

Thoughts and Prayers

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It is often said that people gravitate towards religion in crisis, but I experienced something close to the reverse: the time in my life when I found it hardest to pray, the time I felt furthest from God, was when my then-husband Ben had cancer. I knew that all I would do, if I prayed, would be to say, “Please let him live! Please do this for me! Please do this for our children! Please please please!” And I didn’t want to beg.

I was not always above begging. The first prayers I can distinctly remember were pleas: I was about nine, my mother had just told me my grandfather died, and I prayed to God to make what she said false. My grandfather was the only person in the world who understood me: he taught me how to play cards and at the very same time—in the very same sitting—how to cheat at them. With him dead, I would be alone, so he *couldn’t* be dead.

I begged God then—but as an adult, I refuse to beg God. As I see it, God already knows what I want, and doesn’t need my advice on how to run the universe. They¹ shouldn’t intervene in the world at my behest, so I shouldn’t ask Them to do so.

And yet, I do believe in prayer—and specifically, in prayer that communicates my yearnings to God. My fear, when Ben was diagnosed, was that I would slip from telling God what I *wished* and *longed for* to telling Them what I *wanted* and *asked* for. Now you might wonder how much logical space there really is here: it is natural to construe a statement such as “Dear God, if only...” as either information about what I want or a request to bring that thing about. But I believe that if those were our only options, such prayers would be theologically problematic—God does not need our input—and therefore blasphemous.

This problem actually generalizes outside the theological context: consider the characteristic missteps we make when someone communicates their suffering to us. We offer advice we weren’t asked for, reassurance we have no business providing, and sometimes we even spew psychological diagnoses we have no competence to issue. My personal pet peeve is the listener who responds with conspicuous displays of empathy—as though she could reduce my sadness by feeling some of it herself.

These mistakes are understandable, of course: as a listener, it can be hard to know what you are supposed to be *doing*. If you are not there to intervene with helpful suggestions, or to correct my understanding of the situation, or to alleviate my pain with your empathetic attentiveness, then your role in the conversation is unclear. The problem of prayer is a special case of a more general problem about the point of listening.



When we are trying to figure out “the point” of any activity, our instinct is to consider what might happen *after* it. In this case, that is a mistake. We should be

¹ Throughout this essay, I use “they/them” as a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to God, because I do not believe that God has a gender.

thinking prequel, not sequel. What was I up to *before* I started talking? Inevitably, the answer is: thinking.

Since the time of Aristotle, philosophers have distinguished between theoretical reasoning, which ends in understanding, and practical reasoning, which ends in action. Those two kinds of thinking each contain a natural limit: when I've solved the (theoretical or practical) problem, I've completed that "bout" of thinking. I know whatever it was I needed to know; I've done whatever it was I needed to do.

But—and this is a point philosophers have been less ready to acknowledge—some of the thinking we do slips through the fingers of the practical/theoretical dichotomy. Contemplating the prospect of a loss I can do nothing to avert, my mind terrifies itself with worst-case scenarios, entertains hopeless counterfactuals, haunts itself with regrets and injures itself doubly and triply by reopening old wounds.

Strong emotion sets the mental apparatus into restless motion—even when there isn't any accomplishable task for it to perform. The fact that I can't improve the situation, and that I already understand it, doesn't stop me from reflecting, assessing, cycling back: fruitless, restless mental yearning. What I am looking for is a way to bring this train of thought to a close. And that is where communication comes in.

When I tell God what I wish or yearn or long for, I convert my fear, guilt, sadness and longing into a communicative act. God allows me this mode of self-expression precisely by not being in the business of "granting" my wishes. The knowledge that God will always do whatever They know to be best creates a safe communicative space: I can speak freely, since I am assured that my words will not be converted into a request. The good (human) listener achieves the same result by refraining from interventionist benefaction: the knowledge that she is not set on solving my problems or even learning more about them is a license to share precisely those unproductive and uninformative mental processes I most need her help with reining in.

But why does being listened to calm the mind? Exporting your thoughts means organizing them: finding the main point, concentrating your attention there, taking the steps to work your way to it. Language itself—with its sounds, words, phrases and sentences—is an architectonic miracle. If you tell someone the story of your day, you will suddenly find it has a beginning, a middle and an end; likewise, the act of saying the wish out loud turns the activity of wishing from directionless yearning into something with stages, something completable.

If I want you to access my unproductive and uninformative thoughts, I must elevate them to articulacy. The result is that I elevate myself as well: I become ordered by the order I must give my thoughts so as to present them to you. I now find I know just what I wish for, what I regret, what hurts, what matters. And these verbs represent actions I have performed, tasks that are completed: I have wished, I have regretted, I have felt the pains, I have attended to what matters. I can be done, at least for now.

Talking to yourself is no substitute: you stop in the middle of a sentence and feel no need to continue, because it's no surprise to you what you will say next. You could stop at any point, and that means there's no reason to start, nothing to get you moving.

As an analogy, you might think about trying to motivate yourself to get all dressed up when you have no place to go—especially if you are, to begin with, down in the dumps. Ordering thoughts is such hard work, it takes effort to rise to the occasion, and being listened to by someone who can really listen is precisely the occasion worth rising to.



You might wonder how I know that God is listening. In several of his movies, most notably *Winter Light*, Ingmar Bergman laments “the silence of God”—the fact that God gives no signs of response to our prayers and entreaties.

In fact, I do not always feel heard by God. On the other hand, I do not always feel heard by you, either. I’ll admit that I, personally, don’t make things easy for the would-be attentive listener: displays of empathy tend to distract me from what I was trying to say; I find attentive gestures such as nods and listening noises likewise irritating; worst of all is when someone tries to—as I see it, intrusively and creepily—maintain constant eye contact. Those may be idiosyncrasies of my own, but they point in the direction of the general problem that proving you are listening has little to do with actually listening. It is very hard to tell whether one is being listened to, given that the only sound it makes is silence.

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