

In Quietness and Confidence

Elizabeth Yarnall

"Slow down – steady – stop dashing about."

"Center down – be still and know that I am God – in quietness and confidence shall be your strength" – and your sense of direction – and your awareness of next steps.

These are words which keep saying themselves to me, over and over again. Sometimes I find myself saying, "Let me be quiet inside, relaxed and listening." And often I recall the words of Isaac Penington: "For we can do nothing of ourselves, but being called, being directed, being required to that which is beyond our strength, and giving up thereto, the life springs, the power arises, that does the work."

We all have the experience, from time to time, of situations among our family or our friends in which we long to help and, for one reason or another, are helpless: distressing illnesses of mind or body, anxieties and bitterness, loneliness and uncertainties. Increasingly it seems to me that prayer may be the most important thing we can do for ourselves and for one another.

But we live in time when prayer is not taken for granted as it used to be. Only the other day, in our Meeting, a Friend said that in his grandmother's house a small room was set apart and called "the prayer closet." There at regular times each day his grandmother and his great-aunt entered in to pray and, literally, closed the door. Rufus Jones has told us, in his *Finding the Trail of Life*, about his childhood on a farm in Maine:

We never ate a meal which did not begin with a hush of thanksgiving; we never began a day without a "family gathering" at which mother read a chapter of the Bible, after which there would follow a weighty silence. . . . There was work inside and outside the house, waiting to be done, and yet we sat there hushed and quiet, doing nothing. . . . Someone would bow and talk with God so simply that He never seemed far away.

Today we tend to think such prayer old-fashioned, a bit naive. We wonder what kind of God is left to us in a world of science, in the infinitely vast distances of the telescope and beyond, and in the infinitely small one of the microscope, with man learning, as never before, to cope with both.

We have, certainly, no benevolent white-bearded figure bargaining with His children, no Old Testament judge handing out punishment and reward. But we have, now and forever, the mystery, the ongoing reality, the availability, of Life Itself. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

"Be still, my soul," said the poet Tagore, "these great trees are prayers." Many of the ancient wordings are useful to express the inexpressible, and some analogies help us to touch the fringes of reality.

One of the ever-present miracles is our renewal through the air we breathe, of which Gerard Manley Hopkins has written so powerfully, as analogy (with "Mary the Mother of God") and as factual description:

Wild air, world-mothering air
Nestling me everywhere,
That each eyelash or hair
Girdles; goes home betwixt
The fleeciest, frailest-fixed
Snowflake; that's fairly mixed
With, riddles, and is rife
In every least thing's life;
This needful, never spent
And nursing element;
My more than meat and drink,
My meal at every wink;
This air, which, by life's law
My lungs must draw and draw
Now but to breathe its praise . . .

When my sisters and I were little girls we knelt down with our mother each evening and recited together one of several memorized prayers, taking turns in choosing the one for the occasion. Of these prayers the one which stays with me through the years, and grows in power, is the combination of bits from two psalms:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. . . . Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

This is one group of words which can help us to center down, alone or in a meeting for worship, though I confess that too often my galloping thoughts are hard to tame, and I wonder whether I shall ever really learn the "alert passivity" of which Evelyn Underhill speaks. Another quietener is the opening of Evelyn Underhill's poem, "High Tide":

Flood Thou my soul with great quietness,
O let Thy wave
Of silence from the deep
Roll in on me . . .

And another is Anna L. Waring's hymn:

In heavenly love abiding
No change my heart shall fear,

And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here.

In one of his essays Thomas Kelly wrote: "There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings." But this accompanying undercurrent, like Brother Lawrence's practice of the presence of God, comes only, I am sure, when we have made deliberate, disciplined efforts to practice prayer in solitude and quietness.

Recently a dear friend of ours, on being told of the restored health and happiness of a young Friend after a long and discouraging illness, said, "I prayed for her every day for five years." When I commented on this and sent her Agnes Tierney's excellent essay on *Effective Prayer*, she replied, "I read the little pamphlet on prayer you sent – it was logical enough, but somehow too mental for my taste. I think prayer is a *feeling* experience – and prayer, at least *for* other people, is a matter of emanating, breathing out, feelings of love and new life toward them, but of course with no special goal or end in view, such as healing, etc. I think only God is wise enough to set the goals or end results for us or anyone else. But I think maybe we can emanate energy toward another person – and I think love is a kind of energy – and perhaps they are invigorated by it. . . . Be that as it may, when I breathe in new life with thanksgiving in my morning breathing meditation . . . it has always seemed to me that I wanted to return it *for* someone . . . so I returned it for Sally and visualized her face when I did so. Whether this helped or not we'll never know, but it might."

Later in the same letter she wrote, "I sometimes pray, in cases of persons I find difficult or am in doubt about, 'Let Thy will prevail between him and me,' or some such, and when doing so relinquish the outcome. Now I don't always succeed, because I guess I don't always relinquish the outcome completely – and I can't always maintain an attitude of love, and then of course everything is haywire. But I suppose if you can just maintain the right attitude even briefly, it's a step."

Most of what I have said and quoted is equally applicable to our quiet times, whether alone or with others. Much has been written, by Friends and non-Friends, about the daring adventure which is our meeting for worship. A recent Pendle Hill *Bulletin* describes the daily meeting for worship there and quotes from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding":

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity,
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

For each of us the approach to the Most High will be different, and different wordings will help to steady our spirits. Some years ago this meditation on the Twenty-fourth Psalm came to me:

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.
The earth is the Lord's.
But who is the Lord?
The mysterious aliveness, running through all,
dividing of cell and dividing again, in order to multiply;
the urge to find food,
to crawl from the sea, mothering sea,
onto the hard naked sand of the shore;
the will to take risks, to give birth, to be born.
This is the Lord – the groping, the growing,
the shining and bursting.
This is the Lord, the Lord strong and mighty, without
any ending in time or in space.
This is the Lord, near at hand and particular, gentle and terrible.
The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
the world and they that dwell therein;
not the few or the gifted or the specially chosen,
but they, simply they, that dwell therein.

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