

Chapman, Kim Hill. I bought a tape deck and some batteries. Six months later, Grandy died, in her sleep, the day before election day.

I think my grandmother was sad when she died that none of us, my mother or my sister or me, was a Christian. I think she thought every day about how Proverbs promises that if you raise your children up right, when they are old, they will not stray from the path of righteousness, and I think she was waiting for my mother to come back to church. I don't know what Heaven is like, or where my grandmother is now, if she is seated at God's feet, or if she is waiting, in some timeless in-between, for Jesus' return to earth and the final resurrection of the dead. But I hope, fiercely, that wherever she is, she can see me and know that I have become a Christian. I doubt that I will ever have the unwavering faith that she had. I will always be too embarrassed and too sophisticated and too modern to believe the way she believed. But I hope she is somewhere able to see that I believe just a little bit. I think it would make her smile.

A WEEK LATER, I get a postcard in the mail from Violet and Iola. Iola has crayoned a picture of a purple woman with pointy, feline glasses. Then, in her mother's loopy scrawl, "Wish you were here!"

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### Prayer Life

Last week, I met a man. His name is Bill, and he is tall and clever and knows interesting things, and I am taken with him. Quite taken. Very taken indeed. After our first date, which was one of those dates where neither of you is sure till halfway through that it even is a date and then it lasts until the wee hours of the night and you wind up feeling like you've taken a two-week trip to the mountains with him, not just had dinner and gone out to a bar. Anyway, after that date, he went out of town, and we were supposed to meet for a drink when he came back, which we did. He drank a 7 and 7, I think, and I drank Tullamore Dew, and the Yale Club, where we met, was deserted, except for a few college juniors on their way out of the country for spring break. I realized that he was the only person I had ever met who owned recordings of all the Dvořák string quartets, not just the famous ones, quartets 12 and 14; all those quartets impressed me no end. I felt like I could have listened to his peaty, scratchy voice for years. And then he went home and I went home and I was utterly fixated. Knocked flat on the ground, couldn't think about anything else but him him him. Couldn't work, couldn't take a shower, couldn't even go to the grocery store without thoughts of him, this-man-I-newly-wanted-to-marry-after-two-dates. Scrutinized his three-sentence emails.

Agonized about whether to call him, or would that seem too forward; on the other hand, could anything possibly be more forward than the half-drunk-Tullamore-Dew things I'm sure I must have meltily said in that deserted bar at the Yale Club?

Instead of calling Bill, I call Randi and say, "I'm just fixating, and I have to stop, this is ridiculous, I feel unmoored and it's ridiculous and I don't even know him and I'm not getting anything done and when I wake up in the mornings I think about him, very first thing." And Randi says what I knew she would say. She says, "Pray."

"Yes," I say, "but it's not really working. I tried it Wednesday night, when I was waiting for him to call and make these Yale Club plans, when I was waiting anxiously and couldn't grade my midterms and was just waiting, I did pray about it." (I actually got down on my knees on my dirty pink dhurrie rug and said, "Ok, God, I'm really getting out of control here. I don't want to feel this crazy over this man, I don't want to try to control a situation I can't control, so I'm going to just give it to you. You take it. You deal with it." I even—this is a little embarrassing—I even took a picture of the crucifixion down off my wall, and held it in my hands, and pictured myself laying this bundle of neurosis and anxiety and control-freakishness at Jesus' feet.) "So," I say to Randi, "I tried that on Wednesday, and it doesn't really seem to have worked."

"I think," says Randi, "that you have to do it every day, all the time, these prayers of relinquishment. I think it doesn't really do the trick to squeeze it in on your way to class, 'Hey God, I don't really have time to talk right now, but could you please just take away these kind of overwrought feelings, thanks, I really appreciate it, catch ya later.'"

"Well," I demur, "those squeezed-in prayers could work, if He wanted them to work. I mean, He's omnipotent. He could just zap these feelings away if He wanted to."

"I think you have to do it every day," Randi repeats. (She will say this again in a few weeks, when, after a third and fourth date, things with the peaty-voiced Bill fizzle out like flat ginger ale and I am crushed and don't want to get out of bed. She will say "I think you have to pray every day. Maybe twice.")

I HAVE A HARD TIME PRAYING. It feels, usually, like a waste of time. It feels unproductive; my time would be better spent writing a paragraph or reading a book or practicing a conjugation or baking a pie. Sometimes whole weeks elapse when I hardly bother to pray at all, because prayer is boring; because it feels silly (after all, you look like you're just sitting there talking to the air, or to yourself, and maybe you are); but above all because it is unproductive. As Jo once put it, "If you spend a day in prayer, you cannot, at the end of the day, point to a pile of toothpaste tubes you made and say, *that is what I did today*." Still, there are the weeks when I do pray, the weeks when I trust—or, at least, manage to act like I trust—that prayer does something, even if it is something I cannot see. Aquinas wrote, "Prayer is profitable because it makes us the familiars of God." I like that language. It conjures up God as a witch with a broomstick and a pointy hat, and me His little black cat, everywhere underfoot. Then Aquinas quoted Psalm 140: "Let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight."

WHEN YOU ARE A JEW, if you are trying to be a righteous one, you pray three times a day, *shacharit*, *mincha*, *ma'ariv*, morning, afternoon, and night. You say those prayers in a quorum, in a group, at shul, or in a living room; and in between, all throughout the day, you sprinkle your other words with blessings, blessings over every crumb you put in your mouth, and blessings over rainbows and thunderclaps, blessings for when you see a dwarf or gnome or some other

strange-looking creature, a blessing for when you meet a wise man, a blessing for after you pee, blessings everywhere.

The blessings are easy, short, and it does not take long for even newcomers to learn to bless habitually. What makes a blessing a blessing is the opening phrase, the six-word formula, which in English comes to ten words: "Blessed are you O Lord our God King of the Universe." King of the universe Who does something: Who brings forth bread from the earth; Who made the great sea; Who creates the fruit of the ground; Who sanctifies us with His commandments. In the second century, Rabbi Meir said that Jews should strive to say one hundred blessings a day. Sometimes during college I took the train to the Bronx Botanical Garden, just so I would have some flowers over which to say a blessing.

The prayers, the three-times-a-day prayers, are longer, and harder to learn, and require more discipline. I don't say them anymore, but I remember the lessons they taught me, which were two. One, it is important to pray with other people, in a group, a lesson that gives the lie to the lie I like to believe, which is that prayer is just about this vertical conversation between me and God and God and me. And two, liturgy is dull, and habitual, and rote, and you memorize it, and don't think about what you are saying, and it is, regardless, the most important thing on the planet. It is the place you start, and the place you come back to. I find liturgy, even Thomas Cranmer's beautiful poetry, as bland as macaroni and cheese, but I would have no prayer without it.

LITURGY IS ONE of the ways I stumbled my way into the Episcopal Church, and it is one of the reasons I stay put. When people ask how I came to be an Episcopalian in particular, why not a Lutheran or a Presbyterian or a Pentecostal falling down slain in the Spirit, I say that at the time I had not the foggiest idea why but I

knew, long before I became a Christian, that if I became a Christian, I would become the Episcopal kind. "God's hand," I say. "God's hand guiding me." But God's hand in part because the Episcopal Church reminds me, over and over, in all its nooks and crannies and surprises and ways, of Judaism.

One way the Episcopal Church reminds me of Judaism is its hermeneutic, that is, its way of reading, in particular the way the Church reads the Bible. Jews read the Bible, the written Bible, the Five Books of Moses and the Writings and the Prophets, through a rabbinic scrim. They don't just sit down with the Book of Leviticus and figure out how to live. If they did, keeping kosher, for one thing, would be a lot easier. Leviticus, after all, just says to avoid boiling a kid in its mother's milk; it is the rabbis, speaking in the Talmud, who eventually determined the meaning of that verse: separate meat and milk completely, no cheeseburgers, no meaty lasagna, no hamburger on your pizza, indeed don't even eat them at the same meal, no hot fudge sundae after steak tartar, actually wait a few hours (some say one, others three or six) after eating meat before you drink milk or spoon some yogurt or cut yourself a piece of cheese bread.

Jewish tradition teaches that at Mount Sinai God revealed not just the written Torah, the Torah *shebachtav*, the first five books of Moses, but also the oral Torah, the Torah *she baal peh*, the Torah of the mouth, literally—the Talmud and all the other rabbinic commentaries. All of those elaborations, those readings, those interpretations, the cheese bread and the meaty lasagna, Moses received all that at Sinai. They are just as binding as anything in Leviticus, even though they didn't get written down till later. Jews who dare to read the Torah *shebachtav*, the written Torah, without the Torah *she baal peh*, are heretics of the first order, Karaites. These are the Jews who take literally the 613 commandments in the Old Testament, but disregard completely the teachings of the rabbis.

Anglicans, and other Catholic churches—that is, the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox—read the Bible like Orthodox Jews. Anglicans look at Scripture through the scrim of the church fathers, they balance the Bible with the weight of centuries of church teaching and tradition. This sets the Catholic churches apart from Protestants, who place less emphasis on, vest less authority in, tradition. Martin Luther, inaugurating the Protestant Reformation, called for *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone, and he translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into the common tongue so that layfolk could read it and interpret it for themselves, guided not primarily by centuries of church teaching, but directly by the Holy Spirit. If I had to do that, just secret myself away in my room, just me, King James, and the Holy Spirit, I don't think I'd ever open a Bible again. The task would be too awesome. I am much happier, much more comfortable, much more trusting, and much less terrified when I know that, instead, it's me, the Holy Spirit, and two thousand years of the church reading, arguing, teasing out, all together. This kind of reading is what I was used to. It's just the same as reading Genesis alongside a commentary by Rashi or the Vilna Gaon. Reading the New Testament without Jerome and Augustine and the Venerable Bede makes about as much sense to me as reading Hebrew Scripture without Rashi. So that is one of the things that drew me to Episcopalianism: reading with the church.

The other familiar thing, when I first walked into an Episcopal church, was the prayer book, the habit of fixed-hour prayer, the understanding that you were saying more or less the same liturgy as Anglicans around the world, that you would say the same prayers every morning, every evening, over and over and over, till you knew them by heart, and long after that, till they were rote and boring, comfortable as your best friend's kitchen and familiar as flapjacks.

RANDI'S GRANDMOTHER PAULINE is dying. She has Parkinson's. She's in a hospital in Maryland, and I don't think Randi has seen her in fifteen years, but death is still death, and it is hard any way you look at it. Pauline is ninety-seven, and I am not sure how to pray for her. For her healing? For an easy journey to the World to Come? In my prayer book, in the section called "Prayers and Thanksgivings," I find a paragraph for the aged. "As their strength diminishes, increase their faith and their assurance of your love."

A FEW YEARS AGO there was an article in the *New York Times* magazine about the Roman Catholic priesthood. Used to be that entering the priesthood was a smart, upwardly mobile move for the sons of Irish and Italian immigrants, a good way for kids kept out of the Ivies by quotas to get a good education and wind up with a good job. But, the article wondered, what kind of virile, normal man would enter the priesthood now? Who would take a vow of lifelong celibacy if he had any other options? The article focused mostly on the topics one might expect to find in the *Sunday Times*: homosexuality, celibacy, contraception. But buried in the middle was one paragraph about prayer. The seminarians, Jennifer Egan wrote, "talk about their prayer lives the way most people talk about their love lives."

I GET AN EMAIL from a near-stranger today, someone who has the distinction of being vaguely acquainted with both me and Steven, my ex. "I heard about Steve getting engaged," the acquaintance writes in her email. "I'm thinking of you. I'm hoping you're not too upset." The acquaintance, apparently, assumed Steven had had the courtesy to tell me about his engagement. That assumption—although, in our ongoing effort to have an amicable professional relationship, Steve and

I did talk for thirty minutes just yesterday about what caused the Montgomery bus boycott—was incorrect.

When your ex-boyfriend gets engaged less than six months after you break up, it is nice to learn that your friends cannot stand him. It is nice to have friends who insist that he just can't marry his equal, that Tiffany-the-part-time-Pilates-instructor no doubt has long legs but only about six brain cells. It is nice to have friends who say I am better off without him. It is nice to have friends who hold my hand and plait my hair and scoop chocolate ice cream into dishes for me when I can't possibly eat a thing, friends who say that Steve will be unhappy, their marriage won't last, she probably got knocked-up-by-accident-on-purpose, friends who say he is a creep and a cretin and all-around goon, friends who say the very fact that he could marry someone named Tiffany indicates that he's no prize.

It shakes me, their pending nuptials. I just don't get it. How he could have written me letters that said, "It is not that I can't envision my life without you. I have lived without you for twenty-six years (I don't need to envision it) and I know that in every particular, with you is better, realer, and more than without"; letters that begged me, in sticky-sweet-Valentine language, to "marry me, spend all your mornings and daydreams and nighttimes with me, be patient with me and help me love you better"; how he could have written me those letters, and then, six months later, marry Tiffany, the Pilates instructor with long legs.

And on top of that I am aghast and incredulous and just plain perplexed that we talked for half an hour yesterday morning and he didn't see fit to say, at the end of the conversation, after we had talked about Joanne Robinson and the Montgomery Improvement Association and why the Civil Rights movement began when it did, I am aghast that he didn't see fit to say, "So actually I'm really glad you

called, because there's something I need to tell you." Two sentences is all. "Tiffany and I are getting married next week. I thought I should tell you that."

In my generous moments I think, *Well, he knew I had a lot of work these next few days. He knew I had these major exams coming up. He thought this might upset me and he didn't want to screw up my exam-studying, and he thought he'd tell me after.* Most moments, though, I am not so charitable. In those other moments, I think, *His craven heart just couldn't summon the reserves.*

I am a mean and petty person, and a terrible Christian to boot, and I spend all weekend hoping that Steven and his bride will be miserable, that his brilliant dissertation will turn to straw, that his roof will leak and his car will die and he'll be stuck in a loveless marriage in that godforsaken town in Arkansas for the rest of his natural life. I hope, too, that she is not a Christian, that she'll lead him down a path of sin and restlessness, away from church and straight toward debauchery. I hope he forgets to baptize the baby all my friends imagine she's carrying.

I do have one friend who says something else, something other than the usual supportive Steven-is-a-cretin-and-I-am-very-angry-at-him cant. My friend Sam. He writes me a note. It says "Try to pray for Steven and his bride-to-be. Mouth the words even if all you feel is anger. Remember that the Spirit does our praying for us."

This advice at first sounds nauseatingly pious. But then somehow it doesn't. I am annoyed when I read his note, because I know he is right. It hadn't occurred to me to pray for them. But Sam is wise, and I pray for Steven and Tiffany, not so much for their sake, but for mine.

I pray the collect for families, which is nestled between the collect for the future of the human race and the collect for the care of children in my burgundy Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who settest the solitary in families: We commend to thy continual care the homes in which thy people dwell. Put far from them, we beseech thee, every root of bitterness, the desire of vainglory, and the pride of life. Fill them with faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness. Knit together in constant affection those who, in holy wedlock, have been made one flesh. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents: and so enkindle fervent charity among us all, that we may evermore be kindly affectioned one to another; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is hard to pray this for them. I am not so holy. I start to cry every time I get to the word *dwell*.

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GOD, I HAVE DECIDED, is not on call. That is what Randi means when she says I will have to pray every day, maybe twice. He is all powerful, so I suppose He could be on call if He wanted to be, and maybe, on rare occasion, He is. But in general, God doesn't just turn up when you page Him. He is right where He always is, and what regular, daily-maybe-twice prayer gives us is some more hint of just where that is, and how to get there, and one of the things liturgy gives us is a way to get there when all our other ways have given out.

When I am unable to pray, the prayer book gives me the words. Liturgical prayers, Edith Stein once wrote, "support the spirit and prescribe it to a fixed path."

Sometimes, I think I have come up with something poetic. One day, when I was full in the flush of agony about what I should do with my life, whether I would always be alone, whether I should become a nun, whether I should drop out of graduate school, and other high-

pitch anxieties, I heard, reverberating around my brain, "Go out to do the work I have given you to do." *The work I have given you to do. The work I have given you to do.*

*What an ingenious sentiment*, I thought. *I can't believe I dreamed that up. Maybe I should drop out of grad school and enter a poetry-writing Master's of Fine Arts program.* All day, all week I heard those words, *the work I have given you to do*, heard them, and was deeply consoled by them, sure that God had given me work to do, that He had sent me out into the world to do it, that He even woke me up too early in the morning to do that work, it was mine, I was consecrated to it, and it was given of Him. I heard those words all week, and I felt peaceful. Not only had God given me work to do, He had given me little poetic snatches of reassurance, too.

Then I got to church on Sunday. We opened with a hymn. The crucifer and the priest processed in. We prayed the collect of the day, we read three passages from Scripture. Milind gave a rousing sermon about forgiveness. We sang some more, we prayed the prayers for the people, and exchanged the peace. Milind consecrated the Eucharist and we received it. Then we said the prayer of thanksgiving. "We thank you for receiving us as living members of your Son." And there, in the middle of that prayer, the words God had given me all week: "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do." It was the liturgy that had lodged in my brain, words of the liturgy I barely noticed Sunday to Sunday when we said them, but here I was, noticing them raptly, in the middle of a weekday afternoon, when I needed them most.

Habit and obligation have both become bad words. That prayer becomes a habit must mean that it is impersonal, unfeeling, something of a rouse. If you do something because you are obligated to, it doesn't count, at least not as much as if you'd done it of your own free will; like the child who says thank you because his parents tell him to,

it doesn't count. Sometimes, often, prayer feels that way to me, impersonal and unfeeling and not something I've chosen to do. I wish it felt inspired and on fire and like a real, love-conversation all the time, or even just more of the time. But what I am learning the more I sit with liturgy is that what I feel happening bears little relation to what is actually happening. It is a great gift when God gives me a stirring, a feeling, a something-at-all in prayer. But work is being done whether I feel it or not. Sediment is being laid. Words of praise to God are becoming the most basic words in my head. They are becoming the fallback words, drowning out advertising jingles and professors' lectures and sometimes even my own interior monologue.

Maybe St. Paul was talking about liturgy when he encouraged us to pray without ceasing.



IN CHURCH, ON Sunday mornings, we say the Lord's Prayer right at the heart of the service, right near the very peak, in the middle of the Eucharist service. After Milind tells the story of Jesus at the Last Supper, after he consecrates the bread and wine, and right before he breaks the bread in two, we say the Lord's Prayer. Milind prefaces our unison with these words: "And now, as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we are bold to say . . ." In newer versions of the liturgy, the words are a little different—"As our Savior Christ has taught us, we now pray." But I like the old words better. You lose something crucial in those newer, easier words. You lose how bold it all is, to stand there and remember that God is our father, even though He art in heaven.

There are lots of ways to make the words hard to say, to jolt ourselves out of memorization and into the shock of it all. Christian writers of all stripes have made a mint with slender books devoted entirely to the Lord's Prayer, taking it one verse at a time, clause by clause, breath by breath, trying to breathe meaning back into something so

familiar and so old as to be outgrown, useless. I read many of those books when I first was baptized—not because I'd been saying the Our Father long enough to find it stale, but because reading about prayer was easier than actually praying. And I remember how stunned I was to read, in one of those books, that trespasses or sins—as in, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespassed against us"—was better rendered as "debts." "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

I still have trouble praying that. I still think Steven, if he were a gentleman, would send me \$800, for old plane tickets to Arkansas. I can forgive the tears and the fury and whatever it was he said one night that made me so mad I slammed a full wine stem down on his bookcase hard enough to shatter Chardonnay and glass all over my hand, but it's harder to forgive the debt.

In his book about religion in early modern Germany, David Sabeau tells the story of Lienhart Seitz, a seventy-year-old man from Holzheim. In 1587, the chief magistrate of Goppingen summoned Seitz. Seitz, his pastor said, never came to communion, and he refused to pray. The pastor had invited Seitz to special prayer tutorials, but each time Seitz set out for the parsonage, he wound up somewhere different: a friend's house, perhaps, or a pub. "There was no question," writes Sabeau, "but that the old man was mentally awake and alert; after all he was still able to make a sharp deal on a horse. It was just that he could not keep the Lord's Prayer in his head." When the magistrate threatened to send Seitz to jail for his failure to pray, Seitz promised he would visit the parson and try to learn the words. But Seitz was not optimistic: "No matter how many times he repeated the Lord's Prayer, he always got stuck at the passage where he was supposed to forgive his enemies."

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