

Opening words by Wendy Egyoku Nakao

May we open to a deeper understanding
and a genuine love and caring
for the multitude of faces,
who are none other than ourself.

Prayer by Max Coots

Let us pray to the One who holds us in the hollow of His hands,
to the One who holds us in the curve of Her arms,
To the One whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds and
angleworms,
Whose skin is the color of an old Black woman and a young white
man; and the color of the leopard and the grizzly bear and the green
grass snake,
Whose hair is like the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae,
waterfalls, and a spider's web,
Whose eyes sometime shine like the Evening Star, and then like
fireflies, and then again like an open wound,
Whose touch is both the touch of life and the touch of death,
And whose name is everyone's, but mostly mine.
And what shall we pray?
Let us say, "thank you."

Closing Words by Agnes de Mille

Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The
artist never entirely knows. We take leap after leap into the dark.

EVERY TIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT

Rev. Kathleen Ellis

March 28, 2004

The prayer I chose for this morning's meditation addresses a god or goddess of nature, a god of every color, a god of passion as well as gentleness. It reminds us to give thanks for the gifts of life and death that surround us at every moment.

This morning's reading Chris Summers chose from *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* speaks to the anxiety and despair that sometimes give us a wake up call to change our lives. The writer had reached his Rubicon, from which he could not turn back. I wondered where the term Rubicon came from and learned that it is a historical name for a short, small river in north central Italy. In 49 BCE, Julius Caesar defied a senatorial order to lay down his command. Instead, he marched his army across the Rubicon and launched a civil war. That's why "crossing the Rubicon" has come to mean taking a decisive and irreversible step.

So there stood Julius Caesar, on the bank of the river. Did he take a moment to pray for victory? Did he lead the troops in prayer? I have no idea. But surely there was some hope that he would meet with success. Did Dale Carnegie pray for a new lease on life? You'll have to read the book! Perhaps he tells us.

Prayer is a way of communicating with something more powerful than we ourselves. When I was a little girl, I knelt beside my bed and prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." and ended the prayer with, "God bless Mama and Daddy . . ." and on through the litany of names. Sometimes I'd leave my sister's name out—on purpose, but then I'd feel guilty. I have abandoned that practice, and you probably have, too. But sometimes I gain comfort by assuming that old position on my knees, or by running through a litany of blessings. This is a way of sending positive energy, if not directly to those people, then at least directly to my own heart. Prayer does not affect God so much as it affects me when I pray.

I suspect that it's easier to believe in the power of prayer than actually to put a prayer into words. There's not enough time in a busy life and besides, what good would it do? If prayer really worked, we could eliminate the suffering and anxiety in the world, right? What shall we pray, indeed? How often shall we pray? Five times a day, like the Muslims and Bahá'ís. And why?

Religious and cultural traditions teach us various approaches to prayer. In Japan, for instance, where Jon and I were fortunate to visit my son in November, prayer and ritual are common, yet quite perfunctory to the outside observer. People bow to one another routinely. Japanese do not describe themselves as particularly religious, but you will find Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines right next to each other; beautiful meditation gardens, small shrines on street corners and in cemeteries, and ritual tea ceremonies.

A water purification ritual is common before entering a Shinto shrine. At both shrines and temples, people will toss a coin into a container, bow, pray silently for about 3 seconds, bow, and walk away. Their prayers constitute a single petition, perhaps the name of a loved one, or a prayer for someone's safe arrival, or a prayer for a good outcome. Japanese do not typically understand Christian prayers that go on and on at length. They must be asking for a lot!

Rites of passage for birth, blessings of children at age 3, 5, and 7, and weddings—the happy occasions—are often done at Shinto shrines by Shinto priests. In the event of death, Buddhist priests are called upon for funeral and burial rites. Many couples choose Christian weddings because of the ritual, even if they are not practicing Christians. Christians make up only 1 percent of Japanese citizens. In a historical footnote, in 1946 most Japanese Christians lived in Nagasaki and were killed by the atomic bomb.

A Buddhist way to pray is to meditate. The objective is to empty one's mind and concentrate on the breath. Some people would widely separate meditation and prayer, but I think they share many similarities, particularly in their ability to help center oneself

with fewer distractions. David Carroll points out that meditation practices appear in the world's great spiritual traditions. He quotes a Sioux Indian and medicine man named Ohiyesa as saying,

"In the life of the Indian, there was only one inevitable duty--the duty of prayer--the daily recognition of the Unseen and Eternal. His daily devotions were more necessary to him than daily food." The Hindu sage Swami Sivananda echoed these words: "You are in the world to concentrate your mind on God . . . it is your most important duty. You forget this duty because of illusion which takes the form of family, children, money, power, position, honor, name and fame."

Christians enter a period of special reflection, meditation, and sacrifice during the season of Lent, which began four weeks ago and continues until Easter.

"Do not worry about anything," writes Paul to the congregation in Philippi, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Ph 4:6-7)

In addition to prayer during Lent, many Christians try to eliminate something in their lives--like television, or caffeine, or golf--and to use their energy differently as they focus on what's really important--like kindness, or family life, or spiritual practice. During Ramadan, fasting and prayer during the day helps Muslims focus on their spiritual lives.

Lots of people say grace over meals. I know someone who wonders why her friends can't just pray in the parking lot before she joins the group. Why do they have to be close to the food to give thanks? Why do they have to pray out loud?

Some people would advocate for a recitation of the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of each school day; others would say, "But what about MY child's faith--or her non-faith? Better to have no prayer in school than to impose your prayer on her." For the opening prayer of public meetings or even of an interfaith ministers' association, we believe that it should

be inclusive of many faiths. Some people pray easily in public; others prefer a moment of silence in a private prayer.

Here is a sample of a prayer that might even be appropriate in a public setting. It is an adaptation of the Lord's Prayer written by Rudi Gelsey, a retired Unitarian Universalist minister:

O Thou, Creator, who art the breath of life;
O Thou, Sustainer, who art the energy of love,
Dwell in our hearts and in all realms.
May Thy desire prevail everywhere.
Guide us and support us, day by day.
Forgive us, as we forgive others.
Do not let us be diverted from the purpose of our lives.
Help us live in depth and in the present,
That we may be filled with divine wisdom, power and love.
From age to age, the song goes on. Amen

When life meets death--suddenly, as in a car accident, or more slowly, as from an illness; when severe storms make us worry about the safety of people we know out on the road; when a happy event makes our hearts leap with joy, when we reach the Rubicon--we are sometimes filled with that simple prayer: "Oh, God."

This is not necessarily to say that we imagine God is listening or even that there is a God who might listen. It is simply a cry of emotion that means a great deal more: help this family grieve their loss; keep that person's daughter and sister safe; thanks for this moment. Around the world and in this room each of us has experienced pain and joy, anger and love, passion and apathy. To pray at moments of anguish is to call upon our own strength to sustain us. To pray at moments of happiness is to renew that inner strength with the joy of living.

But prayer does not always contain words, as we see in these two examples. John Biggers said in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy* (1989): "The quilt was a prayer of poor women.

They didn't have anything else to cover their children with." Imagine, if you can, gathering scraps of fabric, stitching them together by hand, and creating a warm quilt for your child. When it's all you have to give, it serves as a prayer.

Ellis Peters, who wrote *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (1977) gives us another image to ponder: "He prayed as he breathed, forming no words and making no specific requests, only holding in his heart, like broken birds in cupped hands, all those people who were in stress or grief."

Some of the people I hold in my heart now have been deployed to Iraq. Every generation sends its young people off to war somewhere in the world. Not only the families left behind, but the soldiers sometimes turn to prayer, and not just in foxholes.

Here's one story told by Harry H. Crosby, who wrote a book about "The 'Bloody 100th' Bomb Group of the U.S. Eighth Air Force in Action over Europe in World War II." He describes mission after mission (37 in all) that he flew as navigator in a B-17. Planes were shot down, other crews bailed out, they were surrounded by enemy aircraft, his own plane was full of holes, and somehow they would make it home. But the entire 100th was destroyed. Crosby asks, "Was it a good war? Did we have to fight it? Studs Terkel . . . says that it was and we did [have to fight it]. "Did aerial bombardment do any good? Did it hasten the victory?" . . . Historians have disagreed." Crosby remembers a song he heard at the Officers' Club:

Coming in on a wing and a prayer,
Coming in on a wing and a prayer,
Though we've one motor gone, we can still carry on,
Coming in on a wing and a prayer

Some guys made it back; others were blown to smithereens, with or without the benefit of prayer even as basic as, "Oh, God." Today we have other wars and other soldiers for whom to pray.

Paying attention to the world around me is a form of prayer. One day I got up at 5 and sat quietly on the living room floor. Through the window the moon—in its last quarter—graced the dark sky and filled me with peace. If I had not been there, the moon would. If I had not noticed, the day would go on. But the reality — the miracle? — is that I was there, and I did notice, and I was filled with gratitude for that moment.

Another time I was driving on a dark road out in the country. I noticed that the stars shone brilliantly that night and it occurred to me that it would be a good place to come star gazing some time. Then another part of my brain woke up and said, "What are you waiting for? —stop right this minute and look!" So I pulled off to the side of the road and got out of my car. Surrounded by starlight I felt a connection in that moment with all the other times I have camped under the stars or watched a meteor shower. I felt a connection with the human family, continually surrounded by beauty too seldom appreciated. Gertrude Stein writes, "Every day is a renewal, every morning the daily miracle. This joy you feel is life."

Let me close with perhaps my favorite prayer, by E.E. Cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any--lifted from the no
of all nothing--human merely being

doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

May it ever be so--that my ears remain awake and my eyes open. Life as prayer means paying attention. May it ever be so.

Amen and Amen