

JOAN CHITTISTER

THE
breath
OF THE SOUL

REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER



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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Self-knowledge	4
2. Responsibility	7
3. Enthusiasm for life	10
4. Discipline	13
5. Constancy	16
6. Living in God	20
7. Prayer and action	23
8. Humility	26
9. Authenticity	29
10. Presence	32
11. Vulnerability	36
12. Gratitude	39
13. Routine	42
14. Prayerfulness	45
15. Acceptance	48
16. Patience	51
17. Change	54
18. Consciousness	57
19. Blessing	60

20. Awareness	63
21. Growth	66
22. Immersion	69
23. Righteousness	72
24. Responsibility	76
25. Intimacy	79
26. Inwardness	83
27. Formlessness	86
28. Purpose	89
29. Abandonment	92
30. Effort	95
31. Readiness	98
32. Involvement	101
33. Humility	104
34. Simplicity	107
35. Openheartedness	111
36. Universalism	114
37. Trust	117
38. Realism	121
39. Consistency	124
40. Integrity	128
41. Enlightenment	131
42. Attention	134

Introduction

This is a small book. More important, it is a very simple book. It does not teach a prayer form. It does not provide prayers for every occasion. It is not a history of prayer styles or theologies. It is neither a primer in prayer nor a discussion of the effects of prayer.

But it does attend to what we are most inclined to forget. It is a discussion of the attitudes that prepare us for prayer. It is an examination of what we ourselves must bring to the discipline of prayer—whatever forms it takes—in order to make prayer an authentic and real, a deep and profound part of our lives.

Prayer is the link to a life beyond the mundane, the daily, the routine, the immediate dimensions of life. It is the beginning of a relationship with the God who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is a relationship with both creation and the Creator. It grows us into the fullness of ourselves, both spiritually and psychologically.

But authentic prayer requires something from us, as well as from the God whom we seek. It requires, among other things, that we bring to it an open heart, a good deal of self-knowledge, constancy in darkness and a willingness to attend to the Light, even when all we can see is darkness.

Spiritual elders from every tradition anchor each chapter of the book. Their words carry us through a spiritual history that is tried and true. They set our sights. They give us the fruits of hundreds of years of spiritual search. They become the spiritual mentors of our own generation as they were of generations before us.

Each segment of the book is meant more to be a reflection on their insights than it is a lesson, in the educational sense of the word. It is not meant to be “studied,” it is meant to be absorbed. Each segment is simply another way into prayer and designed to be of the process of prayer itself. It asks the question, “How much self-knowledge am I really bringing to my prayer?” for instance. And it requires an answer—week after week, year after year.

None of the segments is ever finished, ever closed, ever fully resolved. They are all ongoing steps along the way, steps we retrace over and over again as we

do all the other parts of life, until they become the very breath we breathe, the vision and energy of our souls.

To aid in this deepening process of prayer, every section ends with a short sentence, a mantra, which, said over and over again throughout the day, hammers one particular quality of prayer or another deeper and deeper into our hearts as the days and years go by.

Finally, the Scripture passage at the end of each segment illuminates the process of prayer from the very core of the Scriptures. It embeds us in the teaching and the life of salvation history. It binds us and our prayer life to the very beat of the heart of God.

Read the book in any order that appeals to you as you begin. Read the same chapter as many times as you want before you go on to another one. Allow the mantras themselves to guide your prayer life for a while. Most of all, let the book pour gently into your soul. Don't swallow it whole. Let every segment wash over you again and again. Let each of them become your prayer until, eventually, the words begin to disappear and only the reality of them remains.

I. Self-knowledge

Pray as you can and do not try to pray as you can't. Take yourself as you find yourself; start from that.

✦ DOM CHAPMAN

Prayer forms are a good thing to cultivate in the spiritual life. They give structure to our prayer life. A prayer form tells us how to sit when we pray. It tells us what to say and how to say it—or better yet, perhaps, what not to say and how not to sit.

Prayer forms are designed to calm us down when we're too agitated to concentrate. They center us in the midst of the natural distractions and noise of life. In many cases, they even provide the content that a soul that is dry or weary or perturbed simply cannot always provide for itself. They fill the emptiness that

sets in when prayer becomes just one more effort I have too little energy to make.

No doubt about it: prayer forms are part of the superstructure of a serious prayer life. But they are not everything. Prayer is about a great deal more than simply the way we pray or even the prayers we pray.

The everything of a deep and demanding prayer life is an awareness and acceptance of the self. No rosary, no icon, no prayer corner can supply for the raw material of prayer, which is the self-knowledge that cements the relationship between the self and God.

The temptation with which we must grapple if we really want to learn to pray is the temptation to pray as if we were more than we are. More pious, perhaps. More accepting of the will of God, maybe. More ethereal in our concerns. More otherworldly, more a citizen of the next world than a pilgrim in this one.

But when all we bring to prayer is our holiness, what is the use of being there? What am I not facing in myself that really needs my prayer if I am ever to grow in the art of prayer and the mandate to become fully human—if I am ever to become more than I am in the spiritual life?

To grow spiritually, then, I cannot hide—even from myself. I must pray for self-knowledge, for the searing honesty that, with the grace of God, can bring me to the heart of God.

Self-knowledge saves us from ourselves.

MANTRA: *God, be merciful to me a sinner.*

Two people went up to the Temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: “I give you thanks, O God, that I’m not like others—greedy, crooked, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn.” The other one, however, kept a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said was, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

✠ LUKE 18:10–13

2. Responsibility

Never pray in a room without windows.

✦ THE TALMUD

The rabbis are clear: Prayer is not meant to make us into a world unto ourselves. We do not pray in order to escape the world around us. We pray with one eye on the world so that we can come to understand what is really being asked of us here and now, at times like this, as co-creators of the universe.

When God put humankind into a garden called earth, it was, Scripture is clear, to steward it to fullness of life. We were intended to keep the earth in good condition, to use it and develop it, to be fruitful and to multiply its creative energies, to do our part in bringing every aspect of creation to fulfillment.

What God did not complete, we are meant to finish. God gave us the plants and intends us to

garden and harvest them for the good of the entire world. God gave us the sun and intends us to use its energies in ways that maintain not destroy life. God gave us all the raw materials of life—physical, psychological and mental—and expects us to bring to full growth what was created in embryo.

We must learn to pray with more than ourselves in mind.

We do not pray for our own needs alone. We pray to become holy agents of the God who made us to care for the earth and all its peoples.

We are each workers in the garden of life.

Our most contemplative people—Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day—are those who most actively sought the coming of the reign of God on earth. We pray to become like them.

To be assured that we are living an authentic prayer life we must forever and always examine its fruits in us. Are we really more concerned about others because we have come closer to the God who loves them? Or have we turned prayer into a refuge from what being fully human demands of us?

Prayer is meant to bring us to see the world as God sees the world. It is meant to expand our vision, not

trap us in the world that is only ourselves.

Commitment to the needs of the world is a sign of the presence of God in us.

MANTRA: *God, give me the grace to “till and keep” the part of the world you have given into my care.*

God blessed them and said, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth—and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth!”

✦ GENESIS 1:28