

A few years ago, I attended a course on liturgy in Dublin given by Sr. Sheila O'Dea. It was a wonderful experience. Every day we celebrated the Liturgy of the Word in a different way, the gospel followed by words or music to help us to connect in a personal way with its message. On the third day of the course, I was sitting in the group, waiting; my eyes closed. Nothing happened; no sound, no music. I was content to sit in silence, thinking how good it was to be given the space to soak in the gospel.

It was only later that I realised that there had not been a space after the homily. This fact dawned on me when other group members started to talk about how the movement had affected them. Movement? What movement? It transpired that I had sat, eyes closed, while two dancers had moved silently in the centre of the room; the hand of one of them just skimming my nose. I was entirely oblivious to their dance.

In this particular situation, I did not feel as if I had missed something essential to my spiritual well-being; the silence satisfied. Yet, afterwards, the memory of the experience evoked other memories; of times when I had sat, eyes closed in prayer; sat in silence. Other people told me that something was happening in my prayer but I had no sense of it. Far from satisfying, the silence served only to heighten my sense of loneliness. If God was moving, if God was present, I was oblivious to him.

6. WHERE ARE YOU?

THE NEARNESS OF YOU

*Come then,
my beloved,
. . . hiding
in the clefts
of the rock,

. . .
show me
your face . . .
Song of Songs
2: 13,14*

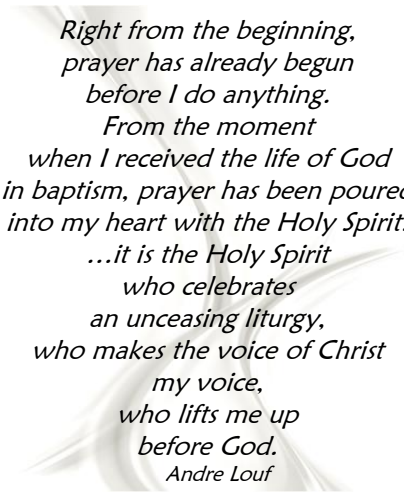


Sadly, in the case of prayer, sitting in an empty silence can leave us feeling left out or doubting our relationship with God. We see others in prayer and imagine that they are experiencing the warmth and comfort of God's nearness to them. We assume that we, too, might experience the nearness of God differently – if only we could get prayer 'right'.

In what is the penultimate chapter of a book highlighting the nearness of God, it may seem a self-defeating exercise to turn our thoughts to those periods of time, often long periods, when it seems as if God is far away and perhaps even absent. However, these experiences occur more frequently than we might imagine. Indeed, it is possible that some of us reading this book - reassuring us of God's nearness - still return to our times of private prayer and feel as if we are on our own. The God of self-giving nearness is not near to us . . . or so it seems.

This book opened with a reminder that we cannot engineer experiences of God. God will be God: always mystery; always beyond our wildest imaginings; always beyond our control. We can undertake as many prayer exercises as we like but they will not create some 'perfect' experience of prayer. They do not need to. Prayer is already 'happening' in us; the Holy Spirit is praying unceasingly,ⁱ the Holy Breath of God

moving its gentle way through our lives. Anything we do in prayer is merely a participation in the prayer that God has already initiated; the ongoing and eternal prayer of the Spirit.



*Right from the beginning,
prayer has already begun
before I do anything.
From the moment
when I received the life of God
in baptism, prayer has been poured
into my heart with the Holy Spirit.
...it is the Holy Spirit
who celebrates
an unceasing liturgy,
who makes the voice of Christ
my voice,
who lifts me up
before God.
Andre Louf*

Yet there are ways of being in prayer that can help us to experience it as meaningful; personal, intimate; ways to help us to trust in, and perhaps even have a greater sense of, God's nearness to us. In this chapter, we will reflect on how we might do this by making prayer as authentic and personal for ourselves as possible. While the suggestions are based on decades, if not centuries, of sound spiritual guidance, most will be familiar to most of us. What follows is therefore not new but it may be that it would help us to be reminded of it now, at this particular point of our relationship with God.



Finding a coat that fits

We start in a place that seems so obvious it might hardly be worth mentioning. Yet, for those of us who work in spiritual direction or parish formation, it is a commonly expressed concern. Good people are languishing in the darkness and frustration of prayer that no longer gives them comfort. They rehearse words that now hold little meaning for them and fear that they are losing their faith. Frequently they force themselves to sit in the quiet or to attend groups where everyone else seems to be deeply connected to God in prayer; in harmony with a God who occupies every corner of the room except their own.



Ask these people how they would feel about putting on the coat they wore at school and the answer would be immediate; even if they could find it, the coat would be too small; they had long since outgrown it! It would not suit; it does not fit. Yet suggest that the same logic be applied to their chosen method of prayer and be met with blank expressions; they simply had not thought it was possible or necessary to change the habits of a lifetime.

The prayers we were given as children served us well. They helped us to pray together with family and with the parish community. They gave us a structure and a much-needed routine. Their familiarity might also have given us reassurance in a changing turbulent world; the prayers stayed the same; God at least was consistent and dependable. These same prayers may serve a similar function for us as adults. They provide stability in a shaky world, something familiar and dependable. However, stability for some can be stagnation for others and some of us



may need to look again at the way we are praying. Our prayer is an expression of our intimate relationship with God; our own particular way of tuning into the Spirit praying within us.

Prayer is not a handbag. One size does not fit all.

Prayer needs, for part of the time at least, to reflect our own uniqueness, our own personality.

It follows that if we are gregarious and find energy in being with people, then praying alone just will not do. For the same reason, if we love quiet stretches on our own and feel rested when we have taken time to be away from others, then praying in a group will not satisfy. The same logic applies to our need to pray indoors, to pray when we are working, to pray through activity. Prayer needs to be a good 'fit' for us.

Like a coat, the style of our prayer may also change according to the seasons. Our life has different phases, some comforting, others less so. Each phase invites its own form of expression. Different seasons of our lives overlap and reoccur, each time requiring different approaches. One helpful way of looking at how prayer might adapt to life's changing seasons is to structure our thoughts using ideas from a theologian called Friedrich von Hugel.ⁱⁱ He identifies three elements of faith; each one a necessary part of the faith experience, each one present in varying proportions over a life-time.' Adapting his language to suit a modern audience,ⁱⁱⁱ we can use von Hugel's categories to help us to understand something of our changing experiences of, and needs, in prayer.



Firstly, in our prayer there is an element of **security**. This is represented in the formal prayers we learn, the comforting and familiar rituals and liturgies in which we participate at home and in Church. Secondly, there is an element of **searching**. This takes the form of the conversations we have with God, the psalms of struggle and anger, the space given over to questioning, to reading and discussion; to learning about God. Finally, there is an element of **intimacy**. This is represented by the part of our prayer that is an experience of God present with us, or, at least, helps foster such awareness. The music, candles and incense of our liturgies; silence shared; scripture, people; places; all contribute to the element of intimacy, that sense, however fleeting or elusive, that the God to whom we pray is with us now.



These elements assume a different priority at different stages of life and we might guess at the general pattern that develops over a lifetime. A child's prayer will have a greater emphasis on security, a teenager's on searching and an adult's on intimacy. However, life is complex; the pattern is rarely experienced in such a tidy and predictable fashion. Life's challenges, God's mystery, our own painful growth and development; all can throw us on choppy waters. The element of security in our prayer can quickly be outweighed by the element of searching. The felt-sense of intimacy ebbs and flows. Our prayer changes with life's seasons.

This search for a way of praying that is a "good fit" - a way of praying that changes over time and that suits our personality - may sound a little self-indulgent and even unnecessary. After all, the Holy Spirit is, doing the work of prayer within us. Prayer is God's initiative not ours. Nevertheless, God's initiative always invites our response and, in intimate relationship, that response needs to be personal, unique, particular. Finding a coat that fits helps us to make our own unique response to the God who has called each one of us by name and who knows and relates to

each one as individual. It helps us to find our particular voice, our own way of talking to God and of being with God. It helps us to discover a God who wants to be with us, who not only loves us but who actually *likes* us and likes spending time in prayer with us – wherever we choose to take him, be it to the park for a walk or into a dark room for some quiet time together.



God in the good room

In my Father's house there are many rooms, we hear Jesus say in John's gospel (John 14:2) but we might wonder if we have given much thought to the rooms in our lives to which we give God access. Think of it in this way: many of us have one room in the house that we try to keep as tidy as possible so that when we have visitors – the great aunt Elsie's of the world who come as pleasant but infrequent guests – we do not have to clear a space for them to sit down. Instead, we bring them into this 'good' room, give them our best tea in our best cups and try as best we can to make polite conversation. Only the respectable fragments of our lives are put on display, not because we consciously fear criticism but, rather, we assume that great aunt Elsie's of the world did not visit to listen to our troubles. We treat our guests as one would treat good china; handling them carefully to avoid breakage.



There are times when we relate to God in the same way as we do to great aunt Elsie. The various parts, the different 'rooms' of our life, may be in disarray as life throws its difficulties in our direction. Yet still we sit with God in a 'good room', the words of our prayer straining between us like polite conversation. We smile sweetly; ask God nicely for what we think we might need and wait in a very grateful and well-behaved fashion for his response. The good room conversation is well intentioned; skilfully choreographed: we handle God carefully to avoid breakage.

Our relationship with the aunt Elsie's of our lives may be pleasant enough but could hardly be described as fulfilling. Certainly, if we were in the midst of a crisis it is unlikely that poor Elsie would have much chance to hear about it and to lend support. Our conversation instead is an experience of polite distance. We are there with each other but not there for each other; sitting together, we are miles apart.

We can be forgiven for behaving in this way with God. For centuries, we have quietly separated the 'holy' from the ordinary, carefully installing God in the good rooms of Church and tabernacle. We are not used to relating to the God who would be just as happy to take a seat at our kitchen table, and to be there for us in the midst of life's mess. Furthermore, as a Church, we have actively encouraged polite conversation with God, fostering the unspoken belief that we have to be 'nice' in God's company, that our stance before him must be one of gratitude and unwavering trust.



*To the question,
"God, what is your
will for me?" the
answer is
understood to be,
"I want you to be
yourself. I leave
the details of that
up to you."
Thomas Hart*

Such expectations place unnecessary and unhelpful demands on our prayer. We are invited into intimacy with God; intimacy is based on a relationship of openness and honesty. The invitation of intimacy is to be open, to "Be yourself!" with the God who cares deeply for you, who loves you as you are. Putting God in the good room can have its impact on this intimacy. It is hard to be yourself in the good room. The God we have placed in there can seem very far away.

Again, it is helpful to remind ourselves that the God we encounter in Jesus did not visit good rooms nor did he confine himself to the more typical sacred and holy places of his time. He dined with sinners and tax collectors. He ate with friends, probably spending much of his time listening to their problems as well as their joys. This God will feel at home in the kitchen places of our lives^{iv} and in the messy corners that we try to hide from him and from ourselves. An extra mug of tea and an empty seat at the table may be all we need to be prompted to be ourselves, to let him into every room in the house and to experience him not only there with us but there for us.



An Angry God

Before we become too enthusiastic about being free to be ourselves before God, we might do well to admit that in the past we felt we had good reason to confine God to the good room. The images we had of God, the ideas picked up from others: all of these added to our doubts and concerns about letting God enter the messier kitchen places of our lives. Created for love, destined for relationship; we are born wanting God. Yet our early experiences may have twisted us out of shape. The past has marked us and more subtly than we might imagine.^v



Relationships may have impacted on us in the past. Some of the people we allowed close to us may have treated us badly and in ways that significantly influenced our willingness to let God close also. Perhaps we have risked showing such people the kitchen places of our lives; places that were messy and disorganised: our troubles at work, our struggles with family members; our fears and inadequacies. Sadly, we discovered to our cost, that our trust in them was misplaced. They looked at the exposed disorder of our lives and found us wanting. They criticised our words and actions and at some very deep level, either intentionally or unintentionally, they hurt us.

However much we may have tried to shrug off their criticism, some of it may have pierced the skin. The pain has taught us about the dangers of trusting others and letting them “in”. Consequently, we may have learnt that it is wiser to keep most people, including God, at a safe distance – out of the kitchen and in the good room instead.



Added to any pain from past hurts is the Church’s collective memory of a critical and harsh God. The memory lingers, especially in the minds of the older generation who lived under this God’s constant scrutiny and were reassured of his punishment if they disobeyed the rules. This God followed them around like the eyes of a holy picture, watching, waiting to pounce, to punish, to test. God was policeman and teacher; the rules and laws he laid down were to be followed without question, without mistake. Just as in covenant, the consequences were made all too clear.

This God is still familiar to us, a frequent visitor to the readings we use in our Eucharistic liturgies. These Old Testament passages, often proclaimed without context or explanation, serve to reinforce our lingering sense of God as an angry, vengeful God who kept score of wrongdoings and who settled scores with those who disappointed or defied him.

*I mean
to make
her pay!”*
Hosea 1:15a



These messages and images are still in the air around us. We breathe them in almost without noticing. Little wonder that so many good people attend parish retreats expressing complete trust in God’s love for them yet still behave as if God was updating their school report and that he had written at the bottom of each daily page in big red letters the words: COULD DO BETTER.

“Where are you?” God asks us and like Adam we reply, “*I was afraid . . . so I hid.*” Little wonder that, in the midst of our whispered fears, we shuffle God and ourselves off into the apparent safety of the good room. There, we use the prayer of polite conversation, with the best of intentions, not realising that it keeps us hidden from sight. We do so because we are afraid; afraid of criticism, punishment and rejection. We handle God like good china; carefully, to avoid breakages.



Show me your face

However much we may be troubled by the pains and poor images of the past, in the very depths of our being we know that we have no reason to hide. We are in the presence of a God who knows our strengths and our weakness, who loves and

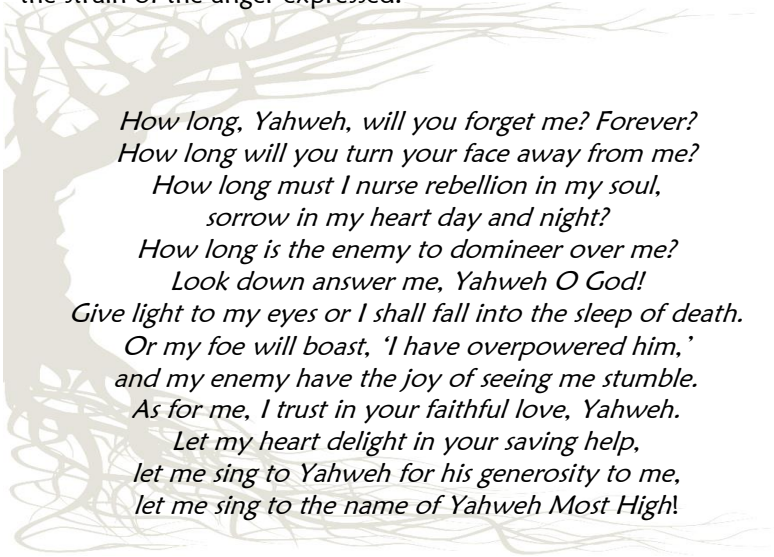
*Come then, my beloved
. . . hiding in the clefts of
the rock, in the coverts
of the cliff, show me
your face .*

Song of Songs 2: 13, 14

accepts us and who draws us ever closer to him. How do we relate to God in a way that allows us to be honest about our fears and concerns? How do we show our faces in our prayer in ways that will foster intimacy and perhaps even help us to have a greater sense of God’s nearness to us?

We can only admire how the people of Israel related to the God of the Old Testament. Throughout all the twists and turns of their relationship with him, they experienced God as approachable, even reasonable. Their God was accessible. Their God could receive their joy and praise. He could also receive their fears and their anger. So, if we want a master-class on how to approach God honestly and openly, we need look no further than the example set by Israel’s psalmists. Every human emotion, comfortable and uncomfortable finds expression in their verses. They speak as people who are not afraid to show God their faces, to let God know exactly what they are thinking, what they want him to be doing about it, and how annoyed they are when he does not do what he has been asked to do!

One psalm that meets frequently with a resounding ‘YES!’ when presented in spiritual direction sessions is Psalm 13, already mentioned in Chapter Two above. The psalmist is expressing his anger at God but also is communicating a sense of unwavering trust in God’s loving faithfulness. He presents his anger to God, firmly believing that God will not turn him away; God will not reject or abandon him. As we read it below, we might avoid sanitising the gritty sentiment expressed. The psalmist would not have shown polite restraint in delivering these words. He entertained no fear of a God so brittle that he might break under the strain of the anger expressed.



*How long, Yahweh, will you forget me? Forever?
How long will you turn your face away from me?
How long must I nurse rebellion in my soul,
sorrow in my heart day and night?
How long is the enemy to domineer over me?
Look down answer me, Yahweh O God!
Give light to my eyes or I shall fall into the sleep of death.
Or my foe will boast, ‘I have overpowered him,’
and my enemy have the joy of seeing me stumble.
As for me, I trust in your faithful love, Yahweh.
Let my heart delight in your saving help,
let me sing to Yahweh for his generosity to me,
let me sing to the name of Yahweh Most High!*

This and other psalms allow us to have access and to give expression to the full range of human emotions. Yet it is in the expression of anger that they provide us with a rare gift in our relationship with God. Anger is often an uncomfortable emotion. Experience has taught us that it is not welcome in most relationships. We have been trained to bite our tongue, swallow our anger, stew in our own juices. All of these descriptions suggest some measure of physical pain and hint at the damage that the suppression of anger exerts on the body.

Left unattended, this anger not only damages our health, it affects relationships. It festers inside. Unexpressed anger sits there in the room with us. We can choose to ignore it but we realise, deep down, that things are just not the same. Something is lost in the festering silence; friendships flounder, emotions deaden; love dies.



The same is true of relationship with God. The invitation is to give the anger expression and to trust, just as the psalmists did, that God can take our honesty and concerns, that we have no need to hide. The effects can be quite dramatic. More open with God, we become more aware of God's presence with us in prayer and in daily life. Something in us shifts; we realise that even our most uncomfortable feelings will not cause God to abandon us. We appreciate that God's gift of himself in nearness comes without conditions; his love given freely.

Extract from *The Nearness Of God*, B O'Hare 2011.

ⁱ Andre Louf, *The Cistercian Way*, trans Nivard Kinsella, (Cistercian Publications, 1984) 73.

ⁱⁱ Friedrich Von Hugel, *The Mystical element of Religion*, Volume 1 (J.M. Dent & Sons: London, 1923) 52-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Breige O'Hare, 'Opening to Love; A Paradigm for Growth in relationship with God,' *Presence* (Spiritual Directors International) June, 2004, 27-36.

^{iv} Thomas Hart, *The Art of Christian Listening* (Paulist Press: New Jersey 1980) 79.

^v Janet Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (St Paul's: London, 2000) 125-9.