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Prayer 101: Wondering Where to Start

by **Thomas Hart**

We want to pray. Maybe we have some special problem we're struggling with, or maybe we just feel the need to find depth and meaning in our life. Yet we don't seem to get around to praying. We're busy. We're not sure how to pray. God seems

distant, and we have to admit that's not totally surprising. So where do we start?

The only place to start with prayer is right where we are. It's all we've got, but it is enough. An ancient parable describes our situation:

"Excuse me," said a young ocean fish to an older fish. "Can you direct me to what they call the Ocean? I've been searching everywhere."

"The Ocean," said the older fish, "is what you are swimming in now. This is it!"

"This?" said the young fish, disappointed. "This is only water. I'm looking for the Ocean." And he swam away to continue his search.

Our relationship with God is a given, always in place. God surrounds us with love every moment of our life. There is a standing offer of friendship and communication on God's side. All we have to do is risk believing in the offer and open ourselves to God's welcoming Presence. When we do that, we have begun to pray.

Enriching your prayer life

◆ *Prayer is what you already do.* Prayer can take many forms—for example, the traditional prayers that we may have learned in childhood and in which many people find deep comfort and meaning, or the potentially powerful and unifying prayer of communal worship services. There is also the time we set aside to be in a quiet place and try to focus on God alone.

But there is informal prayer, too, which we can do right in the midst of our daily activities, often without fully realizing it. Whether we are writing a report, playing volleyball, counseling someone, bandaging a bruised knee, or challenging an unjust policy, we make it all prayerful by doing it in the presence of God.

Our prayer can start from our work, the important relationships of our lives, the things we wonder at, the restlessness and loneliness of our hearts, our experiences of success and satisfaction, a painful conversation, a recent gift of love.

All the events of our lives somehow contain God's word to us, and to ponder these events in search of their significance is to listen and respond to God's word. What Luke says in a summary

Creating your own prayer experience

- *Take a walk* in a beautiful place today. Come to your senses and be fully aware of the sights, sounds, smells, and feel of the place. Contemplate all of it as the gift and self-expression of the Creator. Let your feelings feed your prayer.
- *Sit in a quiet place*, tune in to the presence of God, your friend, and go over in your mind any recent happening that has struck you. Prayerfully ponder it, seeking to uncover God's invitation, gift, challenge. Respond as you feel moved.
- *Select some music* that heightens your sense of the presence of God. As you listen to it, simply enjoy the peace that comes from being with God. See if you can imagine God not asking something more of you but simply taking delight in and loving you.

statement about Mary serves as an excellent model for our own prayer: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19). What things? The things that were happening to her and the feelings and thoughts she had as these things occurred, for it is in the stream of life's happenings that we encounter God.

"In prayer, it's best to begin at the beginning—which is exactly where we are at all times."

In nature, too, we meet God daily. Our prayer rises spontaneously in the presence of mountains or sea, in park or woods, at sunrise or sunset, on fishing and camping trips, at the sight of beautiful flowers, birds, animals, persons. "In God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Enjoying something fully—something as basic as food, drink, a bath or shower, a hug, a nap—if it is done with an awareness of God, can be prayer. Just marveling, musing, or wondering can be prayer.

If you feel at a loss as to where to start your prayer, ask yourself what you enjoy, what you marvel at, what you struggle with, what you suffer from. God is the depth in things. Wherever there is movement and energy in our lives, engagement with God is taking place.

◆ *Prayer is spending time with a friend.* We are made for a relationship with God, and the hunger for this relationship lurks in our souls as a yearning. If we take that yearning seriously, we turn to prayer as naturally as a flower turns toward the sun or reaches with its roots for water. The fish is already in the Ocean it craves; in fact, it is breathing the Ocean. So are we.

The heart of prayer is the awareness that the Source of our lives supports us right where we are. We are loved, and the gift of life, moment to moment, is a lover's gift and an invitation to friendship. When we awaken to that, we are praying. Prayer is communion, simply being together with God. Prayer is mutual awareness and quiet exchange, as when two friends sit before the fire.

Often we do not feel quite good enough for that. Who are we that God should want friendship with us? We are anything but saints. The good news is indeed mind-boggling, and we have trouble believing it. Yet one of the most prominent features of Jesus' ministry was his practice of eating and drinking with sinners, his constant reaching out in friendship to people who had not done anything to deserve his love.

"I have not called you servants," Jesus said, "for servants do not know what their master is doing. I have called you friends" (John 15:15). One way to understand prayer is to think of what it feels like to be with the best friend you

Sometimes the greatest obstacle to our relationship with God is our belief that there is some obstacle.

—Thomas Keating
Open Mind, Open Heart

have ever had, and then to realize that God is a far better friend than that.

◆ *Prayer is give and take.* Prayer involves exchange. But what do we have to give to God? We can give God our effort to live a good life. We can give our human loves and our daily labors. We can give our small efforts to create a better world. We can share with God all our concerns, for that is what friends do.

Most of us live busy lives, and much of our prayer takes place on the run. Think of Papa in *Fiddler on the Roof*, opening his heart to God as he pulls his milk cart along the road. His struggles with his wife, his children, his poverty, and the suffering of his people are the stuff of his spontaneous chats with God on the road.

He also knows how to celebrate, to dance, and to raise a grateful toast "To Life!" He prays from where the action is, for he knows that is where he encounters God and experiences God's goodness, call, comfort, and challenge. And he is at home enough in his relationship with God simply to be himself.

Whether we pull a cart, operate machinery, change diapers and wash dishes, or grapple with problems at a desk or on the phone, we too can have those moments of heightened awareness and greater exchange with the Mystery that is always right where we are. We too have people, concerns, and appreciations to hold up to God as we bathe and dress, drive from place to place, stand in bank

or grocery lines, wrestle with our responsibilities, or relax with our friends.

Listening your heart to God

In God we live and move and have our being, and prayer is as natural as breathing. We come as we are. God is already present. As soon as we tune in, the exchange begins. It is usually quiet and low-key, but something profound is happening. This is what we are made for—to pray. ◆

Exploring further

Books: *On Prayer* by Phyllis Zagano, Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist, 1994. *Listening at Prayer* by Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist, 1984. *Free to Pray, Free to Love* by Max Oliva, S.J., Notre Dame, Indiana, Ave Maria Press, 1994.