



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Intercede, Part 2

"I wonder if you realize a deep great fact? That souls, all human souls, are interconnected . . . that we can, not only pray for each other, but suffer for each other. Nothing is more real than this interconnection . . . this precious power put by God in the very heart of our infirmities."

When Anglican author and spiritual teacher, Evelyn Underhill read these words in a letter from theologian Baron von Hugel, one is not surprised that she wrote back to her uncle that she did not think she was strong enough yet for intercessory prayer.

The fact is that the vulnerable involvement and the self-giving of intercessory prayer will cost us. When we pray for others and our world, we offer our being, our consciousness, our specificity in time and space – our unique collection of genes, ancestry, history, and experience, as a channel for the immense love of God to move toward a particular part of creation. For me this kind of focused, concentrated prayer requires a lot of energy. It

took me a long time to appreciate intercessory prayer as genuine work, which may result in physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental weariness. Our ability as a species to feel compassion and to feel each other's pain is a function of our deep interconnection with each other. Christ who is one with the Creator and Spirit invites us into the unity of the Holy Trinity. As we are one in Christ, we discover that we are one with all that is in Christ.

Who among us feels strong enough to suffer for another? Isn't such a notion too mystical? Doesn't this ignore the redemptive work of Christ's definitive suffering for all on the cross? Who am I to pray in such a way that I might feel others' pain and believe somehow that such shared suffering might be redemptive and healing? Isn't suffering for another person dysfunctional, codependent, getting all enmeshed in somebody else's business? Isn't this a Catholic thing, what those crazy masochistic saints did to get to heaven?

Love binds us together for better or worse. Let's look at three features of intercessory prayer: *Love that intends; Anxiety that hinders; Prayer that may hurt, as it saves.*

Love that intends and stays engaged

Prayer begins and ends with love.

Prayer is the out pouring and exchange of love between a creature and her creator, the lover and his beloved.

Prayer expresses the joy, adoration, and gratitude for the love we experience, both on earth and in heaven. When what I love is threatened or harmed in some way, I pray for God's mercy, healing, and justice. To love is to become vulnerable to the one I love. In order to thrive, we all need to be loved and to love. Yet my desire for my beloved leaves me open to the pain of losing what I value so deeply.

Dutch priest, teacher and writer, Henri Nouwen recognizes this relation between love and suffering, when he writes:

Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply. You might be afraid of the pain that deep love can cause. When those you love deeply reject you, leave you, or die, your heart will be broken. But that should not hold you back from loving deeply. The pain that comes from deep love makes your love ever more fruitful. It is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to

take root and grow into a strong plant.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Intercessory prayer is an expression of love which deserves our attention and concentration. This is not to say prayer cannot be expressed when doing other things. Many of us pray on the go, while knitting, wood carving, peeling potatoes, or driving the car. Often people tell me they pray all the time. For some the Jesus prayer (Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me.) is a constant offering repeating itself like a bubbling brook just beneath their awareness.

Deeper intercessory prayer asks me to stop multi-tasking and deliberately turn away from what I am doing – put down the potato peeler, pull over to the side of the road, turn off my ipad, as I turn toward God and the person(s) in need. Perhaps you may feel an urgency rise up in you: the need to kneel right down by your kitchen sink, to pull over on the side of a road, to light a candle, or go to some place holy to you. For a few moments your whole being is irresistibly drawn into the service of God for the purpose of interceding for someone, whose cries both God and you have heard.

Prayer is a radical act of surrender to a reality beyond our selves. Someone

is tugging at the hem of your skirt, pulling on your shirt sleeve, “Now pray!” You are needed. In our interdependency with all of creation, we are given astonishing power to pray for each other. Yet we are so wedded to a Western notion of individuality, a me-first, consumer driven economy, and polarized politics that we fail to see that we are inextricably woven together. I am my brother’s keeper. As one suffers we all suffer. As one rejoices we all rejoice.

Our dismembered world is full of people whose lives are fragmented, frantic, and have little or no cohesive interests or purpose. We disintegrate into special interest groups, who compete with each other for influence, power, and wealth. We are perpetually at war with ourselves and others, continually erecting walls and fences, doctrines and policies, which separate us from those we consider dangerous, unworthy, unclean, or just not our kind. In the midst of the fighting, the gun shots, the bombs, the melting ice caps, the rocky economy, the lack of jobs – there right in the mess that is our world – somebody needs you.

Hold still for Heaven’s sake. Put down your weapons, your arguments, your money, your intellect and technology and all that we have achieved. In the

face of our utter failure on our own to sustain peace, can we open our hearts and our minds beyond the borders of *what* we know to embrace *who* we know? The Son of Humanity rises from death to swing open the door to life. Christ waits for our faith to summon redemption from the murky morass of human sin and failure. The One whose peace is not as the world gives, whose peace is beyond the grasp and understanding of the greatest minds, lives within and among us.

The Holy One enters the world when somebody has the courage and faith to conceive the impossible, the unimaginable. We need people willing to be pregnant with hope and to say, “Nothing is impossible for God.”

Occasionally people tell me that they feel called to healing prayer. They tend to be shy and hesitant about sharing this information. They fear sounding presumptuous or arrogant. They also seek help in how to understand and use a gift like this.

I say, “Just do it.” Get your Bible, your holy water, anointing oil, your sage, whatever you think you need to remind you who you are and who God is. Drag your foot in a circle in the dust out of which you came and will return. Do what you can. Stake out a

little space in time in the midst of the riotous and wailing chaos beating on our doors. Step over the edge into the holiness waiting in your living room or backyard. Stand in it and let it rise slowly up to your waist. Sit down in it. Abide in it. Breathe it in and out. And ask, pray, plead! Lift up those who have lost their voices and their hope.

Carry the dying ones in your arms to God. Let that ancient longing, the hoarse cry of prophets, the lamentation of the lost and forgotten rise up within you and give voice to all that needs to be heard.

Intercession intentionally, boldly, breaks through the trance and numbness created by the drone of pundits, sensational sound bites, the distortions of propaganda, ambulance chasers, and cynics. Intercession strides right up to the giants, draws back its arm, and lets loose the power of the Almighty God of Heaven and Earth.

Anxiety that hinders

I learned a long time ago that I was not very good at praying for my children, when they were sick or in danger. I was too attached and too anxious. This is not to say God did not hear my prayers, or one ought not to pray when one is fearful.

Though our worry may not limit God, it may be unhelpful for us and for the person or situation we are praying for. French priest, Jeanne Pierre de Caussade, notes -

The great principle of the interior life lies in peace of the heart ... and the reason of this is that great peace and tranquility of Spirit, alone give the soul great strength to achieve all that God wills, while trouble and disquiet turn the soul into a languishing invalid.

I have been that languishing invalid and my children can tell you how my worry and fear did more damage than help to them. "Our worry never helps anyone," Irene de Castilego reminds us -

It is a most destructive form of idle fantasy. We surround the person we wish to protect with a mist of anxiety which only befuddles his possibility of clear thinking or clear action. Who knows whether it may not even bring about the disasters we are trying to avoid.

Anxiety may easily overshadow one's faith. Faith is the single most important component we bring to prayer on our part. Doubt divides our focus and weakens our conviction. An ongoing task in the spiritual life is one of deepening our faith and inner peace. Faith deepens as the cracks in our faith are exposed by our fear and the traumas of our life. Our experiences of fear and loss become opportunities

to grow deeper roots *in the substance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen*. As faith is deepened in us, we simultaneously lose faith in ourselves, that is our ability through our skill, or strength to bring a change, as we humbly recognize our limits. We discover peace in the midst of chaos as we rely more and more upon God.

Prayer that hurts

If anyone claiming to be united to God is always in a state of peaceful beatitude, I simply do not believe in their union with God. Such a union, to my mind, involves great sorrow for the sin and pain of the world; a sense of identity not only with God, but also with all other souls, and a great longing to redeem and heal.

St. Teresa of Avila

Vulnerable involvement with the broken world will expose our own wounds and need for forgiveness. If I pray for my enemy, I risk having my mind changed. To pray for others is to consent to experiencing the cross. The cross may be as simple as dying to my own desires for a particular outcome, or dying to my desire to do something other than to respond to someone's need for prayer.

Intercessory prayer asks what good is my peace, my sense of well-being, when my sister is hurting? What good is my abundance, if it does not give

me the freedom and strength to bring my faith and peace to someone else's weakness and sorrow?

At times intercessory prayer is more a desperate act of love, than eloquence; a messy melodrama, than a polite request. It is as though the intercessor has one foot in the darkness and terror of human existence and the other in the beauty and joy of abundant life. The presence and being of the intercessor becomes a life line through which moves the power of God. To stand in the gap of another's need without being pulled to one polarity or the other requires spiritual strength and maturity.

The formality and reticence of ecclesiastical prayer is utterly foreign to the Bible. Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, and indecorous. It is more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues of churches.

- Walter Wink,

When I began this ministry of prayer, I did not have a clue as to what praying would mean. I took on too much. I felt too much. I was a child playing with fire. I carried other people's pain. I became ill. There were periods when I strongly identified with Christ on the cross in ways I wondered if I was going crazy. Over time I learned what God was teaching me about suffering

and redemption, vulnerability, and the presence of Christ in our lives.

Some people do suffer in prayer for others. Saint Therese of Lisieux saw this as her vocation as a Carmelite nun. 18th century Presbyterian missionary, David Brainerd wrote: “God enabled me to agonize in prayer. My soul was drawn out very much for the world. I grasped for a multitude of souls.” Evelyn Underhill notes, “As the personality of the saints grew in strength and expanded in adoration so they were drawn on to heroic wrestling for souls.. Real saints do feel and fear the weight of the sins and pains of the world. It is the human soul’s greatest privilege that we can thus accept redemptive suffering for another.”

I believe we all suffer for one another within the larger mystery of Christ’s suffering. However I also believe Walter Wink’s caution:

We must not try to bear the suffering of creation ourselves... We can only give it expression and let the groaning pass through us to God. Only the heart of God can endure such suffering. Our attempts to bear them are masochistic, falsely messianic, and finally idolatrous.

We have limits. We need to know the difference between suffering with another at God’s invitation and when it is merely tragic and spiritualized

self-abuse. There is a difference between prayer and acts which are codependent, manipulative, ego driven meddling, and prayer and acts which are life-giving. Knowing when to back off, what is truly my concern, how to protect myself with clear boundaries, and when one’s work is finished comes with experience.

It is difficult to open your heart and mind to the raw suffering before you and remain there steadfast and watching in someone else’s Gethsemane. Yet to wait in faith and hope at the foot of your neighbor’s cross is one of the most healing acts we can offer one another. This is because here in the darkness at the end of the road is where divine action meets human limitation and leaps from heart to heart.

Maybe you light a candle, say the rosary, ask others to pray with you. Maybe you go outside and spread yourself over the ground and let all the sorrow and pain drain out of you into Mother Earth. You might pound on the table or the wall. You might shout to the heavens, “Do something! Be merciful! Be God for us.” You reach out, call a friend or a hotline, write a letter, or paint a picture of the great groaning earth crying for mercy. One way or another we each funnel

a piece of the anguish of this broken world through our being to the One we believe can help.

Your prayer does not have to sound beautiful. It just needs to be honest. Carry what you have been blessed to bear over the terrain of your day into the heart of Love Unbounded. Pretty soon your life will be etched with little channels running between the ocean of suffering in this world and the endless mercy of God.

Loretta F. Ross



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The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Revelation 22: 2-3

To pray is to build your own house. To pray is to discover that someone else is in your house.

To pray is to recognize that it is not your house at all. To keep praying is to have no house to protect because there is only One House. And that One House is everybody's Home.

That is the politics of prayer. And that is probably why truly spiritual people are always a threat to politicians of any sort. They want our allegiance and we can no longer give it.

Our house is too big.

Richard Rohr



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