

15 October * The Only Possible Answer in Any Given Moment
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Call to Worship

“You do not have to be good,” poet Mary Oliver assures us.
“You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

As we enter into worship, put away the pressures of the world
that ask us to perform, to take up masks, to put on brave fronts –
silence the voices that ask you to be perfect.

This is a community of compassion and welcoming.
You do not have to do anything to earn the love
contained within these walls.

You do not have to be braver, smarter, stronger, better
than you are in this moment
to belong here, with us.

You only have to bring the gift of your body,
no matter how able,
your seeking mind,
no matter how busy,
your animal heart,
no matter how broken.

Bring all that you are, and all that you love, to this hour together.
Let us worship together.

Reading: excerpt from Chapter 4 of *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert

Liz Gilbert begins her memoir *Eat, Love, Pray*, in a time of desperation and pain as her marriage unraveled. In this excerpt, Liz describes a moment in which she found herself sobbing on the bathroom floor one November night, where she experienced the beginning of a conversation with the Holy – a conversation that continues to this day.

"The Only Possible Answer in Any Given Moment" The Listening Aspect of Prayer

When I think of the prayerful process by which we tune into wisdom – listening to the still, small voice within – I immediately think of a seasoned practitioner exuding serenity from a seat of calm. That's why what I appreciate most about Liz Gilbert's story is her *truth-telling*: the truth she tells about her stumbling, bumbling path towards the Holy; and the truth that she reveals about the waves of chaos, desperation, and turmoil that deliver many of us to the threshold of that voice.

It's this Listening aspect of prayer that we encounter today, the 3rd stop on our 4-week pilgrimage of re-creating and re-imagining prayer. Throughout this series, the word **prayer** means nothing more than "connecting and reconnecting to the source of our lives." We've already examined how to (re)connect to our Life Source by *Naming*: using creative names and metaphors that speak to our individual spiritual hungers. Last week we explored the usefulness of (re)connecting, and repairing rupture in our human relationships, through prayer that is *Knowing*, that honestly and lovingly assesses our many human foibles and mistakes.

As we turn to prayer that is *Listening*, let me remind you that these spiritual practices are yours to reflect on, and then do with as you wish. Don't digest this sermon series as my urging you to take up an inauthentic practice, nor as a suggestion that we should all adopt one or more of these forms of prayer. I'm not attached to whether you give these forms of prayer another thought, beyond this month.

As your minister, what I am attached to is the state of your spiritual lives, and the continued flourishing of your growth. By holding up an old term ("prayer") in a new light, week after week, I'm inviting you to discern whether your current spiritual practice is serving you, or whether some of these ideas from my sermons might enrich or give new meaning to your practice.

Listening prayer is a realm in which we can't substitute the word "meditation" too sloppily, because Western and Eastern religious traditions use the word "meditation" in contrasting ways. In Western religions, the word *contemplative* is used to describe the "silent, effortless emptying of one's self so that you can become aware of yourself as filled with... 'the Ultimate Mystery.'"¹ *Meditation*, on the other hand, is the focusing of devotional attention towards, and reflection about, a particular topic.

What we're after today is the West's *contemplative* prayer, which is named *meditation*

¹ Erik Walker Wikstrom, partially quoting Fr. Thomas Keating, *Simply Pray*, p. 26

in Buddhism and other Eastern religions. In all cultures, this Listening practice could also be labeled “watchfulness,” or “awareness.” It’s not an all an intellectual or thought-driven pursuit, but one that’s free from the bounds of language and images.

The purpose of Listening prayer, in fact, is to go beyond words, into that realm where we connect with the Source of Life, or the great Nothingness. As Erik Walker Wikstrom puts it, we “gently and easily mov[e] from all forms of doing to a simple state of being.”²

“Gently and easily,” again, are not my words. I’ve already noted that many of reach out to the steady Presence in moments of crisis and despair. And I’ve studied formal meditation techniques, from Kundalini to Vipassana, in enough ways to know that the *process* of listening is devilishly hard. I relate most closely to the writer Anne Lamott, who likens³ the whirring of her mind to a living creature, “perched on top of my head like a spider monkey [on acid].”

It might be helpful, then, to approach contemplative prayer from a different angle. Instead of pretending to be an expert about stilling our thoughts, I want to answer three questions: *Who are we listening to?*, *What are we listening for?*, and *How do we do it?*

*** *Who are we listening to?***

Whether your Naming process includes the word “God,” there’s a particular theology inherent to Listening prayer: one of *immanence*, the notion that the Divine is not outside or beyond us, looking down like a master puppeteer. The wisdom and love that animate all of life is *inside* of each of us, “closer than breathing, closer than choosing – closer than consciousness itself,” in the words of Father Thomas Keating.⁴ The Holy – the “omniscient inner voice” – is knitted into the very cells of our body.

When we connect to the source of our lives through Listening, therefore, it’s an invitation to be informed by that Source. To quiet our words and still our thoughts, shifting from doing into being, “is predicated on the notion that God is already speaking to us and that the reason we don’t know this is that our heads are so full of static.”⁵ What we’re listening for isn’t the God whose Charles Heston-ish voice booms down from on high, but rather a “gentle whisper”⁶ that offers up its companionship and guidance to us in our own voice.

² Wikstrom, p. 27.

³ In “Advent 2003,” on Salon.com. See <http://dir.salon.com/story/mwt/col/lamott/2003/12/05/advent/index.html>

⁴ Quoted in Wikstrom, p. 29.

⁵ Wikstrom, p. 27.

⁶ One translation (New International Version) of 1 Kings 19:12; the other common translation is “still, small voice.”

When Liz Gilbert found herself sobbing on her bathroom floor,⁷ desperate for consolation, the voice that came to her

was...my own voice, speaking from within my own self. But this was my voice as I had never heard it before. This was my voice, but perfectly wise, calm and compassionate. This was what my voice would sound like if I'd only ever experienced love and certainty in my life. How can I describe the warmth of affection in that voice?

Gilbert heard her own voice, and yet there are many ways for our inner wisdom to do its guiding work. "There is a whole other language involved in listening inwardly for communication from the universe," says Yoga teacher Erich Schiffmann.⁸

It is not always dependent on words. Instead it involves feelings, impulses to action, and meanings....You may not actually hear a voice. You may instead simply experience Knowing. You will know what to do without having figured it out....There will be a sudden clarity within you.

*** *What are we listening for?***

The notion of "clarity" underscores another delicious lesson from Liz Gilbert's truth-telling: when we engage in Listening prayer, we can't expect anything more than to receive the only possible answer, or guidance, in that given moment. Although Listening prayer can provide the fertile medium for sudden leaps of creativity or understanding, we can't expect to be imparted with the Secret of Life; Listening is specific to who we are *in that very moment*, offering "moment-to-moment inner guidance."

The analogy that Schiffmann uses is traffic: when we're driving, we can't see traffic jams from miles away. How do we avoid them or learn about them? Traffic helicopters, with their aerial view, broadcast their information through our car's radio.⁹

Your mind is like your car radio, and the "cosmic broadcast" is continuously happening inside you. In other words, there is a larger perspective available to you – the aerial perspective – about what happens in your life. When you are on the ground, so to speak, your outlook and perspective on your life are... limited....You can only see so far and...have only so much information. But just as you can tune in to the helicopter's traffic broadcast with the aid of your car radio for instant access to an

⁷ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, p. 16.

⁸ In *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Silence*, by Erich Schiffmann, p. 335. Also available at www.movingintostillness.com/book/meditation_divine_guidance.html

⁹ Schiffmann, p. 330.

aerial perspective, so you can have ready access to an expanded knowledge, a larger perspective, a more inclusive outlook on your entire life with a simple shift of attention.

* *How do we do it?*

How do we experience the self in stillness, and tune into the “aerial view”? I believe that, as Schiffmann implies, Listening begins when we recognize that our own perspective is *limited*, and that “it is in [our] best interest to access the larger knowledge....Desire and silent listening are the keys. Make the practice one of listening, listening, listening.”

There are some very simple, concrete ways to do this: brief habits to weave into your day. Since they’ve been valuable to me, I’m passing on the methods that Schiffmann provides:¹⁰

χ Begin your day, even before you get out of bed, by saying silently to yourself, “Today I will make no decisions by myself.” Then add, “I will make no decisions by myself because it is no longer intelligent to do so. Instead, I will make all my decisions in silent counsel with the Infinite.”

χ When you face decisions throughout the day, don’t make the decision by yourself. Wait for a moment and ask, “What do I need to do now?” (Schiffmann’s exact wording is “I want to do what You would have me do. What would You have me do?” Like him, I prefer to use the 2nd person, the “you” form, because it makes it clear that I’m involving something larger than myself, beyond my limited perspective. If that feels uncomfortable, you can simply ask yourself, “What do I need to do now?”)

Another spiritual leader (whose name I’ve forgotten) expands on this by suggesting a pair of questions: “What would You have me do?” and “Will you help me do just that?”

χ “If something is bothering you, or if [something] in your life...needs resolution or clarification, silently desire to know the answer and then silently listen for clarification.” One way is to ask, “What is it I need to know?,” or “Is there anything I need to know right now?,” or even “What would You have me do in this situation?”

As you do these things, Schiffmann says, “listen deeply inside yourself for inspiration and be attentive to the way circumstances unfold in your experience. What does your deepest being, the deepest part of you, want to do?”¹¹

¹⁰ All of these in Schiffmann, pp. 336-337. Also available at www.movingintostillness.com/book/meditation_divine_guidance.html

¹¹ Schiffmann, pp. 336-7. Available online:

There is a voice – your own gentle, loving voice – to listen to. It's there as steadily as your breath. When you feel the desire rise in you, to reconnect with this Source, your deepest being, may you listen for, and hear, it speak to you.