



Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers



Citizens' Climate Lobby
Citizens' Climate Education



Prelude

I do not know much about God and prayer,
but I have come to believe, over the past
twenty-five years, that there's something to be
said about keeping prayer simple.

Help. Thanks. Wow.

Prelude

You may in fact be wondering what I even mean when I use the word “prayer.” It’s certainly not what TV Christians mean. It’s not for display purposes, like plastic sushi or neon. Prayer is private, even when we pray with others. It is communication for the heart to that which surpasses understanding.

Prelude

Let’s say it is communication from one’s heart to God. Or if that is too triggering or ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, the force that is beyond our comprehension, but that in our pain or supplication or relief we don’t need to define or have proof of any established contact with.

Prelude

Let's say it is what the Greeks called the Really Real, what lies within us, beyond the scrim of our values, positions, convictions, and wounds. Or let's say it is a cry from deep within to Life or Love, with capital L's.

Prelude

Nothing could matter less than what we call this force. I know some ironic believers who call God Howard, as in "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Howard be thy name." I called God Phil for a long time, after a Mexican bracelet maker promised to write "Phil 4:4-7" on my bracelet, Philippians 4:4-7 being my favorite passage of Scripture, but got only as far as "Phil" before having to dismantle his booth.

Phil is a great name for God.

Prelude

My friend Robyn calls God “the Grandmothers.” The Deteriorata, a parody of the Desiderata, counsels us, “Therefore, make peace with your god, / Whatever you conceive him to be- / Hairy thunderer, or cosmic muffin.”

Prelude

Let’s not get bogged down on whom or what we pray to. Let’s just say prayer is communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or Goodness, or Howard; to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something unimaginably big, and not us.

Prelude

We could call this force Not Me, and Not Preachers Onstage with a Choir of 800. Or for convenience we could just say “God.”

Prelude

Some of you were taught to pray at bedtime with your parents, and when I spent the night at your houses, I heard all of you saying these terrifying words: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake...”

Prelude

Wait, *what?* What did you say? I could die in my *sleep?* I'm only seven years old....

"I pray the Lord my soul to take."

That so, so did not work for me, especially in the dark in a strange home. Don't be taking my soul. You leave my soul right here, in my fifty-pound body. Help.

Prelude

Sometimes the first time we pray, we cry out in the deepest desperation, "God help me." This is a great prayer, as we are then at our absolutely most degraded and isolated, which means we are nice and juicy with the consequences of our best thinking and are thus possibly teachable.

Prelude

Or I might be in one of my dangerously good moods and say casually: “Hey, hi, Person. Me again. The princess. Thank you for my sobriety, my grandson, my flowering pear tree.”

Prelude

Or you might shout at the top of your lungs or whisper into your sleeve, “I hate you, God.” That is a prayer, too, because it is real, it is truth, and maybe it is the first sincere thought you’ve had in months.

Prelude

Some of us have cavernous vibrations inside us when we communicate with God. Others are more rational and less messy in our spiritual sense of reality, in our petitions and gratitude and expressions of pain or anger or desolation or praise. Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence.

Prelude

We can pray for things ("Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz"). We can pray for people ("Please heal Martin's cancer." "Please help me not be such an asshole"). We may pray for things that would destroy us; as Teresa of Ávila said, "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones."

Prelude

We can pray for a shot at having a life in which we are present and awake and paying attention and being kind to ourselves. We can pray, “Hello? Is there anyone out there?” We can pray, “Am I too far gone, or can you help me get out of my isolated self-obsession?” We can say anything to God. It’s all prayer.

Prelude

Prayer can be motions and stillness and energy- all at the same time. It begins with stopping in our tracks, or with our backs against the wall, or when we are going under the waves, or when we are just so sick and tired of being psychically sick and tired that we surrender, or at least we finally stop running away and at long last walk or lurch or crawl toward something. Or maybe, miraculously, we just release our grip slightly.

Prelude

Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union, even if we are bitter or insane or broken. (In fact, these are probably the best possible conditions under which to pray.)

Prelude

Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite may be true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such miserable shape.

Prelude

But in any case, we are making contact with something unseen, way bigger than we could ever imagine in our wildest dreams, even if we are the most brilliant, open-minded scientists and physicists of our generation. It is something we might dare to call divine intelligence or love energy (if there were no chance that anyone would ever find out about this).

Prelude

Prayer is us- humans merely being, as e. e. cummings put it- reaching out to something having to do with the eternal, with vitality, intelligence, kindness, even when we are at our most utterly doomed and skeptical. God can handle honesty, and prayer begins an honest conversation.

Prelude

My belief is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said.

Prelude

If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would also almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real- really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table.

Prelude

So prayer is our sometimes real selves
trying to communicate with the Real, with
Truth, with the Light.

Prelude

It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be
found by a light and warmth in the world,
instead of darkness and cold. Even
mushrooms respond to light- I suppose they
blink their mushroomy little eyes, like the rest
of us.

Prelude

Light reveals us to ourselves, which is not always so great if you find yourself in a big disgusting mess, possibly of your own creation. But like sunflowers we turn toward the light.

Prelude

Light warms, and in most cases it draws us to itself. And in this light, we can see beyond shadow and illusion to something beyond our modest receptors, to what is way beyond us, and deep inside.

Prelude

This is all hard to articulate, because it is so real, so huge, beyond mystery. Rumi said that all words are fingers pointing to the moon, and we think the words are the moon. But because of the light, the light of love, the energy and motion that have called us to prayer, bits of this deeper reality are perceivable, and little bits of it will have to do.

Prelude

My three prayers are variations on Help, Thanks, Wow. That's all I ever need, besides the silence, the pain, and the pause sufficient for me to stop, close my eyes, and turn inward.