

WINNER OF THE FIRST PLACE EDITORS' PRIZE

A Godless Prayer

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Prayer means more to me now than it did when I used to believe in God.

I remember the first time I prayed.

Kneeling on the patterned floor of the upstairs church floor, I held my back straight and my shoulders back. The youth group leader began, "Dear Heavenly Father, I just thank you today for bringing all of these lovely people here today to share in this..."

I could feel the rigid soles of my shoes digging into my lower back. I cringed as the hardwood floor beneath the thin stringy carpet went to work eroding my kneecaps.

I wasn't sure if prayer was supposed to be this uncomfortable, so I peeked. Everyone else was silent and still, so I kept my head bowed. My right-hand fingers stayed laced around their left counterparts, and my palms and eyelids were as squished together as my seven-year-old self could mash them together as if the force with which I pushed related proportionally to the likelihood that this Jesus person would grant my wishes.

Dear Heavenly Father, I just thank you today for bringing all of these... I hastily search my working memory for how the prayer started and mouth the words that come to mind.

He kept going, as I struggled to keep up. "We ask that you open our hearts up to receive the message you have for us today, and that..." Multi-subject phrases and whole sentences came crashing at me like waves sending me panicking hopelessly back into the ocean.

...all of these people here. Please help us to understand the message... and to open our hearts... I'm missing whole phrases at this point - creating an unintelligible prayer that even God would struggle to understand. I start to notice a ringing noise just above the threshold of perception. It was an airy ringing of frustration in my ear that deafened any new words that would otherwise have made it through my ear canal.

But it doesn't seem like he sees an end in sight: "...and if there are any kids here for the first time, I just ask that..."

Oh my God, SLOW DOWN!!! I don't mouth this one, but I give up on the prayer. "In Jesus' name, I pray, Amen."

Amen.

This was about how the next prayer went. It was how the prayers the following week went,

and the one after that... all the way until the last time I prayed.

Sometimes I would pause and start to mouth my own words, my own prayer. But unwanted thoughts and external prayers would insert themselves and jumble my message. Eventually, I gave up, perfecting the art of mouthing word-for-word the prayer that came out of the ceiling speakers.

God was someone to whom I was simply a conduit through which another person's words traveled.

Is this what prayer is supposed to be like?

Am I supposed to be saying my own words?

Would the prayer still work if I take a peek right now?

Do I need to be mouthing my words for Jesus to get them, or can I just think them?

Why am I getting distracted at a time like this?

Why isn't God stepping in and giving me my own Godly thoughts?

For my friends, prayer seemed to come naturally. Every week they talked about having a personal relationship with God through prayer: talking with Him, feeling connected with His presence, *getting to know Him*. I wanted desperately to feel the symbiosis with God that my friends so openly expressed.

For me, prayer was never that profound, despite my willingness to say otherwise during small group time. Prayer to me was frustrating. It felt confusing and deceitful, nothing more than repeating words. When it wasn't, it was asking God to stop giving me nightmares and for Megan from math class to like me back.

But not my mother. For her, that relationship with God was more spiritual, more significant, more real. For her, God was the life raft that floated her to safer shores when her life was shipwrecked by hardships I could never imagine.

But I didn't have those hardships in my life. My grandparents weren't taken from me by Japanese invasions before I was born. Hers were. My adolescence wasn't spent moving between five military bases along the coast of a recently war-torn China. Hers was. I never had to spend the weeks of Chinese New Year celebrations bedridden with pneumonia in a Chinese hospital, isolated from even my family. She did, at just nine years old.

I just had scary dreams and an undiagnosed attention deficit problem.

But despite my needing to feign a closeness with God, our respective faiths in a mutual God was the strongest conduit through which I could share a deeper connection with my mom. So,

it flagged danger to our relationship when I told her I no longer believed in that God over the Winter Break of 2020.

Fogging above the stove, the currents of steam-plumed basil, lima beans, and *lao gan ma* chili oil, spread entropically across the kitchen, only to condense onto the cold glass door.

"You're too young, Joey. You will see when you grow up. I was like you when I was your age." She doesn't even look up, still standing at the stovetop. Her eyes remain locked on the chicken sautéing in the pan in front of her. Her gaze perpendicular to mine.

The air, dense with the love of a mother's cooking, usually buoys my spirits upwards. But this time, I only notice the stuffy hot air around me, making my face flush with bother.

I breathe in, filling my chest cavity with the heavy air of annoyance. I exhale audibly, making sure she hears me mutter "Oh my God." I lean back in my seat, putting my face in my hands and rubbing circles into my eyes.

I hear this comment all the time from my parents, disparaging my autonomy. I thought it was frustrating and denigrating when I was a sophomore in high school, let alone now as a sophomore in college.

This type of rhetoric only served to isolate my character as being *still in development*, as not being worth the time to be understood. But I don't even bother explaining how I feel to her. How do I expect someone who has no interest in understanding me to understand my plea to want to be understood? It was a paradox I wanted no part of.

But nonetheless, I push forward in futility, attempting to validate my newfound beliefs: "There's just no scientific proof for God, so I don't think he exists."

The words that come out of my mouth are sound waves that wash over her ears, but that is what they remain: sound. Not words. Words have meanings, and meanings are assigned by a listening and attentive brain. I know she isn't listening.

Nonetheless, it was enough to set her probing into the inner mechanisms of my agnostic atheism.

"Then how did the universe start, Joey? Do you think this was all just random? Do you know how unlikely life is if this was all random?"

"You can't be this naive, Joey."

For the briefest moment, I don't recognize the eyes that stare daggers into mine, like waves washing me onto craggy rocks and angry sea urchins. To her, my beliefs were only worth

the time to critique, not to understand.

I call her uneducated, despite her having exactly one more master's degree than I do, and our argument continues. More and more, I feel misunderstood and unseen. We ping-pong hostilities at each other like two castles on shores separated by an ocean, firing shots at each other into the fog. The meanings we give to each other's words dampen over time.

I don't see an end in sight, so I get up and leave.

Conversations about faith and religion ending like this were not all that uncommon with my mother. Nothing ever changes until the heated friction of our exchange eventually kills the argument, leaving me feeling unclear and unseen by my own mother. Disconnected. My thoughts impaired and unimportant.

My turn away from religion that December must have given some whiplash to my parents who had just a year ago sent me to Panama City Beach on a church youth group retreat. I decided to be baptized in the Gulf of Mexico on that trip.

The sky was vast and cerulean that day. It hung the sun high, blocked by nothing but squawking seagulls. Dozens of us from around the country lined up on the beachfront, facing the beaming ocean.

Pastor Paul stood thigh-high in the Gulf. He sported a megaphone strung around his neck and probably said something profound, but I was too involved in fixing my hair and wiping the sand off my body to hear it.

He invited out into the ocean those who wished to be baptized. One by one, God's children ran towards the ocean to be washed clean of their sins to begin anew.

Soon enough, it was my turn. My legs splashed into the small but turbulent waves. I saw my feet clearly through the calf-high translucently blue ocean against the off-white sandy backdrop. I walked further into the ocean. *This is it.*

“驼背! (*slouched back!*)”, my mother would always say about my bad posture. My shoulders were cocked back and my chest held high, knowing that I was being recorded and my mom would be the first to see the video and subsequently post it on her Facebook. My heartbeat picked up dramatically and so did my doubts. *Why is that what I'm thinking about? Shouldn't I be thinking Godly thoughts?*

I made my way towards Pastor Paul; my splashing steps turned into whole-body wading. *Wait. Why am I getting baptized?*

I looked down again, but I just barely made out where my feet end and the sand began. *What if*

God isn't real and the whole emotional experience of this trip has been a placebo? Am I lying to myself?

My feet were fuzzy splotches of golden-tan flesh, dug ankle-deep into the sandy white seafloor by the time I make it toe to toe with Pastor Paul. He looked me directly in my eyes. I crossed my hands over my chest and he asked "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" *What does that even mean?*

"Yes."

He cradled my head with one hand and placed the other on my right arm. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." My eyes were closed and my breath held. *What if nothing changes?*

I was submerged into the Gulf of Mexico.

Emerging from the surface of the ocean, I was oriented towards the beachfront, the saltwater wiped off my face, and my hands raised victoriously towards the heavens.

I had told my mother I was going to be baptized on this trip before actually deciding to go. I thought she would radiate with joy, that she would be proud that her son wanted to commit his life to the same God to whom she had committed. I was right about that.

But I was wrong about something else, that I would feel more in tune with my role as my mother's son, that she would see me more clearly for who I was, that maybe I could more clearly see myself.

I looked down at my feet, expecting newfound clarity.

Nothing had changed.

The blurring of my relationship with God didn't start my sophomore year. It started at that moment. That very moment that was supposed to define the start of my relationship with the Almighty. That very moment where I felt nothing, yet all the while expecting and claiming to feel *Everything*.

I continued this deception for another eighteen months, leaving a hopeful opening for the Second coming of Jesus.

But in the end, the rising tide of agnosticism, delayed by faith's passive serenity and the overpowering drunkenness of motherly acceptance, surpassed its threshold and flooded what was left of my soul's waiting room for God.

But tides retreat and eventually pull back, exposing the vulnerable underneath a layer of

sediment.

“How are you doing, Mom?” We were sitting down at the dining room table. I faced directly towards her but she looked perpendicularly towards the kitchen. Her house, compared to my dad’s simple cold home of a chemistry professor, felt warm. It smelled of nuts and candy, and the fireplace was ornamented with Chinese symbols for good luck.

Both of my grandparents were sick with COVID, and my grandfather was taken to the ICU for lung complications. An 88-year-old man with COVID-related breathing problems should be enough to set off panic alarms in anybody, let alone that man’s daughter, my mom.

“*Bu hao*, Joey. I’m really scared for my dad.” Her eyes were red and swollen. She had been crying before I arrived.

“I know, Mom. I’m really sorry.” I buried my head in my hands and wiped away the droplets from the corners of my eyes. There was still a foot of distance between my body and hers.

She looked towards me. I felt embarrassed. My mom had not seen me cry in years. “I know you don’t believe in God, Joey, but please pray for him.”

I reached out and placed my right hand on her shoulder. I shifted my chair over and I hugged her. Not just a *bye Mom I’ll see you tomorrow* embrace, but an *I know you’re hurting and I want you to know that I care about you* embrace.

“Okay.”

I wanted to say so much more. I wanted to tell her that I loved her and that I wished we had the connection that we didn’t have. I wanted to scream-cry *sorry for not being everything you wanted me to be*. But all that made it out were my tears, falling neatly within the stitching of her woven sweater. In that moment, our words didn’t matter. Our beliefs didn’t matter. What mattered was what was right then and there, that I was there for her, and somehow, she knew she had to be there for me.

I felt the rush of the cold Gulf of Mexico waters wash over me. I closed my eyes and held my breath, and for those next few moments, I felt accepted.

I don’t know what it was, but I prayed to something that night.

What I bowed down to that night was not the God for whom I was baptized. It was not the God to whom my mom cried and pleaded. It was not the God to whom I recited unintelligible prayers on a scratchy wool carpet. I remain agnostic towards those Gods.

What I prayed to that night was something so much more real and so much more tangible to me than the Christian God ever was: a connection with my mom. For me, existing within the confines of my embrace with my fearful mother was understanding. It was authenticity.

It was God.

For my mother, that was enough.