



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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... pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve.
James 5: 16

Intercede, Part 1

She kept a little notebook and had it open when she came up to me. “I wanted to ask how things are going for your daughters. I have been praying for them.” More frail each time I saw her, Sarah spoke slowly, halting to retrieve words from the pauses. She was the one who saved soup can labels for the mission, picked up trash around the church, went on the CROP walk in her eighties, and volunteered to teach Sunday school when no one else would. She brought home the prayer list in the Sunday bulletin and faithfully prayed for each concern. Sarah was familiar with the wild grief, suffocating darkness, and helplessness that motivates people to ask for prayer. She knew that she was living proof of the difference prayer could make in a person’s life.

A woman calls me up from Leysdown-on-Sea in England. She is homebound by illness and has questions about God and faith. I listen and we pray.

John was parked alongside the highway outside San Antonio, when he called. “Do you pray for people?” he asked and told me his story. He needed money to go visit his dying daughter, though he had not called the number he found on my website looking for money, advice, or sympathy. He wanted prayer and a person who would lend him their faith and their relationship with God.

He needed a person to cradle his longing heart to be with his sick daughter under their arm like a football player carrying the ball. He needed someone stronger than he to plow through the hulking doubts, fears, and hopelessness, which had tackled, knocked the breath out of him, and left him dazed and aching on the side of this road.

As John and I talked, we discovered that

twenty five years ago he had lived a few blocks from where I live. He shared his memories of Topeka. A few hours after we prayed, John sent me photos of his daughter and family.

I am still praying. I do not know if he got to see his daughter, if his wife found treatment for her cancer, or if he found a job. That is often the case, I imagine, with intercessors, who stand briefly in the gaps of faith and hope in other people's lives. We do not always know the outcome of our prayer.

But Sarah was thorough and persistent. She would come back to me over and over to check if she needed to fine-tune her prayers. I believe that God and the angels loved Sarah a whole bunch and liked to point her out as one of God's finest.

Maybe you know what it is like to be John – that desperate and alone, that you find a website where someone will pray for you. You scratch the phone number on a piece of paper. Then out driving on a road to nowhere, you pull your car onto the shoulder, and call a stranger to pour out your heart. You tell things you have not told anyone else, things you are ashamed of or fear. It all comes out in your parked car under the wide skies with the wind bowing the weeds over in the ditch, and the hawk

gliding above.

Monique from Pretoria, South Africa left her message on The Sanctuary Foundation Facebook Page:

MAY I ASK FOR URGENT PRAYER, I beg you please. I am possibly being retrenched tomorrow. (they said its final they want to close the doors) We can't pay rent, we can't buy food - I can't find other job - PLEASE MAY ASK FOR PRAYER! For God to make a way where there is no way! PLEASE!

I learn that Monique is a pretty young woman, recently engaged. I send her a prayer. This is her response:

Thank you soooo much!!!! THANK YOU!!!! I believe in prayer! THANK YOU SO MUCH!!!! please keep me in your prayers. THANK YOU SO MUCH!
sorry for all the thank you's. I dont even see I am doing it - my mind is just blank now! I appreciate this more than you will ever know

Will you please take a moment right now and pray for Monique and all others without employment?

Thanks. Now, let us our shift point of view from persons in need of prayer to peek in at some people praying.

The clock showed the time. The amen had been spoken. The session was over. He had places to go, errands, appointments, but she sat silent and still. Was the woman okay? Should he say anything? Was she asleep? He felt a tiny twinge of anxiety poke at the peace he felt. At the same time a gentle tug took hold of his heart, like an insistent child, like a lover unwilling to let go. What was going on here anyway?

Finally she stirred, shifted in the rocking chair, and sighed, “Did you think that would never end?” She smiles to herself as she walks to her calendar to schedule the next visit. She has one visitor, who asks with mock impatience, when she finally lifts her head and opens her eyes, “Well are you done?” The two laugh at this mystery of praying hearts and each other’s quirkiness.

I, the spiritual companion/pastor/guide, feel apologetic when this happens, which is with most every person I pray with. After listening to the stories – those winding tales of suffering, betrayal, violence, defeat, yearning, and celebration – we offer the thanksgivings, the praise, intercessions, confessions, petitions, and say amen. The prayer is over.

But I can’t stop praying.

Are we not done now? My internal experience is that while I may feel finished, God is not. Perhaps from God’s perspective things are just getting warmed up. We have taken off our masks and revealed our vulnerability. Now empty and open, we may discover God preparing to respond within us.

An irresistible energy like a huge magnet draws me toward itself into the mystery of God’s being. God is communicating, using our consciousness and being to enter into the sea of the world’s suffering through our faith. God is carving out canyons of compassion within us to carry rivers of mercy to the vast network of relationships we belong to throughout time and space.

Don’t break the connection. The effort of turning my focus away from God, of severing that grip on my being is great and seems abrupt and somehow brutal that I almost cannot bear to do it.

The doorbell will be ringing soon. The person before me needs to go. So I move on. Yet throughout the day and into the night I feel that humming wire, a sizzling stream of *I know not what to call it*, borrowing my consciousness

and willingness as a narrow conduit for Mercy in ways and in realms I do not comprehend.

I am sure that I am not alone in this experience. I venture to say it is almost universal, unless the prayer comes right before Thanksgiving dinner, or has been one of those agenda driven prayers with sorties into political commentary, a pretentious tone, and borne on a long, hot wind.

I believe many of us feel this great yearning of the Spirit reaching toward God through our being. We may not speak of it or have words to describe it, but it is there, nonetheless, drawing hearts toward the suffering among us with love and compassion, bowing heads over in reverence, bending knees in humility and beseeching. In such moments we tap into the eager groaning of the Holy Spirit laboring within us to bring forth new life.

A bit of my story

This relationship with Redeeming Love has been with me as long as I remember. I have ignored it often, even fled from it through the years. It all seemed too much, beyond my control and understanding – this Holiness leaning down upon us, using us to deliver divine mercy, justice, and love

into the world.

However after a spiritual awakening in my early thirties, I felt compelled to pray more and more for great numbers of people. A consequence of any awakening to God will include an outflowing of love and concern for others, which takes its form in prayer, as well as service to them. Reeling with the Holy Spirit, I made my way to seminary when I was thirty three. There in a class on spiritual practices I learned about making mandalas, circular drawings, as a form of image prayer.

It was a relief and freeing to leave words behind. I drew circles on big sheets of newsprint, dipped a brush in tempera paint and swirled and swooped and slopped my prayers across the paper in bold swipes. Later I made smaller versions with free form designs and colored pencils in a journal. Each mandala held particular groups of people and intentions – family, work, friends, world events – that I felt compelled to pray for. Then when I turned to prayer, I could look at the page, see the list of names, and focus on the image I had made. I was able to relax more into the prayer then. It was less effortful and more a simple offering of these to God in faith.

Preparing for Intercession

As I understand the process of intercessory prayer, we need first to receive into ourselves the power of God's love and allow it to collect and gather in all the crannies of our being. For adults creating space within ourselves for Christ usually calls for some cleaning out or purgation, as classical spirituality describes the early stages of prayer. Here one might describe spiritual development as a kind of *Holy Roter-Rooter* job. There are periods when our prayer consists of the soul reaming work of the Spirit exposing and breaking up clotted wads of the roots of bitterness, the hard residue of resentment, and the thick sludge of self-doubt.

Jesus is a plumber, like the fellow in my neighbor's back yard, moving his backhoe onto your lawn, digging a trench, pulling up crumbling clay pipes and knotted tree roots in order to lay new drains. I do not think it is any accident that my neighbor is a pentecostal intercessor. We all need clear plumbing to do that kind of work.

In recent months I have felt called to spend more time in intercessory, focused prayer. I decided to write this issue of *Holy Ground* about intercession. So when my neighbor

invited me to join an intercessory prayer gathering at her home one evening, I accepted her invitation. The two of us do not discuss politics or church doctrine. We are respectful of our differences and have no need to make the other see as we do. Still as I head out the door, I ask God, "Why am I going to this?"

"For instruction," came the immediate response. What? Me? Instructed?! Hrumph! Yes. I am that arrogant.

"Okay doke," I said. "Instruct me." And I walked across the street to learn what I could.

I was the only Presbyterian contemplative type in the group of women invited. Yes, I can speak in tongues, but rarely feel called to do so. And I can speak Pentecostal enough to translate my Presbyterian dialect for them. The women are members of a church which I feel I have little in common with – except – for God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, 2000 years of history, literature, art, music, wars, and the mystery of healing love.

We received brief instruction on how we should pray, as taught by my neighbor's teacher at Oral Roberts Bible College, and a list of concerns.

We were invited to move about the house and outside to find a space for our individual interceding. We took our Bibles and a compilation of the prayers in Ephesians and planned to come back together in forty five minutes.

Sitting on the porch with another lady, I watched the wind blow through the trees, wildly bending and shaking their branches like women drying their hair. I opened my Bible to Psalm 103: Bless the Lord oh my soul!

Inside the house some were speaking in tongues, moving about, lifting hands, praying the Ephesians prayers, each in her own way. I leaned into the silence and waited. Slowly a particular insight emerged about the individual situations and a little more focus and direction for my prayer. The time had allowed me to go beneath my quick solutions and preferences to see more deeply into what might have been the clog blocking the flow of grace into these lives.

That evening and my fellowship with these sisters in Christ was a gift to me. The next day I made a list in my journal of four instructions I received. Number two was to allow myself to be ministered to through their prayers for me.

Pray in community

Here is a rule of thumb I follow. If I am going to be engaging in prayer for others, I need people who are praying for me. We pray in, with, and through the Body of Christ, the community of faith and the communion of the saints. I believe being a lone ranger in intercessory prayer can be foolhardy without being anchored in a larger faith community. Even most hermits maintain some relationship to a faith tradition beyond their hermitage.

Contemplative prayer will reveal our own sewage, but intercessory prayer opens us to the darkness and tangled generational disease and sin of others. Without a community and deep roots in a faith tradition one may easily get enmeshed, sucked in, infected, and overcome.

Religious scholar and philosopher, Baron von Hugel wrote these words to his niece:

I wonder whether 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 into the very heart of our infirmities.

Once one of my classmates asked the professor, “When I pray for others I

begin to feel their pain. Is there any way to avoid it?" Our teacher thought for a moment and replied, "No." St. Paul tells Timothy that suffering is a consequence of his service to the gospel:

For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do.

(2 Tim 1: 11-12)

It was such awareness of the costs of vulnerable involvement with others that led Evelyn Underhill to write to Von Hugel, who was her spiritual director, that she did not think she was strong enough yet for intercessory prayer. He assured her that when the time came, she would know it.

Has your time come? We will continue this exploration of intercessory prayer in the next issue of Holy Ground. I would love to hear about your thoughts and experiences. Email, post to the Sanctuary Facebook Page, or give me a call.

My heart is full of love for you all,

Loretta F. Ross

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

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*I*ntercession is spiritual defiance of what is, in the name of what God has promised. History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being.

Walter Wink



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