

NYT OP-ED

I Don't Want to See a High School Football Coach Praying at the 50-Yard Line by Anne Lamott

Many of us who believe in a reality beyond the visible realms, who believe in a soul that survives death, and who are hoping for seats in heaven near the dessert table, also recoil from the image of a high school football coach praying at the 50-yard line.

It offends me to see sanctimonious public prayer in any circumstance — but a coach holding his players hostage while an audience watches his piety makes my skin crawl.

We are fighting furiously for women's rights and the planet, and we mean business. We believers march, rally and agitate, putting feet to our prayers. And in our private lives, we pray.

Isn't praying a bit Teletubbies as we face off with the urgent darkness?

Nah.

Prayer means talking to God, or to the great universal spirit, a.k.a. Gus, or to Not Me. Prayer connects us umbilically to a spirit both outside and within us, who hears and answers. Is it like the comedian Flip Wilson saying, "I'm gonna pray now; anyone want anything?"

Kind of.

I do not understand much about string theory, but I do know we are vibrations, all the time. Between the tiny strings is space in which change can happen. The strings are infinitesimal; the space between nearly limitless. Prayer says to that space, I am tiny, helpless, needy, worried, but there's nothing I can do except send my love into that which is so much bigger than me.

How do people like me who believe entirely in science and reason also believe that prayer can heal and restore? Well, I've seen it happen a thousand times in my own inconsequential life. God seems like a total showoff to me, if perhaps unnecessarily cryptic.

When I pray for all the places where we see Christ crucified — Ukraine, India, the refugee camps — I see in my heart and in the newspaper that goodness draws near, through UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, volunteers, through motley old us.

I wake up praying. I say a prayer some sober people told me to pray 36 years ago, because when all else fails, follow instructions. It helps me to not fixate on who I am, but on whose. I am God's adorable, aging, self-centered, spaced-out beloved. One man in early sobriety told me that he had come into recovery as a hotshot but that other sober men helped him work his way up to servant. I pray to be a good servant because I've learned that this is the path of happiness. I pray for my family and all my sick friends that they have days of grace and healing, and I end my prayers, "Make me ever mindful of the needs of the poor."

Then I put on my glasses, let the dog out to pee and start my day. I will have horrible thoughts about others, typically the Christian right or the Supreme Court, or someone who has seriously crossed me, whose hair I pray falls out or whose book fails. I say to God, as I do every Sunday in confession: "Look — I think we can both see what we have on our hands here. Help me not be such a pill."

It is miserable to be a hater. I pray to be more like Jesus with his crazy compassion and reckless love. Some days go better than others. I pray to remember that God loves Marjorie Taylor Greene exactly the same as God loves my grandson, because God loves, period. God does not have an app for Not Love. God sees beyond each person's awfulness to each person's needs. God loves them, as is. God is better at this than I am.

I lift up one of my grown Sunday school kids who is in the I.C.U. with anorexia. I beseech God to intervene, and she does, through finding my girl a great nurse later that day. (Nurses are God's answer 35 percent of the time). My prayer says to whoever might be listening, "I care about her and have no idea what to do, but to hold her in my heart and turn her over to something that might do better than me." And I hear what to do next — make her one of my world-famous care packages — overpriced socks, a journal, and needless to say, communion elements tailored to her: almonds and sugar-free gum. It's love inside wrapping paper.

Especially when I travel, I talk to so many people who are absolutely undone by all the miseries of the world, and I can't do anything for them but listen, commiserate and offer to pray. I can't turn politics around, or war, or the climate, but in listening, by opening my heart to someone in trouble, I create with them more love, less of a grippy clench in our little corner of the universe.

When I get onstage for a talk or an interview, I pray to say words that will help the people in the audience who feel most defeated. When I got to interview Hillary Clinton in Seattle a few years ago, we prayed this prayer huddled in a corner backstage — to bring hope to the hopeless.

Do I honestly think these kinds of prayers were heard, and helpful?

Definitely.

On good days, I feel (slightly) more neutral toward Ginni Thomas and the high school coach praying after games. I pray the great prayer of “Thanks” all day, for my glorious messy family, husband and life; for my faith, my sobriety; for nature; for all that is still here and still works after so much has been taken from us.

When I am at my most rattled or in victimized self-righteousness, I go for walks, another way to put my feet to prayer. I pray for help, and in some dimension outside of my mind or language, I relax. I can breathe again. I say, “Thank you.” I say, “Thank you for the same flowers and trees and ferns and cactuses I pass every day.” I say, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.

A walk is a great prayer. To make eye contact and smile is a kind of prayer, and it changes you. Fields and woods are the kingdom. You don’t say, “Oh, there’s a dark-eyed junco flitting around that same old pine tree; whatever,” or: “Look at those purple wildflowers. I’ve seen those a dozen times.” You are silent. There may be no one around you and the forest will speak to you in the way it will speak to an animal. And that changes you.

At bedtime I pray again for my sick friends, and the refugees. I beg for sleep. I give thanks for the blessings of the day. I rest into the vision of the pearly moon outside my window that looks like a porthole to a bigger reality, sigh and close my tired eyes.

I have the theological understanding of a bright 8-year-old, but Jesus says we need to approach life like children, not like cranky know-it-alls, crazily busy, clutching our to-do lists. One of my daily prayers is, “Slow me down, Girlfriend.” The prayer changes me. It breaks the toxic trance. God says to Moses the first time they meet, “Take off your shoes.” Be on the earth. Breathe with me a moment.