

Mutterings: A Habit of Praise

Dear God...

The day is hot, muggy, perfectly miserable. Tiny black flies pester me about the face and ears as I walk to the barn. The garden tractor sits in the middle of the barn floor, patiently waiting for me to bring it to life. I pour in fresh gas, filling the tank for the day's job, check the oil, top it off. In the early spring and late autumn, mowing the grass is a delight; today it will just be hot, sweaty work.

The first section I mow is the teardrop-shaped island of grass inside the driveway loop. The old apple tree still looks good. *Thank You for keeping it going this long, Father.* We'll have applesauce this year. *Thank You for the harvest.* The next section is the largest: spread across the front of the house, wrapping East, up around the flower garden, around the wedge of large conifers, down along the drive, all the way to the gravel road. Out in the open, the sun is intense, irritating, but the blue sky is dappled with pretty cotton-puff clouds, and under my broad-brimmed hat I grin. *This is the day the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it...*

I fight the monotony of the long passes that take me from the West fence, straight East, around the curve of the drive North to the road. I want to use the time profitably—think time, planning time—but the heavy, steady drone of the engine makes organized thought a chore. Random sequences flit in and out, flip over and over repeatedly in my brain, putting me to sleep. *Help me, God. I need an idea for that new sketch. What does that church need to hear right now? Spirit, counsel me.* Moses, Moses, Moses... Burning bush, desert, mountain, sandals, holy ground, holiness... *Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning my song shall rise to Thee...*

I wonder if I'll be able to finish the mowing today—or will those clouds collect up into thunderheads and rain me out this afternoon? What a shame that would be.

With all the spring and early summer rains, the grass is growing thick and fast, making extra work. But also with the rains come berries. Both the wild and cultivated raspberries, and the wild elderberries that grow in the ditches along the roads, appreciate wet

seasons. As I pass along the fence line, the new berries are just beginning to color. Soon the thorn-armored stalks will be covered with black and red berries, and this year there'll be enough to make jelly.



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My blessings, O God. You're too generous with my blessings. As well as my waistline—but I'll accept the responsibility for that.

As I move into the orchard to cut the scruffier grass around the young fruit trees, the purple martins swoop and swirl around me, as if wartime dive bombers strafing my position. But I am not their target. They're dive bombing mosquitoes. *Tell me again, God, why You created mosquitoes.* But then, the thought betrays my egocentric view of the natural world, of which man is only a part. If nothing else, mosquitoes are food for many birds, bats—and certainly purple martins. *Thank You, God, for mosquitoes...I suppose.*

I pass the woodpile, near the last section, and see the flash of a chipmunk zipping from his home amidst the logs to the armored safety of the rainspout. *Lord, it was on one of Your good days that you created chipmunks,* those tiny clowns darting here and there, their cheeks bulging with nuts and seed, crouched atop the split wood piercing the stillness with their sharp, amplified chirp. *Yes, Lord, bless them. They add to my life.*

Lord God, I thank You for this place. I thank You for entrusting it to our care. Thank You for the peace we feel here—and the strong presence of Your Spirit. Please accept our labors as a small offering of praise to You, the Maker.

The job done, I steer the tractor back to the barn, dusty, sweaty, my posterior both aching and numb from four hours riding the vibrating metal beast. I disembark bowlegged, stepping stiffly, wishing only to get out of my dirty clothes and into the shower. As I drop the barn door and head back to the house, *Father, I still need an idea for that new sketch.* Moses, Moses, Moses... mountain, mountain of God, mountaintop, hilltop, hills, hills... *The hills are alive, with the sound of music...!*

Brother Lawrence

But when we are faithful to keep ourselves in His holy Presence, and set Him always before us, this not only hinders our offending Him, and doing anything that may displease Him, at least willfully, but it also begets in us a holy freedom, and if I may so speak, a familiarity with GOD, wherewith we ask, and that successfully, the graces we stand in need of. In fine, by often repeating these acts, they become habitual, and the presence of GOD is rendered as it were natural to us.

A Less-specific Devotion

Brother Lawrence

He converses and delights Himself with me incessantly, in a thousand and a thousand ways, and treats me in all respects as His favorite. It is thus I consider myself from time to time in His holy presence.

Let us, for just a moment, not get bogged down in definitions. It's true that the customary elements of our holy devotion—worship, praise, thanksgiving, prayer, service—can indeed be as different as a corn muffin from a baking powder biscuit. But, for the sake of this present discussion, let us glom them all together into a unified lump of holy communion we will refer to as "praise."

For we speak here of a less-specific devotion, a passage of time and experiences accompanying the indefinable communion of one soul with another. We speak here of the groanings and mutterings and confidential whispers that make up a steady dialogue the faithful disciple has with his Master. This is the conversation Brother Lawrence called "an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God."

There is a level of communication with God the Father more akin to a humming vibration than an organized sequence of words formed into paragraphs. In this form there may be few periods, but many commas. Both fresh and well-worn pages may be recited as stream of consciousness, thoughts and images tumbling over one another in a jumble that can be translated only by the intuitive Spirit. There is an even deeper, sub-word level of communication in which the Holy Spirit searches out and translates our stuttered groanings into the language of heaven. The apostle Paul mentions this mysterious dialogue in the context of the believer's stilted attempts to cry out to God.

Romans 8:26

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Then again, this communication may be as succinct and meticulous as a shopping list, muttered in shorthand: clipped, precise—a form of dialogue common among venerable married couples, in which one half always anticipates the other, rendering complete sentences almost redundant. We speak to God with the

economy of shorthand, knowing that He—all-knowing, all-loving—is able to fill in the blanks from His storehouse of knowledge about us.

Lament. 3:21-23

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD'S great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

There is a level of communication with God the Father more akin to a humming vibration than an organized sequence of words formed into paragraphs.

Like a kaleidoscope, with its colored bits and pieces tumbling amidst mirrors, the essential components of the Godhead never change, but reveal themselves in myriad ways, their endless variations delighting the receptive soul. With God there is no one, prescribed form of communication. He is just as attentive to the childlike gropings of the unschooled as He is to the formal liturgy of the high church. He makes Himself available to the countless personalities under His care, and, though He never *becomes* anything different from what He has always been, God reveals

Himself to them in ways personal, and sometimes unique.

Who wouldn't rather spend time with someone well-read, experienced in living, a sparkling and attentive conversationalist, than a dullard? We always come away from such moments enriched and rejuvenated, our senses quickened, our intellect stimulated. Just so, the more time we spend in conversation with this endlessly fascinating Companion—the author of all wisdom, creator of all chapters of life, a brilliant, empathetic conversationalist—the more we will be fed and enriched: Life to life, Soul to soul.

The Plain Between the Hills

Brother Lawrence (notes from a conversation)

...That in order to form a habit of conversing with GOD continually, and referring all we do to Him; we must at first apply to Him with some diligence: but that after a little care we should find His love inwardly excite us to it without any difficulty.

There are certainly different kinds of communication with God, and no one kind should permanently replace another. Because our God loves order, there will always be the need for carefully ordered, systematic praise; because we are called to draw together with the body of Christ, there will always be the time and place for corporate praise in fellowship with like believers.

This habit of *continual* praise is not intended to replace any other style or type, but is meant to be the bonding glue that holds them all together. It is the rolling green plain of ordinary living that connects together the rising mountain peaks of more structured, corporate praise of God.

As a director, I would always instruct my actors to work on their roles privately, between formal rehearsals. Preparation for performance could never consist entirely of the weekly rehearsal, in which all the actors came together to work, but every public rehearsal must be grounded in the work they had each done at home since the last. Even illustrious stage actors do their homework in preparation for the more formal rehearsal with the rest of the company.

Laurence Olivier

During the summer I worked at the speech day and night for four months. I knew from experience that it was essential to get the words first. Then, when I'd got the words absolutely so that they were tripping off my tongue, I'd get the accent. Trying to learn the words and the accent at the same time was dreadfully unwise, for then you had twin problems to contend with. Every morning between six and eight I'd worry at it like a terrier, slowly putting more lines into my head, inch by inch, word by word, syllable by syllable. Driving it into those old, decaying brain cells.

Oh, it's not that our private praise is always such arduous, meticulous rehearsal for the corporate form; we're not performing for the crowd, but practicing the embrace of the Father. The director—be it dramatic or musical—knows that without the daily, private practice of those in his or her charge, half of each formal rehearsal will be wasted just catching up to the point where real work can be done. And without our private

communion during the week, part of our corporate praise on Sunday will be wasted just getting back into the rhythm of the form. After spending all week with the Father, He'll not be an unfamiliar embrace come Sunday.

To the one unaccustomed to this habit of continual praise, the process may at first seem contrived, even mechanical or insincere. Habits (especially *good* habits) are formed intentionally, not by accident. It may at first seem as if *process* is overpowering *purpose*, but in time purpose will become automatic, and process forgotten.

We're not performing
for the crowd, but
practicing the embrace
of the Father.

In one of the more ridiculous scenes from the forgettable 1969 film of the musical *Paint Your Wagon*, Clint Eastwood (of all people) meanders through the forest singing "I talk to the trees / But they don't listen to me." This may be the image conjured up by those new to the idea of a habitual, almost constant communion with God, and they may be inhibited by the fear of being caught by others "talking to the trees."

A.W. Tozer

Canon Holmes of India told of seeing Hindu worshipers tapping on trees and stones and whispering 'Are you there?' to the god they hoped might reside within. In complete humility the instructed Christian brings the answer to that question. God is indeed there. He is there as He is here and everywhere, not confined to tree or stone, but free in the universe, near to every-thing, next to everyone, and through Jesus Christ immediately accessible to every loving heart.

Allured into the desert,
With God alone, apart,
There spirit meeteth spirit,
There speaketh heart to heart.
Far, far on that untrodden shore,
God's secret place I find;
Alone I pass the golden door,
The dearest left behind.

King David: Psalm 86:1-12

Hear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
Guard my life, for I am devoted to you.
You are my God; save your servant
who trusts in you.
Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for I call to you all day long.
Bring joy to your servant,
for to you, O Lord,
I lift up my soul.
You are forgiving and good, O Lord,
abounding in love to all who call to you.
Hear my prayer, O LORD;
listen to my cry for mercy.
In the day of my trouble I will call to you,
for you will answer me.
Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord;
no deeds can compare with yours.
All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, O Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.
For you are great and do marvelous deeds;
you alone are God.
Teach me your way, O LORD,
and I will walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.
I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart;
I will glorify your name forever.

Our communion with the Father need not be audible, but it can be. It need not be eloquent, but it can be. It's personal, after all, and each child must discover his or her own best way of communing with the Father.

The Lord searches out the heart looking for authenticity, not professionalism. He responds best to honesty and sincerity, not necessarily a well-polished delivery. A finely crafted, twenty-minute soliloquy may contain nothing more than the tiniest germ of authentic discourse, while something as small as an honest sigh may speak volumes of adoration, confession, and repentance.

*I need Thee every hour, most gracious Lord;
No tender voice like Thine, can peace afford.*

*I need Thee every hour, stay Thou near by;
Temptations lose their power when Thou art nigh.*

*I need Thee every hour, in joy or pain;
Come quickly and abide, or life is vain.*

*I need Thee every hour, most Holy One;
O make me Thine indeed, Thou blessed Son!*

*I need Thee, O I need Thee;
Every hour I need Thee;
O bless me now, my Saviour,
I come to Thee!*

Annie S. Hawks

A Quiet Place

Brother Lawrence

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with GOD: those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it; yet I do not advise you to do it from that motive; it is not pleasure which we ought to seek in this exercise; but let us do it from a principle of love, and because GOD would have us.

God dwells as much in the cacophony of the city as the sylvan glen; His Spirit dwells as complete and rich in the metropolis as the country. The habit of praise may be practiced as much in the Gotham apartment as the monastic cave: the quiet, dew-sparkled garden is not a prerequisite. But since God rarely shouts, we may find it easier to hear His voice in the quieter place. For profitable communion with God consists more of listening than speaking. We are quick to speak His praise, but just as quick to seal our lips to hear His response.

Why is God so much more present in the sounds of nature—the call of the birds, the croaking of the frogs, the bleating snort of the deer? Why do we hear God more in silence than in sound?

Psalm 46:10

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

When a man-made sound happens to waft by from some distant source—say from a passing jet or helicopter—we normally don't find ourselves being drawn toward God by those sounds. When we step onto the busy city streets,

*There God and I—none other;
Oh far from men to be!
Nay, midst the crowd and tumult,
Still, Lord, alone with Thee.
Still folded close upon Thy breast,
In field, and mart, and street,
Untroubled in that perfect rest,
That isolation sweet.*

• • •

dodging the noisy cars and belching delivery trucks, hear the scream of tires and the tiresome arguments of passing pedestrians, we're not lifted by them into the throne room of God.

While the quietude of nature draws us one step closer to the presence of God, the sounds manufactured by civilization more often insulate us from Him. They represent for us society's bent away from God, and as such, work against the indwelling Spirit's bent toward God.

Our quiet place may not always be a forested glen. We can commune with Him in the arid solitude of the desert; on the shoreline, with its pounding breakers to mask the sounds of everything else; in the privacy of our car, while on the freeway; or in a quiet, inner room of the house. Wherever it may be, we must find and use often that personal place where it is easier for us to find God's holy presence. We must find and frequent that place where His voice is not masked by the invasive cacophony of the world.

The mistake many make, however, is to restrict their mutterings of praise to their official quiet place. But since they seldom have time to get there, they seldom make time to commune with the Lord. The "prayer closet" may be our best location of contact, but if we never open the door and go inside, it is as worthless as a glass phone booth in Times Square.

How much better it is to develop the habit of communing with Him *wherever* we are. How much better it is to find Him in every situation, to listen to Him along *with* the noise, rather than to wait until the noise has stopped. Because the noise will *never* stop, we may find ourselves continually waiting—and instead of finding God, we will have found only another excuse to avoid Him.

*From every stormy wind that blows,
From every swelling tide of woes,
There is a calm, a sure retreat:
'Tis found beneath the mercy seat.*

*There is a place where Jesus sheds
The oil of gladness on our heads;
A place than all besides more sweet:
It is the blood-bought mercy seat.*

*There is a scene where spirits blend,
Where friends hold fellowship with friend;
Though sundered far, by faith they meet
Around one common mercy seat.*

*Ah! whither could we flee for aid,
When tempted, desolate, dismayed:
Or how the hosts of hell defeat,
Had suffering saints no mercy seat?
Ah! there on eagle wings we soar,
And sin and sense molest no more:
And heav'n comes down our souls to greet,
While glory crowns the mercy seat.*

Hugh Stowell

*Because the noise
will never stop, we
may find ourselves
continually waiting—
and instead of
finding God, we will
have found only
another excuse to
avoid Him.*

Isaiah 55:6-12

Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the LORD, and
he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will
freely pardon.
"For my thoughts are not your
thoughts,
neither are your ways my
ways,"
declares the LORD.
"As the heavens are higher than
the earth,
so are my ways higher than
your ways
and my thoughts than your
thoughts.

As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for
the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

**O God, Thou art far other
Than men have dreamed and taught,
Unspoken in all language,
Unpictured in all thought.
Thou God art God—he only learns
What that great Name must be,
Whose raptured heart within him burns,
Because he walks with Thee.**

Through the Fire

Brother Lawrence

We cannot escape the dangers which abound in life, without the actual and continual help of GOD; let us then pray to Him for it continually. How can we pray to Him without being with Him? How can we be with Him but in thinking of Him often? And how can we often think of Him, but by a holy habit which we should form of it?

One of the deeper mysteries of the Christian faith is that we will discover our strength for trials by remaining close to the One who set us there.

Jesus knew this. No one else but the Father had set Him on a path that included a period of forty days and forty nights of fasting and temptation. Yet, His strength throughout the trial was found in communion with God the Father, and meditating on His word.

King David, too, a man after God's own heart, knew well that every dark passage of his life was orchestrated by the Lord, yet he found the strength to continue on in the praise of the One who had set him there.

When, as a result of his increasing popularity with the people and soldiers of Israel, King Saul became jealous of the young man,

1 Samuel 19:1-2

Saul told his son Jonathan and all the attendants to kill David. But Jonathan was very fond of David and warned him, "My father Saul is looking for a chance to kill you. Be on your guard tomorrow morning; go into hiding and stay there."

While in hiding, David wrote:

*In the LORD I take refuge.
How then can you say to me:
"Flee like a bird to your mountain.
For look, the wicked bend their bows;
they set their arrows against the strings
to shoot from the shadows
at the upright in heart.
When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?"
The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD is on his heavenly throne.
He observes the sons of men;
his eyes examine them.*

Psalm 11:1-4

Though placated for a while, a short time later Saul was again filled with rage at David and sought to kill him—this time by his own hands.

1 Samuel 19:9-12

But an evil spirit from the LORD came upon Saul as he was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand. While David was playing

the harp, Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him as Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape. Saul sent men to David's house to watch it and to kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, warned him, "If you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed." So Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped.

Finding himself again in hiding, fearing for his life, David turned again to the Lord:

*O my Strength, I watch for you;
you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God.
God will go before me
and will let me gloat over those who slander me.
O my Strength, I sing praise to you;
you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God.*

Psalm 59:9-10,17

In his later years, David's beloved son Absalom turned against him, and for a time actually wrested the throne of Israel from his father's hands.

2 Samuel 15:13-14

A messenger came and told David, "The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom." Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, "Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin upon us and put the city to the sword."

Unwilling to fight against his own son, and once more finding himself in exile, in his despair David turned to the Lord and penned:

*Stilled by that wondrous Presence,
That tenderest embrace,
The years of longing over,
Do we behold Thy face;
We seek no more than Thou hast given,
We ask no vision fair,
Thy precious blood has opened heaven,
And we have found Thee there.*

O LORD, how many are my foes!
 How many rise up against me!
 Many are saying of me,
 "God will not deliver him." Selah
 But you are a shield around me, O LORD;
 you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.
 To the LORD I cry aloud,
 and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah
 I lie down and sleep;
 I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
 I will not fear the tens of thousands
 drawn up against me on every side.

Psalm 3:1-6

There is no contradiction in our being sustained by the author of our trial when we apprehend the truth that, for the child of God, *all* things dwell in Him. To deny God's sovereign hand in our lives is as foolish as denying that He even exists. And to deny that He is as much in the hard times as the times of ease is to have a very low opinion of His personality.

David understood that the totality of life is both focused on and enveloped by the good pleasure of a sovereign God. And he understood that *man's* pleasure will only be found in regular, continual communion with Him. At every turn of his life—both pleasurable and hard—David always and repeatedly returned to his God.

The pathway to holiness is strewn with the discarded good intentions of those who preferred only a small measure of God—those who considered time with the Father as browsing a dietetic salad bar, rather than sitting down to a sumptuous feast.

Time spent with the Father is, in many respects, much like time spent with anyone else: we get out of the relationship in proportion to what we put in. Open any newspaper, read any news magazine, listen to any television newscast and you will have sufficient evidence for what becomes of a child's life that has had little connection with a parent—and especially a father. It is a life filled with anger and rebellion, ignorance, defiance of authority, and, inevitably, ruin.

Contrast that with the life of a child that has had a stable, loving home life, where the child had a healthy relationship with his or her parents. This child will have a fighting chance in life, because he's beginning with a strong, solid foundation based on knowing well the stock from whence he came.

Just so, when we spend time with our *heavenly* Father—quality *and* quantity, not choosing only one or the other—we come away strengthened, whole, and confident in our relationship with a loving Parent. And when we establish the habit of continual praise as a complement to our more ordered, well-spoken prayers,

we add an even more intimate dimension to that relationship.

The habit of praise assumes what we know is true, that we belong to a loving, interested God, who delights in spending time with His children.

Deut. 33:12

About Benjamin he said: "Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the LORD loves rests between his shoulders."

Through Jesus Christ we have gained access into the family of God—yet our relationship is not with

Christ alone: *because of* Him, the Father Himself loves us as sons and daughters, fellow heirs to His kingdom.

Jesus Christ: John 16:27

"No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God."

The pathway to holiness is strewn with the discarded good intentions of those who preferred only a small measure of God.

laughing, and dwelling in the sweet union that is our habit of praise of the Father.

1 John 4:13

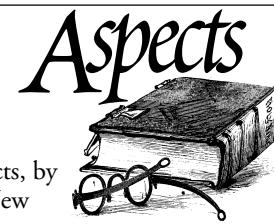
We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

Brother Lawrence

Use yourself then by degrees thus to worship Him, to beg His grace, to offer Him your heart from time to time, in the midst of your business, even every moment if you can. Do not always scrupulously confine yourself to certain rules, or particular forms of devotion; but act with a general confidence in GOD, with love and humility.

O weary souls, draw near Him;
 To you I can but bring
 One drop of that great ocean,
 One blossom of that spring;
 Sealed with His kiss, my lips are dumb,
 My soul with awe is still;
 Let him that is athirst but come,
 And freely drink his fill.

Gerhard Tersteegen



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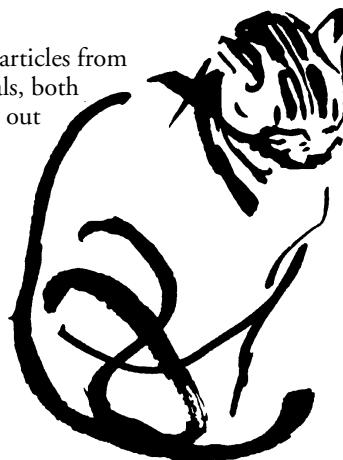
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