

Prayer Cairns By Sara E. Singleton

Once you decide to intentionally enter into spiritual formation, you eventually come to a place when you find yourself in one huge FOG. Nothing seems to have clear edges or definition, and at times you may wonder if you've lost your way. In my own experience, I found that practicing spiritual disciplines heightened my awareness of God's presence. Pretty soon I began to long for a break for God! I'd entertain what it would be like to watch TV again on my own and get life back to "normal." Living with the awareness of God around me all the time was wearing me out!

On the other hand, there have been times when I've felt that I was spiritually soaring, and such heights of spiritual ecstasy gave me reason to look down upon other believers who were less mature. This self-assessment was what a young pastor felt as he wrote to his mentor, John Newton, in the late 18th century. This pastor listened to Newton's preaching and attempted to put everything he was hearing into practice. The pastor soon reported to Newton that although he had once been a kernel, he was now a full stalk with ripe ears of corn. Newton responded to the proud pastor that the more mature Christians become, the less aware they are of their true state. This is because God gives the growth and the mature believer has no eyes except for the Lord.[1]

The goal of spiritual formation is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Luke 10:25-27). Love is of God. How is God's love going to come into me to heal me and fill me so that I can pour back this love to God and to others? Romans 5:5 says, "And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

God's love is poured into us through our communication and communion with God. This is the essence of prayer. The root of all growth in grace is through prayer. Prayer is, simply put, a shared life with God.

How does one have a shared life with God? It is through the same means of communication and communion that we exchange in any intimate relationship. God speaks to us in Scripture, and through reading Scripture, memorizing it, and chewing it in *lectio divina*, we receive the mind and will of God. On our part, we are invited to turn our thoughts into prayers, learning to talk to God about everything! We commune with God through centering prayer, listening prayer and contemplative prayer. But there remains a problem. We think about and study prayer more than we actually pray.

Emilie Griffin expresses this dilemma in her book, *Clinging*. She writes, "There is moment a between intending to pray and actually praying that is as dark and silent as any moment in our lives. It is the split second between thinking about prayer and really praying. For some of us, this split second may last for decades. It seems, then, that the greatest obstacle to prayer is the simple matter of

beginning, the simple exertion of the will, the starting, the acting, the doing. How easy it is, and yet- between us and the possibility of prayer there seems to be a great gulf fixed: an abyss of our own making that separates us from God.”[2]

The reason we have difficulty sharing life with God is that our prayer life is another area of our lives that has been affected by the Fall. Prayer is the most intimate experience possible with God, since it is Mind to mind/Heart to heart/Emotion to emotion, Will to will. Prayer is intimacy with God at its fullest.

What are we to do? There is a great space between us and God. It is what I call the Great Synapse. Imagine from cellular biology an image of a neuron at the interception with muscle tissue. Neurons have tiny branches called dendrites that reach out to the muscle. Communication between this highly specialized cell that carries out the will of the person is communicated through neurotransmitters, bits of chemicals that leak out of the dendrites and move toward the muscle, causing its contraction. Now image is similar to the relationship we have with God through prayer. The mind of God and the energy of God pulsate through the universe. God is expressing His glory and love into all the world. The receptors are our minds, our heart and our will. Prayer is the great connector in this synapse. Think of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel and the space, the gap between the fingers. Prayer is what bridges this gap and connects us with the heart of God!

Recently I went climbing with my husband up to the summit of Mt. Princeton, about 14,200 feet. Nearly four fifths of the hike is over large boulders, with no real trail in sight. Every hiker depends upon those who have gone before them, building cairns as they ascended. Cairns are rocks that are built into the shape of a haystack. They can range from 12” to 4’. To find one’s way up Mt. Princeton, one must walk toward the next cairn. I would like to point out three cairns that left by those who have gone ahead of us.

Cairn #1 is the Lord’s Prayer in Mt. 6:9-14, taught to us by Jesus. At times there are no prayers in us. We need a way to ease into prayer, some aide to prayer when we need all the help that we can get. This is what the Lord’s Prayer can do. To begin the prayer, imagine yourself standing before the door of a great mansion. “Our Father,” You have just entered into God’s house, where life is lived on God’s terms. Who’s Father is He? Our Father! You have begun to pray for the world, particularly for the household of faith. “...who art in heaven,” you continue. Where is heaven? Is it far off, or is all around us? Does God live in heaven? If He does, then this means that all of heaven’s resources are available. In each phrase of the Lord’s Prayer, you are going down a long hallway in within the mansion, and each hallway has many doors on each side. Each phrase of the prayer can lead you to open one of these doors and discover more prayers you want to offer as you are led through the prayer that Jesus taught to His disciples.

Cairn #2 is The PAPA prayer is a way of praying first taught by Larry Crabb.[3]:

P- Present yourself as you really are, not as you wish you were. This means being honest with what is on your mind, your feelings and needs and distractions. If we are not presenting ourselves honestly to God – who are we fooling?

A - Attend to how you are thinking about God. Is He your genie, your servant, your watchmaker, your distant father, your disciplinarian? Or, is He the Lord who is risen and victorious, portrayed most fully in Revelation 1:12-18? Get the true image of Christ which John saw on the Isle of Patmos before you go further. It will change the way you pray.

P – Purge yourself of anything that blocks your relationship with God. This may require repenting of an inadequate view of God and His ability to provide and fully love you. Confess your sins so that you may be made trustworthy and whole.

A – Approach God as the “First Thing” in your life. Imagine that God answered every one of your prayers and continued to ask if there was anything more that you would like. “You: My list is complete. I have everything written down.

God: Then I will give you everything on your list. But on one condition: you will never hear My voice again. I will withdraw all sense of My presence from you. You will never know Me.”[4] Immediately we realize that it is God who we really want. Only He can satisfy the hungers of our heart, for we were made for Him. When we begin to understand that everything else is secondary, then we learn to pray for first things first, which is for God Himself.

Cairn #3 comes from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a spiritual classic written by an anonymous 24 year old man in the 14th century. This monk says that all prayer can actually be summed up in two different one-syllable words. All that is wrong within us and within in the world is because of sin. When we cry out, “Sin! Sin! Sin!” we are petitioning for immediate and complete grace to come to our rescue. The image that comes to mind is a peasant who discovers in the middle of the night that his house is on fire. He has not time for explanations or long requests. He calls out with all his might, “Fire! Fire! Fire!” and every one of his neighbors will come running. In the same way, we call out our need with this one word – sin. The other word that is the summation of all that is good, the ultimate desire of our heart and our greatest need is the cry for “God! God! God!” Surely God will be pleased to make Himself know to the soul who cries to Him to reveal Himself in all His glory. These two words can be spoken as breath prayers while one walks or works throughout the day. These two words can gather our thoughts into one great petition and one great trust.

Fire! Fire! Fire!

By beginning with these three cairns, the spiritual pilgrim can continue on the difficult yet worthy trail of pursuing the God who waits to be found!

[1] See J. Todd Murray’s “Beyond Amazing Grace: Timeless Pastoral Wisdom from Letters, Sermons and Hymns of John Newton,” 2007.

[2] Emilie Griffin, *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer* (New York: McCracken Press, 1994), p. 3.

[3] Larry Crabb, *The PAPA Prayer: The Prayer You’ve Never Prayed* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

[4] Crabb, p. 153.