

Prayer in the Classroom

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In over forty years teaching at The City University of New York and elsewhere, I've had numerous, powerful experiences of prayer. In honors courses on writers and their spiritual journeys we read several of Sara Miles' books about ministry in San Francisco. We also read about the houses of hospitality set up in the early 1930s in New York and Paris by Dorothy Day and Mother Maria Skobtsova. This was no stereotypical exercise in hagiography. Rather, following the accounts of these women, also Mary Oliver, Barbara Brown Taylor, and the searing memoirs of Mary Karr and Mira Bartok, students amazed each other and me with their willingness to share equally striking situations with which they were living.

One student began her reflection to the class by apologizing that she had not been raised with much religion. In the course we had encountered Karr and Bartok's accounts of tortured childhoods with emotionally ill, severely dysfunctional parents. Karr was often asked, "How is it that you are alive today?" The student could have stuck to the text but chose to do a mini-memoir of her own life at home. As a girl, she was never praised or encouraged. She was also expected, no matter her schoolwork and job, to help with cleaning, cooking and the like. She did very well in school and was admitted to one of the city's most prestigious high schools. With the decline of her grandmother, home became a nightmare. Asian culture demanded that an elder be cared for at home, by the family. The student described how her grandmother with dementia would wail and scream through the night. Care of this afflicted soul was women's work, this the student and her mother never got a full night's sleep. Eventually the student's mother needed treatment herself, but no allowance was ever made for the student's school and work obligations.

It was the atmosphere of trust created by the students that enabled this student to share so much of her struggles. She acknowledged her depression, due to lack of support for her achievement in school as well as the immense burden of caring for her grandmother. On the verge of tears, her classmates immediately surrounded her with empathy, first in words and then in hugs. Is all of this not prayer--reading, reflection and discussion in class and the spirit of trust that was built up? If prayer is the growth of spiritual presence, if it is learning about not just God but oneself and about one's neighbors, how could this deep learning not be prayer?

Then there is another student who returned in her sixties to complete a degree after years of work and parenting. She was greatly inspired by the honesty of classmates younger than her children, and soon was a most encouraging presence for them. She eventually spoke in class about a powerful settling up with her religious tradition. She wrote a mini-memoir of her own religious journey, of the enormous familial pressure exerted on her from adolescence onward and which drove her out of her community into the wider Jewish as well as secular worlds. There was less rage at tradition of her early years, rather and more gratitude and understanding. She was a "living icon" of how faith can liberate, deepen, and beautify life. Her presence was that of an elder, with compassion, insight, and patience.

In another course on social theory, a remarkable, probably unrepeatable convergence of students took place. The mix of ethnic backgrounds and ages of students made it remarkable. The collection of readings we went through, the range of topics from the civil rights, antiwar, anti-colonial and women's movements to the social justice challenges of inequality and the situation of LGBT people in our society—all this made for a dynamic exchange in class.

One of the most intense and memorable exchanges had to do with racism, identity and racist behavior. This was long before BLM. There were at least a dozen persons of color and students of mixed backgrounds. How complex this designation, and identity has become was evidenced by the actual identities and origins. One student, with a Latino name, was African-America, Puerto Rican, and Egyptian and married to a Dominican. "You see what my name is and how I look," he remarked in the discussion. "But who am I, really? With what group do I side? Tell me, guys. I am not sure." The question under discussion, growing out of essays we'd read from W.E.B DuBois, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, was did racism still exist in American society?

The team presentation unleashed a flurry of first person narratives from the class, moving testimony. It was a profound and often humbling act of sharing what it was like, in everyday life, to be perceived as "other," as different, threatening, and suspicious, as well as not really being part of the neighborhood or society. There were accounts of being stopped and frisked. A student in her forties and spoke movingly of looks and stares in trains, at bus stops and even in on the platform in Grand Central Station. She also described others crossing the street to walk on the other side rather than next to her. Another described of how often her father was stopped by police and questioned on his way to and from work. Others echoed these accounts, noting that they had experienced similar treatment as outcasts. "I have been treated as though I was different, to be feared, as not fitting in all of my life. All of my family has experienced the same even though we were born here, sound like everyone else, and are citizens. When I hear that we are "over racism," or that there is no racism any longer, I want to ask, 'For whom? I will experience racism for the rest of my life. This is what it is like to be a person of color."

How is any of what I have described prayer? If one can move from the association of prayer solely to houses of worship, sacred texts and rituals, I would point to the testimony, confession and sharing that went on in these classes. Students begin to connect their lives and history, their biographies and the society around them. Without using explicitly religious language, they probed the origins and effects of racism and inequality, of social injustice, of discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity. No direct equivalent of the prayer of the scriptures or the services of church, synagogue or masjid intended. But if we are encouraged "to pray all the time," and if we are, in Paul Evdokimov's words, "to become what we pray," then is not learning a kind of everyday, uncommon prayer?

(Adapted from *Uncommon Prayer: The Experience of Prayer in Everyday Life*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2016.)