

Watch in wonder, gather the courage to act, and pray

Rich Heffern | Dec. 20, 2010



Delicate Arch in Arches National Park in central Utah (Dreamstime)

Earth & Spirit

I used a prayer bench for the first time recently, one of those comfortably padded contraptions that enable kneeling in an upright posture, attentive yet relaxed. On a chilly day, the opportunity came to spend an hour quietly meditating in an atrium room with a skylight and plants. My wife and I were housesitting for a weekend at the home of friends.

This relatively new technology reminded me how much my prayer has changed since my youth.

In high school seminary in the early 1960s, we put in hours on hard kneelers in pews of varnished hardwood that gave no solace or comfort to the body. Kneeling on those unyielding surfaces was Club Med, though, compared to the adolescent scrupulosity that plagued those years. Finding the release of forgiveness behind the purple confessional curtain, my own inner inquisitor would nag at me that same evening. ?Haven?t I forgotten to confess some detail, thereby nullifying the absolution? Didn?t I fudge just a smidgen in the telling, thereby completely invalidating God?s forgiveness??

Tormented by too much religion in the head, I endlessly circumnavigated my cobwebby mind, hoisted on the petard of unanswerable Western Christian koans, such as how to haul my pesky adolescent body along with my soul to holiness.

My prayer was a beseeching for release from the torments of linking a delicate conscience with newly released hormones. What finally brought me out of these self-floggings was a case of acne, replacing one torment with another in those acutely self-conscious years. Yet when my skin cleared up, so did my soul. Such exquisite writhing, common according to the spirituality manuals of the day, now seems like nothing more than avoidance of the fullness of life.

The next stage in my prayer can be described in one incident. My wife and I camped right after we were married in Arches National Park in central Utah. We were the only U.S. citizens in the campground -- at least on that day. Our neighbors were all French, Japanese or German tourists. In fact, at a ranger talk, one foreigner asked

the official where the Americans were. The ranger simply pointed straight up at a Las Vegas-bound jet overhead.

We spent the day clambering through the convoluted sandstone corridors, streaked beautifully with desert varnish and cryptically decorated with colorful lichens as the canyon wrens sung. We visited Delicate Arch, a megalith weighing thousands of tons that looked elegantly feather-light like a whimsical stone daydream framing the blue, snowcapped La Sal Mountains behind it.

Back at the campsite that evening, we perched on a rock to watch a storm pass over. The clouds parted just in time for a sunset over the vast, spellbound Colorado Plateau around us. The sun lit the desert landscape with a dramatic, saturated light custom-made for this phantasmagoria of a land. There were maybe 150 people in the campsite, yet all that could be heard in the midst of the sunset drama was the wind, and gasps. It was an unforgettable experience of spontaneous group prayer -- one of appreciation, awe and wonder.

Later, I perched on a stone lookout, watching the moon rise and light the arches and hoodoos with wan, spectral light. Nighthawks swooped and dived overhead, as the last of the storm flickered and flashed over Colorado. Besides being a lifting of my mind and heart up to God, who had produced such weather and landscape, my prayer then was a quiet exultation, a gratefulness, awestruck and open-mouthed underneath the life-giving beauty.

I notice my prayer now has become a mulligan stew, a watchful melting of the heart, a quiet inner healing and, more and more, a surrender to and acceptance of things as they are.

Many times my prayer is a shakedown -- combined pep talk and whistling past the cemetery -- that takes me from fear to a ragtag mustering of courage and focus. Or often my prayer attempts just to frame the confusing montage of life happenings with some sanity and purpose rather than with absurdity and chaos. The idea that nature loves order, but uses messiness to get there, is profoundly comforting to me.

Over and over again, I have learned how to pray. From the nervous supplication of confused youth, to the hiking-boot-clad adoration of middle years, to a new kind of contemplative hanging-in-there and, in my best moments, creative integration.

To whom do I pray? Always to the "mercy within mercy within mercy," in Thomas Merton's phrase. I pray to the hidden glory, the luminous darkness, the wholly other who is closer to us than our own skin, the deep-down freshness in things.

"Our prayers are not answered with miraculous gifts," wrote Catholic science writer Chet Raymo, "tagged with our names or those of loved ones, but rather tagged with beauty and terror. For the prayerful listener, the world becomes the sublime scripture, full of stories of structure and chaos, law and chance, complexification and decay."

I've never seen a statue cry or an open palm perpetually bleed, but I've seen the beauty of arches and been near the bedsides of courageous deaths, watched frail elderly ladies speak truth to power, read about the complexity of the human cell, experienced the intimacy and tenderness of a marriage.

Miracles enough for me.

What now most shapes my prayer is the new scientific creation story, which tells us this: The universe is a unity, an interacting, evolving community of beings and life bound inseparably together. Our responsibilities to each other, to the planet and to all creation are implicit in this unity. Each of us is profoundly implicated in the functioning and fate of every other living being on Earth. Our stance then is to be contemplatives engaged in justice-seeking and Earth-healing in equal measure.

We watch in wonder and gather the courage to act, and we pray, sometimes even on a comfortable padded bench.

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