

bread for the journey

Prayer as a contact sport

We urge our patients to pray fearlessly at Rosecance. There is nothing sporting about prayer.

No athletic prowess or athletic dexterity is required in order to pray. Prayer is not fun. It is often boring, tedious and sometimes sleep-inducing. Anyone who has sat through a church service as a child can remember nodding off when the worship leader invited the congregants to bow their heads in prayer. I remember growing up as a kid looking forward to the pastoral prayer during the service—for all the wrong reasons. Communion with God? What's that? It was usually a ten minute drone in which the minister prayed for anyone and everything including the kitchen sink. No sooner had he invited us to fold our hands, close our eyes, and assume the proper prayerful position, I took a snooze.

There was another prayer we were forced to endure while growing up—the prayer before the meal. Dad would open and close every meal with a prayer. It invariably began, “Almighty God—heavenly Father” and it ended sometime after the food had grown cold. Hungry orphans made it into every one of his prayers—not that he really did anything on behalf of hungry orphans, but at least he prayed for them. We were always reminded to be thankful for the food—even the cauliflower.

Prayer was not an altogether positive experience for me. By


the time I was off to seminary—the preacher factory—I was mostly turned off to anything that involved prayer. This concerned me. In fact, my problems with prayer and the contemplative life worried me so much I found myself seeking help from my spiritual mentor at the seminary, the esteemed, ancient Professor Henry Stob. I confessed to him openly, “Dr. Stob, I don't think I belong here. It's not that I don't believe in God ..., but I find prayer to be a tedious drag, and frankly, somewhat tangential to my daily routine.” I told the old codger I thought prayer was a waste of time. I don't think this Salem chain smoker heard me because he told me to get out of his office, return to the library, get to work, and finish my term paper. It was probably the best advice this reluctant prayer warrior could have gotten: “Suck it up and get back to work.”

And so, I did. But I never really resolved my difficulty with the “praying life.” It never became a priority to me. During the course of my spiritual journey, I have been invited to attend and participate in retreats and gatherings of pious souls who wanted to grow “closer to the Lord.” The most memorable one was a “silent retreat.” We were urged to spend most of the day in a quiet place in absolute silence. No books. No radio. No conversation. Simple communion with God was the idea. I almost went coo-coo. And that was my first step toward a resolution. Forced to be silent, I was forced to listen, to be aware, to tune in to my inner most self, and to pay some attention to the presence of God. It also introduced me to some of the personal monsters within me—monsters that were simply delighted to see me skate through life and live life on the most superficial terms possible. Nothing deep. Nothing

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thoughtful or reflective. The unexamined impulse driven life which is so commonplace among us. Lots of TV, bebop, and conversation about Cubs and Sox and little else. A silent retreat will make you a little crazy. It might also help you wake up and smell the coffee bean.

Along the way, I have made what seems to be an important discovery about the praying life. Prayer is a contact sport. Prayer is a wrestling match with God. My hero in this regard is Moses. The story goes somewhat like this: he is walking in the desert with God. God is bummed; the Israelites are grumblers and idol worshippers. God didn't get it that a long trek through a wild and woolly desert is not a walk in the park. So God says to Moses, "Step aside. Let me wipe them out. You and me, pal, will start over together." Moses' response is an in-your-face confrontation. "O Lord, why be so ticked off? Aren't you forgetting something? You promised to stick with your people through thick and thin. You are married to them. They are your people. And you are stuck with them. So stick with what you are stuck with." (Exodus 32:9ff.) This encounter became a template for my prayer life. Pray aggressively.

Prayer is not intended to be a passive, apologetic, groveling-for-mercy exercise which is designed to impress God. Prayer is not "kiss and make up" time with God. Doing the work of recovery and spiritual renewal is where a broken relationship with God is restored. The God who restores us to sanity is not impressed with manipulative apologies and tiresome promises. Prayer is less a subtle conversation and more a wrestling match with God. Think of Jacob wrestling with God and not letting God go until God blessed him. Let us pray that way—honest prayer. Let us engage the God of our understanding in some real conversation. Let us tell the God of our understanding where we truly are, not where we pretend to be. Let us pray fearlessly. Our life is on the line. Keep it real. Lasting recovery and spiritual renewal is predicated upon this kind of honesty. 



The Rev. Dr. William Lenters
Chaplain

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with addictions. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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