

### **Writing Humble: The Story as Prayer**

My favourite kind of prayer as a child was praying in tongues, because I didn't have to figure out what words to use. I just opened my mouth and let the sounds spill out, felt my tongue moving with strange facility, producing the sibilants and fricatives of a foreign language. I didn't worry that I was saying the wrong thing, I just let the noise flow like liquid. It wasn't French or German or any language I recognized, so I imagined that my tongue was something spoken by an Amazon tribe or an African people as yet undiscovered by anthropologists. God understood what I said, even if I didn't. But I was intensely curious. What was I saying? Was it exquisite poetry, heavenly angel songs? Or was it the same old stuff I prayed in English?

I loved praying in tongues because I was terrible at any other kind of prayer. One year my whole family got up at six a.m. to do devotions together. We would take turns reading Psalms and Proverbs, searching for wisdom and recording it in our spiral notebooks. Then we would write down all our prayer requests and parcel them out to various supplicants. My trick was to get my assigned prayers over with first, so that when I fell asleep afterwards, lulled by the subdued voices of my mother and father and sister, I probably wouldn't get caught.

When I was older, I was sent to my room to pray through a complicated twelve-step cycle of prayer, where 5 minutes for each step equaled 1 hour. The timing involved a distracting relationship with my watch, wherein I spent more time peeking at the minute hand and calculating intervals than I did actually praying. That's if I managed to stay on my knees and didn't succumb to the temptation of lying on my bed. Next to the prayer wheel diagram pasted in my Bible was the prescient admonition "Jesus asked His sleepy disciples, 'Could ye not watch with me one hour?'" This method turned prayer into a simple matter of stamina—when I did manage to finish successfully, I felt more like I had just completed a 10K race, not an hour in the presence of God.

For a while in university I tried writing my prayers, using a handy acronym—ACTS. Every day I recorded a paragraph each for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. I lasted a month or so, but finally I couldn't think of what to say that was interesting enough to keep my attention. Over and over it was—Thank you for this, Please help me with that, Forgive me for the other thing. I didn't talk to anyone else that repetitively. Finally I gave up altogether on personal prayer, and concentrated on Bible reading instead, which I found much more stimulating.

Then one day last year I came across a useful revelation in a book called *Holy Writ: A Writer Reflects on Creation and Inspiration*. The author, K.D. Miller, is a reluctant Anglican, and the book explores how her writing and her spirituality intersect. Here is the sentence that I grabbed hold of so gleefully: "Writing stories is the way I pray."

I read this and thought, Terrific! Now I'm totally off the hook. I have an excuse for not kneeling by my bed and mouthing words every night. If anyone asks me about my prayer life, I can say, "Actually, writing stories is the way I pray." It sounded so mystical and impressive. I was already writing stories, and now I had the prayer thing covered too.

Then, during an episode of depression this summer, I turned to my faith for support and found myself something of a stranger there. "Who is God again?" I asked myself. "What is prayer supposed to be? I don't remember." The pessimism and hopelessness of my depression made me believe that I had never had a connection with God, that I had never truly prayed in my life, and I despaired.

Then my mind turned to this phrase, "Writing stories is the way I pray," and I began to think of my book, *Brick and Mortar*. I wrote the nine stories in that collection about the members of a Presbyterian church congregation in Kingston, Ontario, my hometown. And slowly I saw how those stories were and are still prayers of mine. I thought of the many characters, Helen Bentler and Molly Ascott and Elizabeth Newcomb, who respond to humbling events by recognizing their brokenness, letting God transform them, and reaching out to others in community. This revelation was the beginning of my journey out of depression, because it assured me that God was real and important in my life. Thank God these prayers were written down in the form of stories, to remind me that my art, and therefore my being, were suffused with God's presence and my response to Him.

I'll read an excerpt from *Brick and Mortar*, and you can decide for yourself whether you think this story is a kind of prayer.

[Excerpt from "Vestments"]

Lately I've been stuck on the question of whether writing is solely *like* prayer, or whether writing actually *is* prayer, not a metaphor but the actual act. Perhaps the distinction doesn't really matter. Perhaps it's different for every writer—some, particularly those who don't believe in prayer, or a Higher Power, might resent the equation of their art to a religious practice. For myself, I'm most interested in the idea that writing *is* prayer—it strengthens the connection between my writing, one of the most important and mysterious things in my life, and my faith, also important and mysterious. Then whatever I learn about prayer, I can use to understand my writing better, and vice versa.

So when I talk to you about prayer and writing, I am talking about two different things, and also about the same thing.

For me, writing and prayer begin with desire, a desire that is slippery and paradoxical. Ask me what I want most in life, and I will probably say that I want to know God better, and I want to write stories. But look at the way I spend a particular day, and you will find a strong resistance to both of these undertakings. As I've mentioned, I don't even have a regular traditional observance of prayer. I barely know what it means to pray. And I can find dozens of things that I would rather do in a morning instead of writing. I believe my resistance to these two activities comes from the same place.

Henri Nouwen's writings on prayer are collected in a book titled *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*. Here Nouwen writes: "Prayer is the act by which we divest ourselves of all false belongings and become free to belong to God and God alone. This explains why, although we often feel a real desire to pray, we experience at the same time a strong resistance. We want to move closer to God, the source and goal of our existence, but at the same time we realize that the closer we come to God the stronger will be God's demand to let go of the many 'safe' structures we have built around ourselves. Prayer is such a radical act because it requires us to criticize our whole way of being in the world, to lay down our old selves and accept our new self, which is Christ" (39).

Writing also demands that we let go of safe structures. Each time we sit down, we must reinvent the rules, we cannot just follow the patterns that have worked in the past, because they are unique for every poem, or story, or novel. We must rummage around inside ourselves and bring up whatever truth we find there, even when it is dangerous or transgressive or embarrassing. I am working on a story right now that ends with a devastating act of violence, something I never thought I could conceive of, let alone record on the page and show to others. That story is so true! But I wept the entire time I was writing it, because what I wrote also felt very dangerous.

Then I have days when writing just seems too difficult—I would rather read a book or clean the bathroom or reorganize my file drawer. Why, I ask myself, do I pursue such a taxing vocation?

A friend, recently converted to Judaism, sent me some quotations from Abraham Heschel on prayer. This passage particularly applies here: "We do not refuse to pray. We merely feel that our tongues are tied, our minds inert, our inner vision dim, when we are about to enter the door that leads to prayer. We do not refuse to pray; we abstain from it. We ring the hollow bell of selfishness rather than absorb the stillness that surrounds the world, hovering over all the restlessness and fear of life--the secret stillness that precedes our birth and succeeds our death. ... We dwell on the edge of mystery and ignore it, wasting our souls, risking our stake in God. We constantly pour our inner light away from Him, setting up the thick screen of self between Him and us, adding more shadows to the darkness that already hovers between Him and our wayward reason."

And doesn't this hold true for writing as well? Listen: "We do not refuse to write. We merely feel that our tongues are tied, our minds inert, our inner vision dim, when we are about to enter the door that leads to the typewriter. We do not refuse to write; we abstain from it. We ring the hollow bell of selfishness rather than absorb the stillness that surrounds the world."

Writing is a practice that, like prayer, requires humility to absorb that stillness, to face the blank page, or the silence of heaven. These voids can never be mastered or controlled. I am a person who likes to think there's nothing I can't do, armed with a detailed to-do list and enough will power. But my creative side has made it clear that she does not respond well to sheer force and bullying. Pushing harder will not entice her to produce more.

I once sat on my couch for two days straight, unable to move out of fear and exhaustion at the thought of facing my short story collection. My editor told me that the new drafts were good, but something vital was still missing. The problem was, I didn't know what was missing; I didn't know how to fix the stories. I couldn't feed them into a machine to analyze what was lacking. I was forced to face my helplessness, and it paralyzed me.

When I finally got off the couch and back to the computer, I felt that I was recovering from an illness. The writing continued to go badly—I hated every page I had written and could hardly keep myself in my chair. But the deadline forced me on and each week was a little easier than the last. Finally I started throwing out entire drafts of stories and starting over, keeping only the characters and premise. To this day I still can't say exactly what vital something was missing—a sense of play? A willingness to relinquish control? But somehow by trudging humbly through the revisions I seem to have made better stories.

Most writers at some time face the question, "Who is my audience? Who do I write for?" Some have an ideal reader in mind, either real or imagined; others write for themselves, the books they wanted to read but couldn't find. I'm starting to wonder whether I haven't been writing for God all along, telling Him my secrets, trying to make Him laugh. He is, I believe, an attentive reader, a generous critic, a most appreciative and forgiving audience. With that understanding, stories as prayers make perfect sense. I write stories for God to read.

(The only drawback is that God doesn't seem interested in *buying* any of my books ...)

I'll finish with one more story/prayer. "The Beckoning Door" is about a teenager who gets fed up with caring for her siblings at the cottage, and secretly hitches a ride into town to see her mother who is working there. The story is also about my longing to be in the presence of God, and my resentment at the drudgery (often of my own choosing) that keeps me away.

[Read "The Beckoning Door"]