Concerning Prayer

a book offering

Carole R. Fontaine
Resident Artist

People ask me sometimes, 'What do you do? Exactly?'

Why ever should someone ask that?—what I do is based on what my body can tolerate, yearn for, accomplish, endure....

It might be totally different for you....

But still, are there things I can

say that might be of use? I think so....

This is my gift to you and all who seek....

Things Change

What I do now is **not** *what I did as a beginner. It is important for beginners to set up a clear program of practice and keep to it, for at least six months. You must clear your con-sciousness and meditate for at least 20 minutes, twice a day, for six months, before you will see some measurable results in 'alpha-spreading' and 'alpha-integration'. That is, by practicing contemplative prayer, you may expect first to have the*

brain waves you make spread over your whole neo-cortext (alpha spreading). Keep practicing and eventually you will have those brain waves reach down into your more primitive parts of the brain (cortex and limbic system)-this is called 'alpha integration'.

At this point, you may select what kind of brain waves you want to make, for different purposes. Deepest healing and relaxation are associated with theta waves (shamanic trance), or delta waves (yogi practice that controls autonomic body functions).

When you bless a thing, celebrate communion, stand at a bedside,

you will want to be in alpha state; for great acts of healing and prayer, theta is best-but you also want a com-munity around you who will take care of your body while you are traveling in spirit, and you need to have a clear practice that allows you to find your way back (a drumbeat, for example; a chant, a song).

In all ancient cultures, non-ordinary consciousness was considered natural and basic; they would think we are the weird ones!

Once you achieve control over your consciousness, then it's up to you: you only have two obligations:

1. you must train one other person to do what you do, so the power is passed to the next generation, and

2., do what you will, as long as none is harmed!

Reading the Classics

There really is no substitute for knowing that you are not alone in your search, your difficulties, your desire to shorten the way...

You must start within your own tradition —and that means with the spiritual traditions of the peoples and lands from which you came. If you cannot 'read' Nature for signs of Presence, there's no point in looking to

words, which are, after all, only convenient abstractions of the things we really wish to speak of...

Explore your spiritual heritage. It may be from Africa or Asia, from the Southern Hemisphere, or Northern Europe. Go, find yourself, and see what your ancestors did. Start your journey there.

If you are a Christian, know that there is a rich treasure chest of knowledge, gained by other seekers, just waiting to assist you...

My favorites are all mostly in the apophatic (image-less) mystical traditions of the Carmelites, the Cistercians, the Franciscans, and

the odd Quaker or Reformer.

Some titles are:

The Cloud of Unknowing

The Philokalia

The Way of the Pilgrim

Practicing the Presence of God

St. John of the Cross, especially his *Living Flame of Love* and *Spiritual Canticle*, which is based on the Song of Songs

Theresa of Avila,
The Interior Castle

For the heritage of northern peoples, I read and practice sets

of prayers from Celtic Christianity, a version which honors Nature as a genuine expression of God's Presence. This kind of spiritual practice marks the seasons, the waxing and waning of light and dark, and seeks balance through the harmony of savoring the ever-present blessings of life....

'Visual Prayers' were made by Irish and Scotch monks when they illuminated The Book of Kells and The Lindisfarne Gospels. I keep facsimiles of these and other sacred manuscripts around me and use them for prayer images right before retiring.

I say my prayers, like any other person of faith. My prayers are

sometimes in Hebrew, sometimes in English, sometimes poems, sometimes drawings. Whatever they are, they are always luminous, and they seek the light from which they came.

Caitlin Matthews is an author whose little prayerbooks and Celtic dictionaries explore the deep tradition of the faith of the British Isles-from whence some of my people came, once upon a time.

I use her 'Celtic Devotional: Daily Prayers and Blessings' to follow the seasons as they come and go, and for special occasions. Her 'Celtic Book of Days' is useful for planning group and theme-based gatherings.

J. Phillip Newell has written a book of prayers that stays with me as I breath through the day, and as I end each day. It is called 'Celtic Benediction: Morning and Evening Prayers'.

Using the Psalms, Celtic manuscripts for imagery, and a deeply felt language of wonder, he invites the user throughout the book to make prayer a natural act with every breath:

Be still and aware
of God's Presence
within
and all around,

he begins each meditation. A simple duty of compassion is at the heart of each prayer:

Pray for the Life of the World

These are prayers that seem to exhale themselves, and they draw in a sense of connection with the world around the one who prays them.

Before I speak or take up some great (or stressful) endeavor, I say one of a few things:

'May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of my
heart
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord,
my strength
and my redeemer'

or

'May all I say

and all I do
be acceptable to
thee,
God within me,
God around me,
Maker of the Trees'

Sometimes I remind myself,
'Unless the Lord
would build a house,
the Builders build in vain', and I
remember that it is not all up to
me, or my performance in
difficult situations.

When vicious things have
occurred in space I inhabit, I
walk to each threshold, in a
counter-clockwise circle, saying:

Love lives here!
Health lives here!

Wealth lives here!
Hope lives here!

When I walk, I chant Psalm 121 in
Hebrew...

Or I say, on the pattern of 'inhale-
hold-exhale-hold',

Christ is life.
Christ is rhythm
Christ is Love Again!

(This is especially nice with
children, who get weirded out
when you have them do the
'confession of faith': they don't
want (or need) to reflect on Jesus'
death just yet!)

Sometimes when I walk and use
breath to pace the prayer, I use

the Hebrew Prayer that came into my mind after reading a prayer that used this form of address for the Shekinah (the female in-dwelling presence of the Hebrew god):

'Rechem Ha-Olam,
Alaynu Binah
Alaynu Hokmah
Alaynu Da'at-haQodeshah!
Itanu, Emmanu,
Rechem Ha-Olam'

(Womb of the Universe,
Upon us be insight,
Upon us be Wisdom,
Upon us be knowledge
of the Holy One.
Be with us,
Our Mother,

Womb of the Universe!')

And sometimes I use the inclusive blessing by the Sudbury Temple Beth-el,

'Holy One of Blessing,
your presence fills the Universe'

It grew a second verse in praying it:

Holy One of Blessing,
your presence fills the universe!
Holy One of Blessing,
let your presence fill our hearts!

For the benediction in the Book of Numbers, chapter six, I translate inclusively:

'May the Lord bless you and keep watch over you!
May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you,
May the Lord turn to you,
and give you peace!'

On days full of terror and pain, in nights driven by despair, I keep to the rule of the Rabbis: let those who love God say One Hundred Blessings whenever they may!

I walk around, turning everything in sight into cause for blessing— because the Torah says that the Dead do not praise YHWH:

Blessed art thou, O Lord of the Universe, who has created this cat!

Blessed art thou, O Lord of the Universe, who has set this task before me!

Bless art thou, O Lord of the Universe, who has allowed this car to start!...

And so on, even unto the one hundredth blessing.

I read all the Jewish classics, to remind myself that I am not the only one who has suffered. I confess that in the small reaches of the night, I am more apt to turn to these prayers than to others, for they do not shy away from expressing pain or deep wounding, anger or confusion. They do not ask me to be more than I am at that moment.

Psalm 42 is my psalm, but Psalms 119 and 104 are dear as well.

In the end, a life of prayer can only be cultivated by your intention and your work at it.

Pray without ceasing!
Rejoice like crazy!

It is one of the duties of life...

A Most Esteemed and Beneficent Professor, for her Torah students
Newton, 2003

More Resources

Kenneth Leech,
Experiencing God;
True Prayer

Marcia Falk, A Book of Blessings

Morton Kelsey,
The Other Side of Silence

Roland Murphy,
Experiencing the Biblical Tradition

Earth Prayers

The Book of Common Prayer

Meister Eckhardt,
The Little Book of Divine Comfort

A Greenheart Book