# Praying with Imagination

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A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the Spiritual Directors Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries New Zealand.



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'If you are weary of some sleepy form of devotion, probably God is as weary of it as you are.' <sup>1</sup>

Frank Laubach

#### **Covering Statement**

This project has emerged as a result of my participation in the Spiritual Directors Formation Programme. My desire in sharing this material is to offer hope to anyone whose prayer experience has worn thin and who desires refreshment. I hope to point the way by sharing some discoveries and imaginative exercises that have proved helpful in my own prayer life, to allay some fears that might arise with those new discoveries and to suggest some ongoing resources for the journey. I hope to encourage others like myself who wish to stay firmly rooted in Christian biblical traditional while reserving the freedom to explore beyond the boundaries dictated to them by a sometimes narrowly focused evangelical background.

#### Introduction

The desire to pray is evidence of God's Spirit already at work in us; responding to that desire is central to the process of our spiritual transformation. It can be a surprise then, to encounter dryness or difficulty in answering an invitation so fundamental to nurturing our soul. A clue to why this might be so is supplied by the Apostle Paul, 'We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and dildren' (Romans 8:15,16—The Message); prayer is not so much a ritual to be mastered as a personal encounter with God. In that encounter he desires to unveil the truth about himself and who we are in relation to him. Like any relationship though, this one is just as 'unpredictable, unplannable and unrehearsed as life with any of our neighbours'. Realising this could propel us on an exciting journey of discovery in prayer but more often than not raises the second most common objection - if it's that unpredictable, if there is no formula, how can we know if we are getting it right?

In prayer we struggle to bring these and other tensions together; our desire for spiritual vitality conflicts with our desire to stay safe and resist the change that results from deeper intimacy with God. We might also feel pressure from our culture with its tendency to want to attain any goal by means of a ready made 'how to' programme and we engage in a spiritual battle against the enemy of all that is good and who determines to frustrate God's purposes in and through us.

Paul writes again to the Galatians (4:6) to help them

understand that with the advent of Christ we have been set free to live from our rightful heritage – as fully adopted sons and daughters of God and co-heirs with Christ of all God promises. Knowing and being known by God in this way comes with the privilege of intimate conversation – God has done his utmost to make prayer as natural and effective as the cry of a child to a human parent. And just as parental response is not constrained by an infant's skill in articulating need, so God stoops to meet us in our struggle to pray – he gives us his Spirit to pray in us (Romans 8:26,27). Andrew Murray points to an understanding of prayer as less about technique and more about simple awareness when he says, 'Our first work, therefore, ought to be to come into God's presence, not with many words and thoughts, but in the confidence that the divine work of the Holy Spirit is being carried out within us'.3 The good news is that the limits of language or even our wordlessness need not restrict our communication with God. It may at times even enhance it, since, as we have already seen, 'He does our praying for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans' (Romans 8:26—The Message).

I propose that our inability or even unwillingness to articulate our need to God signals not an end to prayerfulness but invites a new beginning. God's stooping to meet us in our helplessness and his capacities as the author of all creation suggest an infinite variety of yet to be explored ways in which we might commune with him in prayer. I further suggest that the recovery of imagination, an attribute we often leave behind on the journey to Christian adulthood, could be employed in our desire to reconnect with God.



A retreat I attended in the course of my training as a spiritual director proved unexpectedly painful as old ways of being with God were displaced by the new things he was doing in me. In a phone call part way through the week my husband asked how it was going to which I responded 'I feel like a paddock ploughed up for replanting'.

Invited by the retreat leaders to bring to community worship something to symbolize what we each were experiencing I offered a dried seed pod I'd found while out walking in the grounds of the retreat centre. Its dry,

shrivelled state reflected something of the lifelessness I felt at the time. A closer examination though revealed that as it dried, the pod had begun to split apart to expose the seeds inside - contact with the outside elements would eventually cause them to sprout into life and realize their hidden potential.

My own hope was rekindled by the reminder that every new birth is preceded by a dying of some kind and that despite my emptiness; I could trust God in the process of his being reborn in me.

### **Prayerful Reflection**

I wonder what might symbolize hope for you as you wait on God for the first green shoot to indicate new growth. If nothing in your immediate surrounds suggests itself perhaps you'd like to take a walk around your own garden or around your neighbourhood. You might like to go with this phrase in mind 'speak Lord, for your servant is listening'. (1 Samuel 3:9,10)

Record what you find or observe, by whatever means you enjoy — writing, drawing, modelling, photography, poetry etc. Do you notice anything else as you do this or further reflect on your discovery? I invite you to spend a few minutes each day this week, adding to the observations you have made about what represents hope for you at this time.



I hope you are pleasantly surprised to find that whatever direction your observations in the preceding exercise took you, that you have been praying, because prayer is simply giving attention to God. Christian tradition describes the two main ways in which we focus on God as meditation and contemplation.

Simply put, meditation involves using our understanding, our reasoning 'to come to know the Lord in scripture and to grasp the meaning of his gospel message for us.'4 An emphasis on the intellect often accompanies the main prayer experience of those of us with an evangelical background and in combination with an accent on 'doing' rather than 'being' explains why sometimes our desire to pray simply 'dries up'. A way of describing contemplation, on the other hand, is the use of the imagination to engage with Gospel imperatives.

'The imagination is something which enables us to discover unique present meaning in a given moment of our life.' <sup>5</sup> It involves being part of the event we are contemplating, being there imaginatively; involving the senses in our appreciation of what Jesus wants to say to us. Contemplation could be described as what happens when we become absorbed in a good movie – we enter into the drama ourselves and as we do so, become aware of new meanings. Meditation is reflecting on that event and applying its lessons to our own lives. <sup>6</sup>

Of course, these two things often overlap, it is not always easy to describe our prayer as distinctly meditative or contemplative but if we ignore their distinctiveness it is possible to end up with a faith that informs our minds but leaves our hearts unchanged and our will unmoved. The goal of imaginative prayer is not a beautiful mystical prayer experience but a deeper and more solid commitment to Jesus and his kingdom.

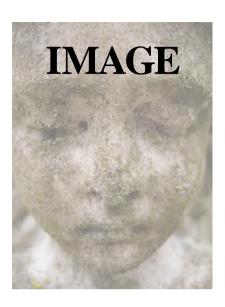
## **Prayerful Reflection**

Try this simple exercise based on Luke 8 - the story of the woman who dared to reach out and touch Jesus garment. Find somewhere quiet and comfortable to sit — somewhere you will not be interrupted. Quiet yourself in God's presence and ask him to take the words of Scripture and by the power of his Spirit to make them his word to you. 'A sk for the gift of a few moments of Spirit-guided imaginative encounter with Jesus'.' Read the passage of scripture several times slowly, preferably out loud.

'A s Jesus went along the people were crowding him from every side. A mong them was a woman who had suffered from severe bleeding for twelve years; she had spent all she had on doctors, but no one had been able to cure her. She came up in the crowd behind Jesus and touched the edge of his doak, and her bleeding stopped at once. Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" E veryone denied it, and Peter said, "Master, the people are all round you and crowding in on you". But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I knew it when power went out of me." The woman saw that she had been found out, so she came trembling and threw herself at Jesus' feet. There in front of everybody, she told him why she had touched him and how she had been healed at once. Jesus said to her, "My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace".' (Luke 8:42b-48 GNB).

Now put the page down and allow your imagination some freedom for a few minutes. Put yourself in the picture, as a spectator or as one of the participants in the drama. Try to imagine the sounds and smells of the crowd and the feelings of those involved. Resist the urge to analyze or derive a lesson from the encounter- simply be aware of your own reactions.

This exercise will be easier for some than others but I encourage you to persevere with day dreaming the event. If your mind wanders, don't worry, just come back to the scene and share Jesus experiences with him and enjoy spending time with him. 'God gave us Jesus as the Divine Image so we could gaze upon him and thereby come to know him'.' Do no more than simply offer your thoughts and feelings up to God. Remember, the Gospel holds the power to transform our hearts, not just our minds.



It is not necessary to adopt the practices of New Age or Eastern mysticism in order to engage in contemplative prayer but despite this reassurance, we might still regard with suspicion some of the new opportunities God is presenting. Sometimes we hesitate over new forms of prayer for fear they might lead us away from God rather then toward him. Sometimes we simply find it hard to let go of what is familiar even when it no longer serves us well; sometimes it's just that we are unsure of what to do with the new thing entrusted to us - like new parents holding a tiny baby for the first time.

Some faith traditions are rich in symbolism, some like the Baptist stream which has shaped me, are not, meaning my own engagement with images in prayer has been very tentative. I have needed reminding that our current facility with literacy is relatively new and that for

thousands of years the language of ecclesia has been that of images — what was symbolized by architecture, vestments, furnishings, colours, decoration, music, art and sculpture and of course the Eucharist, were all clearly understood by the congregation — you did not have to be able to read to participate in worship. Added to this, our scriptures are brimming with imagery — God is variously portrayed as a shepherd, a consuming fire, an immovable rock. Elsewhere Jesus is likened to a sacrificial lamb, a mother hen or a triumphant king while the Spirit is personified as fire, wind or as a dove descending. We understand Jesus himself to be the ultimate image; the invisible God become flesh.

Henri Nouwen says that prayer has much to do with imagining and believes that true prayer makes us into what we imagine. To pray to God leads to becoming like God... When we believe that we are created in the image of God and come to realize that Christ came to let us reimagine this, then meditation and prayer can lead us to our true identity.' 10

Paul wrote this to Christians in Rome (Romans 12:2) Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' Part of the reason for our need to reclaim the role and place of image in shaping our spiritual growth is that we are now immersed in an image based culture. The images we are exposed to every day by the flood of visual media we swim in are doing a fine job of shaping not just our preferences for clothes, food, skin care and cars but our spiritual reality as well, with little opportunity or encouragement 'to spend time testing their true meaning' 11 or to consider how they affect the way we think about God.

#### **Prayerful Reflection**

Give thought to the part images have played in your faith journey to this point in your life. One way to do this would be to draw a time line of your age to date and divide it into sections representing significant life stages – childhood, adolescence, teenage years, early adulthood etc. Or you could simply divide it by decades or half decades.

Having done that, think about the images that have informed your faith life at those particular stages and notice how they have changed (if at all). Ask yourself - what are the points at which change has occurred? What has precipitated the change? How has this impacted on your relationship with God?

You could also go and see a movie, a play, or a live performance of some kind this week or perhaps you've seen one very recently – what new possibilities did that present for your relationship with God? Did it change your image of God in any way or simply reinforce stereotypical images of God? Is there a friend or group of friends with whom you could share this exercise and discussion? How would you like to respond to what you have noticed as you undertook this exercise?



Progress in the spiritual life and in prayer has to do, at some point, with the setting aside of words – something that is uncomfortable for us since we rely on words not only to communicate our needs but to define who we are. My sister-in-law with her husband, went to live and teach English in China two years ago. Her early emails described her frustration over finding herself amongst throngs of people who spoke not a word of English and could or would not help her with the simplest of life's tasks like buying vegetables or catching a bus. Finding ourselves wordless makes us vulnerable and explains why we avoid being in that state even in prayer. Some of us have made the effort only to be put off by the 'videos replaying in our heads,' as Martin Laird so succinctly puts it. 12. We anticipate what might arise from interior silence with the discomfort we sometimes feel when prayer is

invited in a congregational setting — we steel ourselves to listen to the same recitation from the same people or wait in tension filled silence wondering what 'Lucy', who is slightly unusual, will come up with this morning. Often, our minds simply wander and 'all sense of Gad's presence seems to evaporate'. Determined pray-ers down through the ages recount similar struggles and a common theme emerges from their accumulated wisdom — the necessity to anchor ourselves to our desire to pray, with a promise or a truth from scripture.

You may read from a variety of spiritual traditions for ways in which this is done. Many Christians have returned to the use of the Jesus Prayer, an ancient Eastern Christian Prayer developed by the desert Fathers. The most common form being 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'.

For those of us wishing to remain faithful to biblical tradition the choice of words will be important. As we come to prayer, we might in the first instance ask God to help us to become aware of the thoughts that threaten disturbance to our desire to pray and then ask him for a word or a short phrase in response to those. For example, someone struggling with confusion, might use 'Show me your ways, O Lord' (Psalm 25:4), with anxiety -I commit all my troubles to you Lord God, for you care for me' (1 Peter 5:7), with fear –'Be with me to ddiver me Lord' (Jeremiah 1:8) and so on.<sup>14</sup> Or we might just use 'Jesus'.

The intention is that the quiet repetition of these phrases should gradually replace our 'obsessive drewing' on the

thoughts that bother us and enable us to get past them. The prayer word or words enable movement beyond a dialogue with ourselves to a dialogue with God, in which we are open to the gifts and opportunities disguised by the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings which accompany them.

I live ten minutes from a typical Taranaki beach, a beautiful rocky landscape prone to wildness in rough weather. Recently, we were battered for weeks by a strong Westerly and walking on the shore afterward I found some alien looking sea creatures flung up by the tide. I learned later that they were Portuguese Men of War - a very toxic relative of our common blue-bottle. As I pondered on how I felt drawn to them and repulsed by them at the same time I remembered a similar time from my childhood on our family farm, when damp weather produced fascinating looking fungi. Of course we were warned by our parents not to touch them since they were almost certainly poisonous and death to our small persons would be the consequence!

A few days after my beach walk I was reading in Psalm 50 '...the world is mine, and all that is in it.' (verse 12) and the thought came to me; I wonder what new discoveries my fears are keeping me from? Since God knows all about these things that to my mind are strange and dangerous, might I not safely go with him on a journey of further investigation?

#### **Prayerful Reflection**

I wonder if you also might entertain the thought that fear could be robbing you of some important new discovery. If so, I invite you to first ask God for a word or verse from Scripture to represent his presence with you and his promise to you before you pray. Find a space and a position that is comfortable, and become aware of your breathing as you enter his presence.

Pace your breathing to the words or syllables of your prayer word or phrase as you become engaged with the presence of God. Each time the distractions return, or fears surface become aware of your breathing once more and take up the words of the prayer again. Begin by experimenting with short periods of time with this form of contemplative prayer, doing nothing more than simply allowing yourself to be aware of God's presence with or around you.

You might like to journal your thoughts or impressions of God's response to your fears or other concerns as you engage with this type of prayer. A spiritual journal is not usually a chronological record of events but is a creative dialogue with God often involving colour, collage, drawing or poetry in addition to your own thoughts or prayers or those you find helpful in the course of your reading. Journaling in this way often helps us to see and remember the themes emerging from our prayer over time and sometimes leads on to other creative expressions of spirituality such as music, poetry, art or sculpture.



The assurance that we are not alone is what makes possible our journey in prayer. In our highly individualistic and competitive society though it is easy to forget that our journey is corporate as well as one of individual relationship to God through Christ. Experiences in prayer can be very subjective and every one of us needs to reflect on them in light not just of scripture, but the tradition of the Christian faith community and the shared life of others who are travellers on 'the way'.

None of us can evade the darkness which we will encounter if we truly desire to make all things obedient to Christ. He has shown us that it is only in dying that we are reborn to new life - one of the privileges of Christian fellowship is to keep vigil with one another in periods of

darkness— hold the Christ light for one another in the night time of our fears — in the words of a once popular song. However willing our hearts and spirits are to submit to the Lordship of Christ (Matt 26:41) we live in our body and in its world; there is reshaping to be done on the way to shedding the old and inhabiting the new (Col 3, Eph 4). That reshaping is often best accomplished in our interactions with one another and the challenges they present to our Christian discipleship. Our personal spiritual disciplines by themselves are meaningless unless they result in an expression of greater Christ likeness in regard to those around us — the proof of our own transformation lies in 'the persons we become and the deeds that flow from us'.16

It is all too easy to evade our responsibilities in this area in pursuit of personal holiness — to resist submitting to the wisdom of Christ in the contribution of others to our spiritual journey or to think ourselves so out of step with the experience of others as to remove ourselves all together from their fellowship. That is not to say that a new awareness and experience of our freedom in Christ might not awaken us to the need to ensure our safety from any personally or spiritually abusive situation, but essentially our practise of spiritual disciplines and desire for personal transformation is best considered in the context of community.

I leave you with these words of Dallas Willard as encouragement for the path you have embarked on:

'Spiritual formation in Christ is accomplished, and the Great Commission fulfilled, as the regenerate soul makes its highest intent to live in the commandments of Christ, and accordingly makes realistic plans to realize this intent by an adequate course of spiritual disciplines. Of course, no one can achieve this goal by themselves, but no one has to. God gives us others to share the pilgrimage and we will be met by Christ in every step of the way. "Look, I am with you every instant," is what Jesus said; and it is also what he is doing'. 17

## **Prayerful Reflection**

When my husband and I pruned the garden in Autumn we found a small, beautifully constructed nest – probably deserted by a fantail. As I thought about the bird preparing a nest for her eggs, then hatching and raising her chicks only to farewell them, it set me thinking about the cycle of the seasons of our own lives and the new opportunities each stage presents.

From a box of crayons select several colours to represent one (or more) of the four seasons of the year you currently feel the most affinity with. Use the colours to draw shapes or words on paper to express the way you feel about your particular season. What are the gifts of this current season of your life? Is there anything you need to say goodbye to in order to make room for what God wants to give you now. In light of your discoveries could you ask yourself how your giftedness might enrich the faith community that you are part of at this time?

Who would you like to share your discoveries with? Is there someone who would partner with you in prayer for the birth of the new opportunities offering themselves in this stage of your faith journey, both personally and communally?

#### After word:

By offering the preceding reflections I do not mean to prescribe your prayer in any way. There are an infinite variety of ways to pray and these suggestions are only an introduction. I hope though to have revived the hope that prayer is possible for those who have all but given up and to encourage you to further engage with some of the resources I offer in the appendix.

I also recommend you seek out someone you trust and with whom you can share something of what you are currently experiencing. A Spiritual Director is a person especially trained to assist another to discern the movements of God in that persons life. To find out more about the ministry of spiritual direction or for details of how to contact a spiritual director in your area, see page 24.

Although some experience of the desert is an unavoidable part of the spiritual journey for those who desire to grow in it, persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness should be expressed to someone competent to discern whether they are only temporary or require professional help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but of strength – in admitting our need we are at the same time inviting Jesus into the situation in whatever way, shape or form he chooses to disguise himself – his wisdom might just as well be uttered through your local GP or counsellor, as a wise companion or pastor. Giving up pretence and making myself vulnerable in this way marked a beginning for me – it has taken time but new life has emerged and I am confident, will for you also.

I pray as you read this that your imagination be enlivened by the Spirit of Christ within you, that you become newly aware of the presence of Jesus with you and that your experience of God, in person and in community, be enriched and deepened.

Robyn Lewis New Plymouth December 2007.

Dear Lord, give me the grace
to hold the past lightly
And to lay no claim to the future.
May my reverence for old wood
And my eagerness for new seasons,
Enrich this present time of growth
And find their rightful place
In the greenness now.

from 'Old Wood'.
By Joy Cowley, Aotearoa Psalms, Pleroma (NZ) 2004.

### **Appendix**

There are a wide variety of books to choose from to further your understanding and discovery of the role of the imagination to the life of prayer. My suggestions below are a selection of those most likely to be available from your local bookstore or public library.

#### Guided Prayer Reflections -

Sheila Pritchard, 'The Lost A rt of Meditation'. (Scripture Union: Bletchley, UK., 2003, 2004). Joyce Hugget, 'Open to God'. (Eagle: Guildford, 2000).

#### Biography -

Sue Monk Kidd, 'When the Heart Waits'. (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1992).

### Poetry and Psalms -

Michael Leunig: 'A Cartoonist Talks to God.' (Harper Collins: Pymble, NSW, 2004).

Joy Cowley, 'Psalms Down Under'. (Catholic Supplies (NZ): Wellington, NZ, 1996/1997).

Joy Cowley, 'Psalms for the Road'. (Catholic Supplies (NZ), Wellington, NZ, 2002/2003).

Ann Powell, 'Firesong'. (Steel Roberts: Wellington, 1999).

### About Prayer -

Margaret Silf, 'On Prayer'. (Lion: Oxford, 2004).

Phillip Yancey, 'Prayer: Does it Make Any

Difference?" (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006).

Thomas H. Green, 'Opening to God'. (Ave Maria Press:

Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977, 2006).

Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home*', (Hodder and Stoughton,: London, 1992).

#### Finding a Spiritual Director

If you interested in finding out more about the ministry of spiritual direction, in becoming a spiritual director or in find a spiritual director to accompany you on your journey into prayer I suggest you look at the SGM website -

#### www.sgm.org.nz

The Spiritual Growth Ministries Trust aims to enable people to develop spiritual resources for their life and work by deepening their relationship with God in Jesus Christ through spiritual direction, formation of spiritual directors, retreats and other experiences of prayer. The site will tell you more about the ministry of spiritual direction—by clicking on the Programme of Retreats and Short Events link then on the current years programme and scrolling down you will find a list of area contacts. These people will be able to tell you more about the availbitility of spiritual directors in your locality.

The Association of Christian Spiritual Directors -

(www.acsd.org.nz)

should also be able to direct you to spiritual directors in your region—details of a contact person to ask are available from their website.

#### Notes

- 1. Frank Laubach, 'Game with Minutes' in Man of Prayer. (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), 205.
- Eugene Peterson, 'Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places'.
   (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005), 276.
- Andrew Murray, 'Living a Prayaful Life'. (Bethany House Publishers, 1983, 2002). Quoted in Discipleship Journal, Issue 137, Sep/Oct 2003, in an article titled 'The Spirit of Prayer', 51.
- 4. Thomas H. Green, SJ., '*Prayer and Common Sense*'. (Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, 1995), 66.
- Esther De Waal, 'The Celtic Way of Prayer The
   Recovery of the Religious Imagination'. (London: Hodder
   and Stoughton, 1996, 2003), 5.
- 6. Green, 'Prayer and Common Sense', 67.
- 7. David G. Benner, 'The Gift of Being Yourself', (Downers Grove, II: IVP, 2004), 38.
- 8. Benner, 'The Gift of Being Yourself', 41.
- 9. Patricia S. Klein, 'Worship Without Words; the Signs and Symbols of our Faith'. Paraclete Press: Brewster, Mass., 2000), introduction.
- 10. Robert Durback, 'Seeds of Hope'. A Henri Nouwen

- Reader. (Image Books: New York, 1997), 114.
- 11. Esther De Waal, 'The Celtic Way of Prayer', 36.
- 12. Martin Laird, 'Into the Silent Land-the Practice of Contemplation'. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), 21.
- 13. Joyce Hugget, 'Open to God'. (Eagle: Guildford, 2000), 15.
- 14. Laird, 'Into the Silent Land', 55.
- 15. Laird, 'Into the Silent Land', 56.
- 16. Dallas Willard, Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What it is and How it Might be Done. <a href="http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?">http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?</a> artID=81
- 17. Willard, 'Spiritual Formation in Christ'.

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