



SYLVIA DE SWAAN

Readers Write

PRAYING

GROWING UP IN A NONRELIGIOUS family in the Northwest, I thought Christianity was nothing more than a bedtime story. When I was in fourth grade, we moved to the South. It took me a while to adjust to life in a small North Carolina town. I began to understand the drawl and enjoy the regional food, but the emphasis on religion was beyond me.

One day, while I was in math class, the lights went out. Tree limbs bashed against the windows. Rain pummeled the tops of cars in the parking lot so loudly we could hear it two stories up. A voice over the intercom called for everyone to follow “tornado plan C.”

“We’re going to die!” yelled one of my friends. A classroom full of panic-stricken nine-year-olds began to cry.

We were herded into the basement and told to sit with our heads to the wall and our hands covering our necks. The

room was mostly quiet except for a constant whisper coming from the frail blond girl beside me. I realized she was praying, asking God to protect all of us. I’d never heard anyone pray before and was amazed at how calm she looked, as if God himself were beside her. I also marveled at her devotion to the faith she thought would save her.

For all I know, her praying did save us. Though branches were broken and cars overturned, no one was hurt. Later, when a boy made fun of the blond girl for praying, I punched him and made his nose bleed. “Eileen!” the girl said to me. “I’m going to pray for both of you tonight.”

*Eileen McDonald
Greensboro, North Carolina*

I USED TO SET ASIDE SOLITARY TIME to pray, but with two young kids, I rarely have a moment to myself anymore. I look

forward to a time when I can once again enjoy periods of quiet meditation. For now, my prayers are woven into my daily routine: remembering a hurting friend as I fold laundry; weeping over broken nations as I bounce my colicky baby boy; whispering a plea for help as I fight tears of loneliness; thanking Jesus for the safety of my children as I tuck them into bed at night.

*Melana Bontrager
Everett, Washington*

I WAS RAISED IN A MESSIANIC JEWISH family, which means we believed Jesus was the Messiah, but we maintained a Jewish cultural identity. My mother taught me to talk to God whenever I felt like it, and to pray in whatever way I was comfortable. I preferred to pray with both eyes open, looking at God’s creation.

We went to two services each week:

one at a traditional Christian church, and one at a Messianic Jewish congregation. One Sunday when I was five, I attended the Christian Sunday school. When the children gathered in a circle to pray, I gripped the seat of my chair and gazed up at the ceiling.

“What are you doing?” the teacher whispered. “It’s time to pray.”

I explained that I prayed with my eyes open.

“If you don’t pray with your head bowed and your eyes closed, then God will be mad at you,” she said.

When my mother came to pick me up, I told her what had happened, and she gave that teacher a lesson of her own. I never went back to that class, and I still pray with my eyes wide open.

*Chaim Dauermann
New York, New York*

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN CALCUTTA in the late 1940s, violence between Muslims and Hindus was sweeping through the city. I had witnessed a murder by the time I was seven.

My Christian family lived in a large house on the border between a Hindu neighborhood and a Muslim one. We hired both Hindu and Muslim domestics and offered refuge to anyone who felt threatened.

I feared the Hindus would kill Abdul, who cared for my younger brother and me. Abdul tried to reassure me by pointing out that he was eighty and close to death anyway. Besides, he added, every Hindu in the neighborhood knew him and would not attack him.

Wanting to keep him safe, I followed Abdul everywhere, except to his room, where he prayed facing Mecca five times a day. Mother said I should respect his privacy at those times and not bother him, but one day I broke the rule and tiptoed into his room. Abdul was kneeling with his forehead to the ground. He stood up and then knelt again, murmuring prayers. He was a picture of dignity and calm amid the strife surrounding our house.

When Abdul had finished his prayers, he smiled at me and said, “God will protect both of us. Don’t you think?”

*Manish Nandy
Reston, Virginia*

I USED TO WORK ACROSS THE STREET from the World Trade Center. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, I didn’t leave my Harlem apartment for several days. I was afraid even to shower, because the window in my shower faced south, and I worried that another terrorist attack would shatter it and send glass flying into my body.

On the third day I decided I needed to go outside. As I walked from 139th Street to Riverside Park, I felt far away from what was going on around me. When I came to Riverside Church, I went inside and sat down and asked God to take away my fear and give me back myself. Nothing happened. So I zigzagged farther south to the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, which has always felt especially holy to me. I sat in the sanctuary and prayed for my fear to go away, for my mind to slow down. I’d never prayed so selfishly before.

Gradually I sensed God’s presence. Then, for the first time, I felt physically touched by God. For almost half an hour

God held me like a baby in a womb. The anxiety went away, and I knew that from then on everything would be OK. Not that there wouldn’t be more attacks; not that I wouldn’t die. But that everything would be OK.

*Rev. David J. Huber
Eau Claire, Wisconsin*

AFTER GRADUATING FROM SEMINARY, I became one of seven ministers in a small-town church. We rotated duties, and I was often asked to lead the congregational prayer. After the service I’d receive requests for copies of my prayer and messages of appreciation from church members who said I’d articulated their own deep concerns.

After I’d been at the church for two years, the congregation had to decide whether to seek ordination for me as pastor. As my ordination date approached, a retired minister in the congregation began to complain publicly about my prayers. She accused me of offering Jew-

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Telling The Truth	May 1	October 2007
Airports	June 1	November 2007
Getting Ready	July 1	December 2007
Fame And Fortune	August 1	January 2008
Parties	September 1	February 2008
The Last Time	October 1	March 2008

ish prayers rather than Christian prayers, because I didn't end each one by invoking Jesus' name. To her, this meant God would be deaf to my entreaties.

Despite her complaints, I was ordained and continued to offer the congregational prayers, but I now ended each one with "In the name of Jesus, amen." I usually stammered on this ending, because I was so self-conscious. The woman soon began complaining about my sermons, my theology, and my language for God, and I eventually left that congregation.

Now when I pray publicly, even if only to bless a meal, I always rush through the ending, feeling anxious rather than joyful.

*June Mears Driedger
Lansing, Michigan*

EVERYONE WAS PRAYING FOR MY twenty-eight-year-old daughter, who was dying of ovarian cancer, but I couldn't seem to do it. If there was a God, I thought, he knew what to do. If there wasn't, what was the use?

During her last days, on my regular walk, I sat down on a pepper-tree stump and bowed my head to pray. Only two words came to me: "Thank you."

I am still thankful that my daughter was on this earth for twenty-eight years.

*Donna Kennedy
Riverside, California*

WITH EVERY BEND OF THE GUATEMALAN mountain road, the Mayan mother and I, the American nurse, bang against the sides of the pickup-truck bed, fighting to hold on to her four-year-old as he stiffens with seizures. I am nauseated with fear and fatigue, and disoriented by the truck's siren and the rotating orange light on its roof. The only sound from the child is a gurgle as his airway tightens.

I grope for the Saint Christopher medal I keep pinned to my bra, to guard against the perils of travel, which are many in this Central American drug corridor. Finding it, I silently pray. The boy's mother prays, too, aloud and in Spanish. Her son floods her skirt with urine as his bladder reacts to a seizure. She screams, and for a moment I think I will not emotionally survive this night.

At the hospital, hands lift the child from our laps, and he clutches a fistful of his mother's hair and tears it out by the roots. He is the color of the gray dawn. I leave an hour later, having more faith in the hundred-dollar bill I placed in the physician's hands than in the power of my prayers. The Mayan mother has collapsed on the sidewalk in slumber, surrounded by the skirts of villagers who kneel protectively around her, fingering rosary beads and murmuring to the God who hears the prayers of the humble.

Name Withheld

AT THE CUSTOMARY POINT IN THE service, the rabbi asks anyone who's in mourning to rise for the kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, which famously does not mention death. I'm technically not mourning someone, but I stand anyway. I rarely attend synagogue, so I want to get my money's worth.

I learned the kaddish years ago, after my bar mitzvah. My ancient Hebrew teacher had explained that now that I'd reached adulthood, I needed to say it for my deceased father.

Today the Hebrew words roll off my tongue despite years of disuse. Their rhythm is mesmerizing, like music, like a chant, like poetry. I don't exactly know what they mean, but I get the gist: the kaddish praises God, over and over.

I'm no longer religious. When asked, I say I'm "Jewish on my parents' side." I don't know why I'm reciting kaddish. Perhaps to honor my father, my sister, my grandparents. *Oseh shalom bimromav*: I ask God to send peace from heaven. I'm praying to a God I don't believe in. So why do the words comfort me? Why, before it's over, do I break down, sobbing and clutching my wife as close as I can?

*John Unger Zussman
Portola Valley, California*

I CAME OUT TO MY FATHER AS A LESBIAN at the same time he came out to me as a newly converted "charismatic" Catholic. When he made it clear he disapproved of my life and intended to evangelize me, our relationship collapsed.

At fifty-two my father was diagnosed with aggressive multiple myeloma. I hardly recognized his voice when he

called and asked me to fly home to be with him. For the first time in years, I prayed.

During my father's last week, women and men from his church came at all hours to pray over him. Someone placed a rosary in his weak hands, and they all recited, in perfect unison, an entreaty to the Blessed Virgin to see him safely beyond purgatory and into heaven. Their words were a kind of low, melodic chanting. Though we had thought him unconscious, my father began to weep.

Later one of my father's church friends sent me a rosary. I try to view it from my father's perspective, as a source of comfort and protection, and I carry it in my purse to honor him. But I wonder if it isn't also a symbol of the distance we had between us. I never knew the man of faith he became. He never knew the real me.

*Julie Jordan Avritt
Greenville, South Carolina*

AUGUST 30, 2005: I ALMOST CRIED today. The Gulf Coast is laid bare. Houses, restaurants, buildings gone. Many dead; many more suffering. No fresh water, electricity, food, jobs, money, or homes. No way to call friends and family to find out whether they're OK. No way for us to get there to help.

Today, for the first time in a long time, I prayed. There was nothing else to do. I couldn't talk to those affected by the storm. I couldn't touch them. So I prayed. Then I asked myself, *Aren't I praying to the same God who let this happen in the first place?*

*Annie Brock
Murfreesboro, Tennessee*

AS A PSYCHOLOGIST, I SPECIALIZE IN people with personality disorders. Most of my clients blame others for their unhappiness, have little emotional control, and can't manage even minor parts of their lives. They're often referred to me by other therapists who are at their wits' end.

Before I see a new client for the first time, I lock myself in the bathroom and pray for guidance and the ability to treat this person with kindness, respect, and dignity. I pray that I will see all my patients' good qualities and appreciate their ability to survive in a society where most

people reject them.

I've been privileged to hear the life stories of some exceptional people. My clients often say, "You don't seem like a shrink." I know then that my prayer was heard.

*Steven Barry
Portland, Oregon*

WORSHIP WAS AN UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE in the old Appalachian country church I attended growing up. I sat quietly under my mother's watchful eye and entertained myself by trying to guess what people petitioned God for in their prayers. Sometimes people prayed aloud. They seemed to be telling God how to run his business. My own prayers consisted of holding my hands out, turning my eyes to the skies, and shrugging, as if to say, "I don't have a clue. You know best."

A barely literate country woman, my mother believed she didn't know enough to tell God how to run his business, either, but she knew enough to get up and help him out. She was always in motion, ordering her world in ways she thought would be acceptable to God. She'd look at a problem, such as weeds growing in her vegetable garden, and declare, "We can't have that," and she'd promptly weed the garden. If my behavior was unacceptable, she'd say, "We'll not have that, young lady," and I'd find myself cleaning horse stalls or shoveling out the pigpens as punishment.

My siblings and I grew up to be successful adults. As we rose out of poverty and began to enjoy material comforts, our mother would warn, "Now, don't ever think you're above your raising."

Today my mother's mind is fading into dementia, but she's still in motion, organizing her nursing-home space. And when I pray, I still shrug my shoulders and plead ignorance. Then I put myself in motion, grateful for the task at hand.

*Glenda Massengale
Cleveland, Tennessee*

NO ONE EVER TAUGHT ME THE RIGHT way to pray as a child, so I improvised. I'd pray by staring up into the synagogue's dome, which I thought looked like the eye of God. I was certain that God was watching me through that eye. Sometimes, as

I prayed, I'd feel moved by an awareness of things greater than myself.

When I got older, I stopped going to synagogue and pursued my own spiritual path. But when a friend was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease — the same terminal illness that had brutally taken my father — I found myself wanting a connection to God.

Though my friend's body became paralyzed, her mind remained heartbreakingly brilliant. I began looking intently into her blue eyes, so deep and clear it was like looking into the endless blue sky. Through those sparkling eyes, I felt aware of things greater than us.

A few days before my friend died, her eyes became dull and cloudy. I stroked her gray hair and softly told her she was not alone; that God was with us in our hearts, and there was nothing left to fear. I knew these things to be true. I felt them in my bones. I had figured out how to pray.

*Barbara Straus Lodge
Los Angeles, California*

MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME THE GOLDEN rule, but kept me away from organized religion. I pictured God as an old man in robes with a long white beard, to whom other people prayed when they wanted help with something, like passing a geometry test.

When I was twelve, I saw a TV program about Islam and learned that in some parts of the world people prayed to Allah. I liked the sound of "Allah." I could say that name over and over and not get tired of it. Because there were no images of Allah, you could imagine him any way you wished. I decided that I would pray to Allah.

I knew intuitively that Allah was not the type of God you prayed to for help or material things, like a new bike. My prayers to Allah would all be prayers of thanks. Whenever I saw a rainbow or a hawk soaring in the sky, I would silently pray, "Thank you, Allah." When I saw an animal lying dead along the road, I would visualize Allah laying himself over this poor creature's twisted body to protect what remained of its spirit.

I never revealed my prayers to anyone, thinking that perhaps when I married, I

might share them with my husband or my children. I married a lapsed Catholic who believed in God but wanted nothing to do with organized religion. We prayed silently together each night, but I never told him I was praying to Allah, because I was afraid he would laugh at me.

Soon after we married, the Gulf War began. Suddenly there was increased public awareness about the differences between Christianity and Islam. Some Christians considered Muslims to be infidels, I learned. I decided never to reveal my secret.

Name Withheld

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