings, but the depth of our anger and sadness and fear and doubt? What if God not only tolerates, but actually welcomes, the expression in prayer of our true selves, including those feelings that we tend to hide away and repudiate and despise?

C.S. Lewis once observed that “the prayer preceding all prayers is ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’” If this is so, then our intention in prayer is to be our real selves and to encounter the real God. As Hart pointedly puts it, “The first principle of prayer is to be yourself. Prayer is being yourself before God.” It is as if God were whispering in our ears as we begin our prayer, “Get real.”

Getting real involves opening to the truth of what we feel. When we are out of touch with our feelings, we are not fully present, not fully available to ourselves, to one another, or to God. Part of us is shut away. The question is whether we are willing to let God in on the depth of our anger and sorrow and anxiety and shame. Are we willing to disclose these parts of ourselves to God?

Are we willing not only to name these feelings, to gesture vaguely toward them as if we were standing at a respectable distance from them (“Well, God, the other day I got kind of angry ... “), but actually to feel them in God’s presence, actually to experience and express them in prayer, in all their vividness and urgency? How we answer these questions will profoundly affect our sense of intimacy with God. Unless we begin to risk disclosing and expressing these parts of ourselves to God, we will keep God at arm’s length. We will think that we have to keep up appearances with God, to keep smiling or achieving or earning approval, or doing whatever it was that we learned as children we had to do in order to please our parents or the other important people in our life. “A friend is a person with whom you can

afford to be yourself,” writes Thomas Hart.

Just yourself, nothing more or less. That is enough. There are plenty of people in the world with whom you cannot afford to be quite yourself. You have to resent the proper face, make the right impression. For them you have to make something beautiful, or attempt to. With them you need to be strong and have yourself together; at least you would like to appear that way. With a friend, none of this is necessary. When you meet others, you need to have some energy, to be ‘up for it.’ With a friend you do not really need that. You can open the door to a friend even when you are a wreck and could not turn on the charm if you wanted to. 3

Do we consider God to be a friend, with whom we can afford to be ourselves? “Just as I can choose to disclose myself to my friends, so I can also choose to disclose myself to God Setting out to disclose ourselves ... if only for a moment, promotes our relationship with God.” 4 I am sure that God welcomes our attempts to reveal our deeper feelings, however fumbling these attempts may be, for it is only in risking such self-disclosure that our relationship with God can finally become authentic. In prayer as in other forms of communication, “we often reveal more of ourselves as we are at a given moment by expressing to God the feelings we are experiencing than we would if we described our thoughts for an hour.” As Evagrius Ponticus, one of the 4th-century desert fathers, reminds us, “A single word in intimacy is worth more than a thousand at a distance.” If we hope to develop a conscious relationship with the loving Mystery who dwells within and among us, then we must grow in the willingness, the commitment, and the capacity to share with God whatever is stirring within us, including the feelings that we tend to hide from the world and even from ourselves.

Great, you may say, this is all very well and good, but many of us do not find it easy to express our feelings frankly, either to one another or to God. “How are you doing?” a colleague asks us. “Fine!” we answer merrily, swallowing the grief or rage or loneliness that was rising in our throat. Even in our close relationships, we may not do much better than this. Growing up in my family, for instance, I rarely witnessed any direct expression of anger. With clenched jaw and burning eyes, someone might go so far as to say, “I am cross with you.” The only words more alarming than these were the dreaded sentences, spoken with averted gaze, “It’s not that I am angry with you. I am just disappointed.” In families like mine, where certain feelings are apparently so dangerous, so potent, or so evil that they cannot be freely admitted and directly expressed, it is unlikely that anyone will feel particularly encouraged--much less eager--to reveal honest feelings to God.

For those of us trained by upbringing or culture to temper the expression of our feelings and to be less than frank with one another and with God, it is probably worth reflecting on what we tend to do with our feelings when we pray. The following questions may stimulate personal insight. As you read through them slowly, are there one or two that have some energy, some “juice,” for you?

Do you consider God a friend, with whom you can afford to be yourself?

Do you seek to express to God the full range of your feelings, the “negative” as well as the “positive”?

Do you consider prayer a place to express mainly warm and loving feelings?

Do you consider prayer a place to be “peaceful, a place where you no longer feel anything at all?

What feelings are easy for you to express to God?

What feelings do you tend to shut down, block, or shy away from in prayer?

What are the tears that you need to shed?

Are there areas of your life that you have shut away from God?

What is the grief or anger or secret that you need to express to yourself, to God, or to someone else before you can open to new life?

Are you willing to let your anger, or mourning, or secrets become a place of encounter with God?

Are there losses that you need to grieve? Is there something or someone that you need to mourn and to let go so that God can draw you into an even deeper love?

Is there an image of God that frees you to know that you are safe, free to be real, free to tell the truth? (For example, you might imagine Jesus gazing upon you with tenderness and respect, holding your hand, embracing you, or weeping beside you. You might imagine God as mother or as friend.)

What happens as you reflect on these questions in the presence of God? What spontaneous prayers arise within you?

Until we come to the inner stillness of contemplative prayer, when all thoughts, images, and movements of the heart are stilled and there is nothing to do but breathe in the presence of God's silent love, our feelings will be the language of our prayer, as surely as sounds are the language of music. Until and unless we are called by God to silence, can we learn in prayer to give our feelings full play? Can we let the song that is singing through us discover its place in the symphony of creation? As Alan Ecclestone writes, "Our business is not to invent a peculiar song of our own or make do with a hotch-potch of scraps got from others, but to discover ... our part in the song of the earth, the music of the spheres, the Lord's song, and the hymn of creation ... and give it utterance." 6

Praying with Feeling

For many of us, it is in learning to pray the whole range of our feelings that we encounter most fully the tenderness of Christ. After my daughter died three years ago, I was filled with both grief and rage and, for many weeks thereafter, spent long stretches of prayer time simply sobbing and pounding as the waves of feeling passed through me. There was no other way for me to be real in prayer. It was here or nowhere that I would find God and that God would find me. One afternoon, when I was boiling with anger, I imagined myself hurling my fists against a wall. After a while the image changed, and I found that I was beating my fists, not against a wall, but against Jesus' chest. I was raging and pounding within his embrace.

The anger was still there, as was the fierce need to express it, but everything had changed; I was feeling it now within the embrace of love. Like a canopy, love enclosed and embraced all that was within me. All that I felt, all that I needed so urgently to communicate--all this was received, accepted, understood, and blessed. I was still angry, yes, but now I was also amazed, surprised, and grateful, as well. Love had found me in my anger. The part of me that had been most raw and most violent, even to the depths of despair, had been met and held and touched by Love. Healing had begun. Healing was here.

For those seeking to be real with God, one simple way to begin prayer is to ask ourselves, "What am I feeling right now?" and "How would a person with this feeling pray?" If the reality is that we feel stuck and blocked and bored, then that is the prayer that we have been given to pray, at least for the time being. Rather than instantly trying to pep ourselves up – counting our blessings, perhaps, or turning at once to a psalm of praise--what would happen if instead we gently opened to the sense of being

bored and stuck? Is it possible that here, in the very place where we least sense God's quickening presence, God might have a gift to give us?

How quick we generally are to label our feelings, to pass judgment upon them, and, when we deem it appropriate, to hustle them off out of sight! When a flicker of anger arises within us, do we immediately tamp it down, accusing ourselves of being "judgmental"?

When the wind of sorrow blows through, do we slam the window shut and berate ourselves for "self-pity"? Aren't these rapid-fire self-condemnations a way of maintaining tight control? What would happen if we came to prayer with the intention of loosening that control just a bit and allowing the repressed parts of ourselves a gentler, more generous hearing? What if we sought to pray with an attitude of interest and respect toward our inner selves? Isn't it possible that such an attitude is more akin to God's than the relentlessly self-critical gaze that so many of us turn upon ourselves?

One way of praying with feelings is to experience them in God's presence and to express them to God as simply and directly as possible:

Spend some moments settling down. Take several slow, deep breaths, taking care to exhale completely. Use whatever ways you have learned to center yourself. Adopt the posture you find comfortable so that you can be both relaxed and alert,

Open yourself to God's presence. Entrust this time to God.

Allow your awareness to settle in the center of your body, noticing how you feel inside.... Gradually allow this inside awareness to extend to the rest of your body, noting whatever might be there.... What are you aware of feeling right now? ...Whatever you are feeling is fine.... Where do you feel it in your body?.... How big is it?.... If it had a color, what color would it be?

Check for a moment: Is it OK to be with this for a few moments, to give it a friendly hearing, to let it tell something of its story?

Open yourself to the feeling, while remaining aware that you are in the presence of God. Try to be with whatever you are feeling in a gentle, caring way. (If you are feeling something painful, you might see if you can hold and feel it in the same way that you might hold a little child who has come to you for comfort. You might put your arm around it or seat it beside you – whatever makes it easier for you to let yourself feel what you are caring inside.)

Gently open to the emotion while remaining steadily in the presence of God. Let arise within you whatever images, thoughts, and feelings spontaneously arise, but continue to be open and receptive to the presence of God. Express to God whatever is within you as simply and directly as you can. Let your feelings--and the images that may arise with them--flow as freely as possible.

If you get overly caught up in the images, thoughts, and feelings and lose contact with the sense of God's presence, return for a while to the simple awareness of God's presence.

Weave gently back and forth between exploring your feelings in the presence of God and returning to a simple awareness of God's presence.

The purpose of this way of prayer is to explore and express our true selves while remaining conscious of the presence of God. It is one thing to tell ourselves how angry or sad we may be; it is quite another to express these feelings to God. The former may leave us self-absorbed, spinning in a web of

our own self-talk. The latter opens us to personal relationship with God. After praying in this way, it is often helpful to reflect, perhaps in writing, in a journal: What happened during this prayer time? What was it like to disclose these feelings to God? When did I feel that God was closest to me? most distant? Was there any sense of God listening to me? responding to me? Were there any surprises? How did praying with these feelings affect my relationship with God?

Only I Suffer

The degree to which we are present to the woundedness and brokenness in ourselves is the degree to which we are present to the woundedness and brokenness of the world. Only by exploring our own woundedness to the depths can we respond to the woundedness of the world.⁸ Nevertheless, many of us feel blocked from entering or expressing our pain because of a myriad of inner voices: “Nice girls don’t get angry!” “Big boys don’t cry!” “You should be over this by now!” “You’re wallowing in self-pity!” “It can’t be that bad!” All these voices, and more, may clamor within us, urging us to silence, to secrecy, to denial. One particularly insidious voice for spiritual seekers is the one that argues, “Your suffering is insignificant compared to the suffering of the poor, the homeless, the war-stricken, the hungry.” One way of avoiding, minimizing, and denying our own pain is to compare it with someone else’s and to conclude—with either relief or disappointment—that ours is not real and does not count. As a result, we never dare to explore our own pain, and we never learn what it has to teach us.

Sound familiar? If during our prayer we find ourselves trying to talk ourselves out of what we are feeling by comparing our pitiful, unimportant suffering to the much more worthy and interesting suffering of someone else, perhaps it is time to explore the following way of prayer:

Listen to the pain with respectful attention. Honor it.

Trust it. Try not to minimize or deny it. Your pain is real. Your pain has a gift to give to you, if only you are willing to let it be felt.

Gently open to the feelings, while remaining aware of the presence of God. You are not alone with these feelings: you are feeling them in the presence of God.

Now imagine that you are the only person who has ever suffered in this way. You are the only person who knows the exact degree and shape of your suffering. You are the only one who knows the particular meaning of this pain. In this sense, you are alone in your suffering.

Let God know exactly how this suffering feels. Your suffering is the only suffering in the world. You have God’s complete and compassionate attention. No one else matters but you. No suffering matters except yours.

Allow yourself to enter the depth of your pain. God is here.

We All Suffer

As in the exercise above, when we are in pain, sometimes the way to open to God’s love is fearlessly to enter the pain and to experience it as if there were no pain in the world except our own. Sometimes we have no choice: in the extremity of suffering, all our energies may be absorbed in dealing with our own pain, and we may be unable to notice or to respond to the pain of others. In times of great shock, this response is natural.

However, when we are in pain, sometimes the way to open to an awareness of God is to open our

awareness to the suffering of others. If pain is isolating us so that we feel cut off from God and from the rest of the human race, can we find a way of prayer that will connect us again, perhaps even at a new depth? Can our own particular pain lead us beyond ourselves to the pain of others? Can our own suffering teach us empathy and nurture in us the holy compassion that connects us with all living souls? In discovering the pain that we share, will we also discover our human connectedness and the divine love that flows through us all?

In times of great suffering, you may be led to try this prayer:

Open yourself to feel your suffering in the presence of God. Feel its particular shape and weight. Breathe with the suffering.

Let your breath bring you an image of someone else who is suffering. It may be a person that you know. It may be a person whose picture you have seen in the newspapers or on television. Perhaps she (or he) lives in the same town or perhaps somewhere far away. Imagine what she is doing. Imagine what she is feeling--the anger, pain, grief, confusion, fear, distress.

Open your heart in compassion to that person. Let your pain mingle with hers, and her pain with yours. You may have never met her, but that does not matter: you are close to one another. You are sharing the same pain.

Let your breath bring you images of other people who feel what you feel. ... Imagine them, one by one, in their distress.

Open your heart in compassion to them, too, one by one. How many of you there are who share this pain, this suffering! Feel your suffering in solidarity with theirs. Let your suffering be a window into the human suffering that fills the earth. Let your cry of pain include their pain as well. You are giving voice to their prayer as well as to your own.

Grounding in the Cross

As we grow in sharing our true selves with God, including our deeper and more painful feelings, we will probably find that we are becoming more, rather than less aware of the suffering that lies within us and around us. God is leading us beyond the pretense that neither suffering nor death is real, and we may come to feel overwhelmed by our own pain or the pain of the world. Famine, war, environmental disaster, innocent suffering, violent deaths--how can we take all this in without being defeated by despair or going numb with horror? How can we open to such suffering and respond to it without falling apart?

As we grow in awareness of suffering, we may need to take hold of our prayer life with a fervor that we have never felt before, for it is in the face of enormous suffering that we must admit our complete dependence upon the mercy of God. It is here that we bow before the cross of Christ and offer him our pain--the pain and grief shared by all human beings, the pain that none of us can "fix," the pain that none of us can "solve." The cross of Christ is the place where all the suffering and evil of this world are met by God's infinite compassion and mercy. Because there is no suffering or evil we can experience that is not met by the cross of Christ, we need not succumb to hopelessness, apathy, or despair. Because the cross is planted before us, we are free to open to the reality of suffering and evil: here all suffering and evil are touched by Love. We can let pain and evil pass through us into the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ is like a lightning rod that draws to itself all suffering and evil and "grounds" them in Love. The cross of Christ bears all pain, endures all pain, and transforms all pain into love.

The following form of prayer is inspired by Joanna Rogers Macy's adaptation of an ancient Tibetan meditation for the development of compassion.⁹ As Macy observes, "We will never perceive the full beauty of life if we close our eyes and ears to its suffering."¹⁰ Or as novelist Franz Kafka once put it, "You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, this is something you are free to do and is in accord with your nature, but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that you might be able to avoid."

Spend some moments settling down. Take several deep breaths, taking care to exhale completely. Use whatever ways you have learned to center yourself. Adopt the position you find comfortable so that you can be both relaxed and alert.

Open yourself to God's presence. Entrust this time to God.

Let your breath bring you an image of the cross of Christ. ...

Perhaps it is in front of you, or behind you.... Sense its weight, its placement deep in the ground.... Its roots go deep into the earth, deep into all the muck and mess and pain of human life.... Its top lifts high into the sky. It stretches far above you... Sense the presence of Christ upon the cross. ... Here is the place where heaven and earth are joined. ... Here is the place where every suffering and evil is lifted up, and met by the love of God.... Sense the holy power that is before you or behind you.

Relax. Center on your breathing.... Visualize your breath as a stream flowing up through your nose, down through windpipe, lungs. Take it down through your lungs and, picturing an opening in the bottom of your heart, visualize the breath stream passing through your heart and out through that opening to pass into the cross of Christ.

Now open your awareness to the suffering that is present in the world. Drop for now all defenses and open to your knowledge of that suffering ... Let it come as concretely as you can ... concrete images of your fellow beings in pain and need, in fear and isolation, in prisons, hospitals, tenements, refugee camps.... No need to strain for these images, they are present in you by virtue of our interconnectedness. Relax and just let them surface, breathe them in, breathe them through to the cross of Christ ... the numberless hardships of our fellow humans and of our animal brothers and sisters, too, as they swim the seas and fly through the air of this ailing planet.... Breathe in that pain like a dark stream, up through your nose, down through your lungs and heart, and out again into the cross of Christ.... You are asked to do nothing for now but let it pass through your heart.... Keep breathing ... Be sure that stream flows through and out again, do not hang on to the pain. Surrender it for now to the healing power of Christ.... Christ can bear it all. ... The love of God is larger and more enduring than suffering, pain, or death.... Breathe in all the suffering of the world, and breathe it out into the cross of Christ....

With Shantideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say, "Let all sorrows ripen in me." We help them ripen by passing them through our hearts ... making good compost out of all that grief ... so we can learn from it, enhancing our larger, collective knowing.

If you experience an ache in the chest, a pressure within the rib cage, that is all right.... When our heart breaks open to the sufferings of the world, we are entering into the heart of Christ.... The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe. Your heart--Christ's heart--is that large. Trust it. Keep breathing.

The Passionate God

This essay has sketched four ways of prayer to deepen our intimacy with God and our capacity for full responsiveness to the pain and joy and being alive: praying the full range of our feelings (Praying with Feeling), honoring in prayer our own particular pain (Only I Suffer), perceiving our solidarity with all human pain (We All Suffer), and entrusting all our suffering to the transforming love of Christ (Grounding in the Cross). None of the steps in these prayer exercises should be taken as rigid rules, but rather as suggestions for helping us to listen more attentively for how the Holy Spirit seeks to pray through us. Prayer is inherently unpredictable, and these guidelines are intended not to inhibit or force our prayer, but rather to encourage some possibilities for prayer that may free us for a new depth of intimacy with God.

Daring to pray our honest feelings opens us to encounter the passionate God, a God revealed in Christ who seeks to offer us abundant life (Jn 10:10). According to the testimony of the Gospels, Jesus freely felt and expressed the whole range of human emotion--anguish and anger, joy and grief, gratitude and tenderness--and all within the context of loving intimacy with the Father. Jesus himself sought to elicit a response from those around him: time and again he questioned his listeners, challenged and provoked them, as he tried to stimulate thought and awaken emotional response. Clearly he felt frustrated when he was greeted with indifference: "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you would not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn'" (Mt 11: 16-17, NRSV).

The God we meet in Christ is One who galvanizes us to engage fully with life and to join in the dance. And if we do so, we will be changed. To pray is to invite God into our depths--or, more accurately, to begin to realize that God is already there--and we cannot encounter God without being changed. The person who learns to pray the whole range of feelings may notice any number of changes over time. For example, we may find ourselves less numb, less emotionally inhibited and withdrawn, for we have begun to connect with the One who welcomes us as we are and who listens attentively to our sadness and hope and anger. Our feelings have found their voice, and in God's loving presence we are safe to express them fully. We may find ourselves less scattered and more serene, for now our various emotional impulses have begun to connect with the heart of reality that holds all things together. Now it becomes possible to experience equanimity, to stay steady even while the whole range of feeling washes through us. We may find ourselves less hopeless and passive, for in praying our anger and sorrow we discover the One who not only consoles our suffering, but also strengthens us to hope and empowers us to act. We may find ourselves less self-centered and more compassionate as we begin to realize that, through intimacy with God, we have touched our solidarity with all people, indeed, with all living beings. More than one person of prayer has discovered that, in praying with others in their suffering, it is possible not only to empower the sufferer to bear the pain, but even to relieve it. As a Hasid woman, Rifka, concludes in a poignant story recounted by psychologist Robert Kegan, "I cry tonight now this mother vit her idiot vhat is so beautiful vhat is life, tomorrow she vill cry less." 11

To pray our feelings is to express who we are, to be a real self in search of the real God. In praying our feelings we become more fully human. And we discover the passionate God who draws our full humanity into the divine life so that Christ's joy may be in us and our joy may be complete (Jn 15:11). As Irenaeus wrote in the 2nd century of the church, "The glory of God is a person who is fully human, fully alive."

Notes

- 1 Thomas N. Hart, *The Art of Christian Listening* (New York: Paulist Press), p. 53.
- 2 Hart, p. 52.
- 3 Hart, p. 56.
- 4 Madeline Birmingham RC and William J. Connolly SJ, "Talking to God," *Human Development* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 44.
- 5 "Talking to God," p. 44.
- 6 Alan Ecclestone, *Yes to God* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1975), p.124.
- 7 For an excellent presentation and theological reflection on a nonverbal, body-centered way of prayer based on Focusing as taught by Dr. Eugene Gendlin, see Peter A. Campbell PhD and Edwin M. McMahon PhD, *Biospirituality: Focusing as a Way to Grow* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985). This suggestion for prayer is loosely adapted from their approach, esp. pp. 122-130.
- 8 Michael Dwinell, *Fire Bearer: Evoking a Priestly Humanity* (Liguori, Missouri; Triumph Books, 1993), p. 82.
- 9 Joanna Rogers Macy, "Despair and Empowerment Work," in *Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, ed. Tilden H. Edwards (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 117-133. The last three steps in this prayer are drawn--with the addition of Christian imagery--directly from the words of Macy.
- 10 Macy, p. 126.
- 11 Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 21.



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