

COINCIDENCE

October 8, 2007

Edward S. Gleason

Shortly before my fourth birthday, early one afternoon I walked upstairs for a nap in my small bedroom at the top of the stairs. Springtime, the month of May, clear and sunny, lying on the top of my bed, covered by a single blanket, I was completely alone, except for my Teddy Bear to whom I told all my secrets. The window was open, curtains drawn; the shade flapped in the breeze.

Fully lit by strong, filtered sunlight, the walls were pale yellow, woodwork glossy white and still smelled of fresh paint. Wide-awake, I began to talk to myself. Conversation consisted of a single question, "Who am I?"

I asked the question aloud, "Who am I?" There was no answer. I asked the question again. "Who am I?" Still, no answer.

Looking up at the ceiling and its single light fixture, I repeated the same question, over and over and over again. "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?" At that moment, an amazing thing happened.

The question became objective, as if asked from above, outside, beyond my own body. I saw myself from the vantage of the light fixture, stretched out on the bed. "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?"

From this perspective, there was an answer - clear, strong, authoritative. "You are mine."

That experience never recurred, but the assurance remains. I am God's.

That moment marked the beginning of my life of prayer and provided a definition of prayer. Prayer is the presence of God.

Prayer happens in countless ways for vast numbers of people. It happens through words known and well remembered and in words too easily forgotten. It happens in silence, during the challenge of exercise, vigorous debate and conflict. Prayer happens while we are sleeping. It surely happens in words that appear, unsummoned, on the spur of the moment and through utterances that are wordless.

Prayer, no matter where and how and by whom it is expressed, is universal. We live in a world and universe where we are never alone. There is more. Some call what is more God, but named or unnamed, this context surrounds and defines us. Our life in its midst is prayer. Some who pray are Christian, others Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist or

from another religious persuasion. Some claim no known or acknowledged manifestation of the divine; still they pray, whether they know it or not. They speak of a "Higher Power" or give such power no name; nonetheless, they pray. There are no atheists in foxholes; all people pray, some time, some how, perhaps often.

The fact remains, however, that we hear almost nothing of the universal practice of prayer. Why? It is because nothing is more personal than prayer. Every other intimate concern of human life has been dethroned, made comfortable for common conversation. Prayer remains sacrosanct, reserved for the innermost recesses of private life.

Young naval officers once were taught that three topics were never to be discussed in the wardroom: sex, politics and religion. Conversation today revolves around these topics. The discussions that took place in my parents' living room and dining room avoided all mention of money or sex. It was unheard of to enter a house and ask, "So what did you pay for this place?" Real estate prices and sexual intimacies are now part of common parlance.

This is not so for prayer. Do you remember any recent conversation with friends or acquaintances that concerned prayer? It is rare. Even a monk seldom engages in the discussion of prayer in a social setting. Prayer is more intimate than sex or money or religion, more private than any other human concern. Prayer is at the very center of your being. Prayer defines the heart of our identity. Prayer is not a matter we choose to discuss. We would rather keep the matter completely to ourselves.

There are significant exceptions to the accustomed privacy of prayer. For ten years I served as Editor and Director of Forward Movement Publications, whose mission is to support people in their lives of prayer and faith. It was my good fortune to spend several hours every working day in conversation, through telephone, email and letter, with hundreds of persons who wanted to discuss what it meant to be a person of prayer. This was my rare privilege. Did these persons have such conversations with priest or pastor, lover or spouse, child or parent? This was unclear, but I doubted if these new friends, readers, clients, customers, spoke with another human being about what was absolutely central in their life: prayer.

They listened to God. They spoke with God. God listened to them. God engaged them. This led to an unusual opportunity: they welcomed me into the conversation that was their life of prayer. This was a new experience, a window into the greater reality that all people are bound together with one another and with God through prayer.

Most of them were Episcopalians, and so conversation about their lives of prayer often related to The Book of Common Prayer. These conversations made me realize that I was charged with drawing others into this book's rhythms, insights and patterns. In these conversations no prayer was mentioned more frequently than the Collect for Purity at the beginning of the Holy Eucharist:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 323)

This prayer sets the tone for private prayer, the realization that when God is particularly present, there are no secrets. This is one place and time when we are fully the persons God made and with whom God continues to dwell. As our lives open and respond to God's presence in prayer, we know the power of complete intimacy.

My life with The Book of Common Prayer Book began when our family knelt, usually for Morning Prayer, together in the pew on most Sunday mornings. Family life had two dear centers. The dinner table was one; corporate worship was another. The two were inter-connected. Table conversation concerned matters of importance: language, history, values, belief. The Book of Common Prayer was the source of coherence.

My parents were typical of many in their generation. They believed in the privacy and primacy of prayer. Once seated around the dinner table, however, we revealed what was most important. What was believed important by those assembled bound us together as a family. Dinner table conversation revealed the considerable amount of time my mother spent on retreats, sponsored by The Sisters of St. Margaret, retreats centered in The Book of Common Prayer.

My father was far more taciturn, but at the dinner table I discovered that those persons whom he most admired and of whom he spoke most frequently were men whose lives were rooted in prayer. These were the people whom he held up to me as models and mentors

It was inevitable that my Confirmation experience would be memorable. More than a dozen seventh graders met on sequential Sunday evenings with the Rector in his enormous office, and our Sunday school class that year was centered in The Book of Common Prayer and the event of our Confirmation.

Our Sunday School teacher, Mr. Carr, was more than six and a half feet tall,

imposing and impressive, who stood at the end of the table at which we all sat. He wore a black moustache, a gray suit, spoke loudly and clearly. He and his wife were now childless, their only son killed early in World War II. He didn't need to say it, for we all understood that we had become his children, his family. The class did his bidding and occasionally met together for a party in the Carr's house.

The curriculum in Mr. Carr's class was The Book of Common Prayer. Our task, as students, was not just to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, but to memorize. Memorize: the General Confession in Morning Prayer, the General Confession in the Holy Communion, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the General Thanksgiving. These assignments were not casual. In class after class after class, each of us stood, alone, and in turn, and recited what we had memorized. It did not take long before our recitations were done to perfect.

Although many of my professional years have been spent teaching secondary school students, I never followed Mr. Carr's model. It was so old-fashioned, so pedantic and authoritarian. The fact is, however, that it worked. What happened in that year-long process and in the moment that the Bishop of Massachusetts placed his hands on my head and said, "Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace; that he may continue thine forever ..." was a watershed. I was changed.

Each of us prays using words of our own choosing. For close to five hundred years The Book of Common Prayer has been created by the work of hundreds of persons and through repeated revision the Prayer Book has created forms and patterns to touch and guide the life of prayer. Prayer is the place where human life opens to the presence of God. More often than not, prayer catches us unawares, opportunities that occur when we allow its words to enter our lives.

This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.
Psalm 118:24 (BCP 39).

The only moment that truly exists is right now. It is all we have, all we know. The past is gone; the future is only a hope. What matters is right now. Pay attention. Let nothing escape notice. This is the moment in which God is present.

It happened at 11:30 P. M. on a September evening, as we turned into the driveway. My wife, Anne, wrote this poem to capture the moment.

Sitting in the corner of the garden.
She is statue still.

Our headlights catch the reflection of the
Screech owl's eyes –
Yellow-brown marbles.

No movement.

We freeze caught in the moment
Of surprise.

Mystery surrounds us.

Pay attention.

The event she writes of, a series of moments, has become a "now" so crystal-clear that it is ours forever. What makes this true? Was it the event itself? The fact that we stopped and watched? Or was it Anne's poem? It is all of that and more. It was the surrounding silence that invaded and controlled us. We were in the presence of an Other, enveloped by awe and the awareness that we were welcomed into the world God made. God was present, and we knew it.

This is the world in which we live all day, every day. Too seldom do we stop and pay attention. When we do, God is present.

The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.
Habakkuk 2:20 (BCP 40).

God is present in the silence.

The first summer of my two-year duty as a young naval officer was spent in Foxe Basin north of Hudson Bay in the eastern part of the Canadian Northwest Territories. Our ship had been sent to help supply and construct the DEW (Defense Early Warning) Line, being built to warn the United States of missile attack from the Soviet Union.

On a Tuesday, not long after we had crossed the Arctic Circle, heading north, just as I walked into the wardroom to sit down for lunch, the Executive Officer appeared at my side and said, "Mr. Gleason, the Captain would like to see you in his cabin."

Scared to death, I walked from the Wardroom to stand before the curtain that opened onto the captain's cabin and knocked on the door jam. The captain, said, "Come in."

Sitting at a round table covered with a green felt cloth he looked up, and without asking me to sit down, said, "Mr. Gleason, I have just learned that you majored in

Geology. I'd like you to collect some geological samples from this area, identify them, and I shall send to the Navy Hydrographic Office for comment.

"The Executive Officer has ordered an LCVP with a crew of three for your use for the afternoon. It is waiting at the gangway. Collect any tools you may need, dress warmly, go ashore and report to me when you return. That will be all. Thank you." I saluted, turned to leave and do as I had been ordered, still frightened.

The three seamen in the boat were as green and bemused as I. No one spoke as we left the ship's side, until finally the boy at the helm asked, "Where to, sir?" I gestured toward the shore in the direction of a collection of rocks of all sizes, marked by several large boulders. The boat nudged slowly next to a large flat piece of glacial residue, and I stepped ashore, none too gracefully.

"Lay off a hundred yards or so," I said. "Keep an eye out, and I'll wave when I'm ready. It'll be two hours, at least." I turned and began to climb the steep slope ahead of me with no idea what to do next.

After I'd gone two hundred yards, I turned and looked back. The ship, riding at anchor, seemed far away. I turned to walk some more. Here and there, stone cover gave way to what I thought was mossy tundra. Before long it occurred to me that I'd better do what I'd been sent to do, get it over with, and I stopped to chip several samples with my hammer, designed for removing paint and rust from the ship's hull. The samples went into the pail I had brought with me. Pail, samples and hammer were set atop a large boulder to await my return. Then I continued to walk, up, up the hill, until the terrain began to flatten out

When I turned to look back once again, the ship was even less visible, now in another world. I was alone, all alone. I could scarcely make out the thirty-eight foot LCVP that had brought me from ship to shore. The world from which I had come was unreal, toy-like. Only I was real, and now totally alone.

Or was I? Actually, I was surrounded by silence - complete and absolute silence. Everywhere, there was silence, palpable, real, enveloping. There was not a sound, not a single sound. There were no voices, no distant whir of machinery, no sounds from the water, or the noise of the wind. Since there were no trees, there was no way to hear the wind.

This did not mean, however, that there was nothing. There was something, something amazing, wonderful and life-changing. I was enveloped, encased, surrounded,

and uplifted, as I had never been by silence, complete and absolute. I had never been in such silence. It was overwhelming.

Through no action, no intention of my own, I knew I was in a holy place. I found a way to lie down, flat on the ground, my head on a small rise. There I remained, as still as possible, to look up into the gray sky and listen, just listen to the sound of silence, something I had never before heard. Time lost all meaning, and as it did, I knew what I was hearing was the voice of God.

God is present in the silence.

Watch, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. Mark 13: 35,36 (BCP 75)

God, whom we may know only in part, is always ready to enter our life. This opportunity is every day. The invitation that will make it happen - to open our lives to God's advent - is always ours. All-powerful and always present, God will never intrude, unless we desire it. We must offer the invitation. Any time, any hour of any day, will do. The choice is always ours.

The possibility remains that God will one day arrive with force in the fullness of time. How do we prepare for that moment?

An old friend, who would not consider himself a part of any worshipping body, wrote this poem:

When the tsunami draws back its fistful of waters
And crushes the city, let me for once be ready.
Let me be washing the dishes or patting the dog.

When the great windstorm angles across the flatlands
Hungry and howling, let me be patting the dog.
Let me be kneading the bread or picking an apple.

When the ground shudders and splits and all walls fall,
Let me be writing a letter or kneading the bread.
Let me be holding my lover, watching the sunrise.

When the suicide bomber squeezes the trigger
And fierce the flames spurt and wild the body parts fly,
Let me be holding my lover or drinking my coffee.

Let us be drinking our coffee, unprepared.

Watch. Sooner or later the meeting will take place. We prepare by living our lives

in the Presence of God, knowing that the moment of dramatic Incarnation of His Presence may take place anytime. In the meantime, we live our lives knowing God is present in the ordinary, life-giving patterns of daily life - washing the dishes, patting the dog, holding our lover, drinking our coffee, unprepared.

This is how prayer happens. This is how God happens.

The hour cometh and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

John 4: 23 (BCP p.40)

"When's the best time to trim that holly bush?" I asked my wise, older, and sometimes laconic, friend.

"When the shears are sharp."

When is the best time to pray, to practice the presence of God? There is no best time. All times are best; all times are right. God is always more ready to hear than we to pray.

He awoke as he always did, very early, in the still dark small hours. Surrounded by unnamed and unknown fears, he remained very still hoping the fears would pass and prayed familiar words, "Our Father, who art in heaven ..." Then again, and again. Silence. He listened. God listened. It set the pattern for the day to be spent in the presence of God, always more ready to hear than we to pray.

This is how prayer happens. When prayer happens, the presence of God enters our lives, and God happens.

This said the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy, "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."
Isaiah 57:15 (BCP 41)

Strong, resounding words. Words that announce and demand silence. They are spoken and heard with the authority that comes from God and declares God's presence.

Mother Theresa was asked what she said when she talked to God. "I don't say anything. I listen."

"Well, what does God say to you?" Mother Theresa replied, "God doesn't say anything. God listens."

This is what happens in the silence when we practice the presence of God. God happens.

May today there be peace within.
May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities born of faith.
May you use those gifts that you have received and pass on the love that has
been given to you.
May you be content knowing you are a child of God.
Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing,
dance, praise and love.
It is there for each and every one of us

On a Sunday afternoon in April I was the senior resident faculty member, alone in my dormitory study, when there was a knock on the door. "Come in," I called and an advisee, a senior about to graduate, entered the room. Without introduction, he asked, "Do you know Tim Stokes who lives across the quad in Arundel?"

"No," I said, "But I remember seeing him playing bass in the group that jammed on the steps of the Art Gallery last Tuesday after dinner. Why do you ask?"

"His father just called to tell Tim that his younger brother, age fourteen, had committed suicide. He's sitting over there in his room all alone. I thought you might want to go see him."

If I'd been honest, I could have said, "No I really don't want to go see him; I have no idea what to say." But I went.

As I approached the door to the student's room, I wondered if I had the strength to lift my right hand and knock. A voice from far within the room said, "Come in." Tim was sitting at the opposite end of the room in an old mission-style wooden chair, nestled in the window alcove. As I walked into the room, he looked up and said, "Hi, Mr. Gleason." That was all. "Hi," I replied and sat down on the bed.

"Tough news. Do you have any details?"

"Shot himself." There was silence. Mostly I remember only the silence. We both continued to sit there, averting our eyes. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of him looking at the floor. After a while, he turned and looked out the window.

"Look," I said. "I'd like to say something that would make everything all right. But I can't. There are no such words. So what I did come to say is this. I'm sorry. Sorry more than I can say. Everyone you know in this school - and they are many - is sorry. They all know, all of them. And they don't know what to say. So let me say this for them. Take care, for we care for you and for your brother. Wherever he is, he's in God's hands. And so are you."

As I stood and turned to leave, I said: "If you want to talk more, you know where to find me." I opened the door and fled.

Tim and I never saw one another again, not to this day, but last year he wrote me a letter out of the blue. The letter said, "Thank you. You'll never know how much your visit meant.

Some years earlier I received a letter from an old and close friend, who wrote, in part:

"Five years ago I had an operation on my spinal chord. When my Rector heard about it (I didn't tell him), he visited me before the operation. We discussed my surgery and whether I wished to be on the list of intercessions. My wife and I had made a decision not to tell too many persons about the operation. We prayed; we knew we had the Rector's prayers, and somewhat reluctantly agreed to be on the parish intercession list. But I didn't talk too much about the operation. I was certain that I could handle it by myself with my wife's help.

"It was a major operation that lasted fourteen hours, and I was hurting when it was over. Three days later my recovery slowed, and, suddenly, I believed there was no hope and wanted to die. My prayers had not worked, and I had been deserted by God. My world had gone totally dark and despair was my only thought. I had prayed hard, my family had prayed hard, and I thought that I was ready for this, but my world had gone totally dark.

"Then I asked to see a hospital chaplain, and shortly one appeared - a Jesuit priest. He looked at me and said, 'My son, we have taken over for you. We are praying for you. Let us do it.' Then he held my hand for a long time, prayed, and left. Suddenly, the room had color, I was relaxed, I stopped worrying. Everything would be all right. I knew that I would live. My life had gone from darkness to light

"The words of the Jesuit have stuck with me. 'We have taken over. We are praying for you. Let us do it.'"

The following was written to me by my wife, shortly after we had become engaged and one year prior to our marriage.

There was a blinding
Light from the stone
You have given me.

It first came as white light
And then as I watched it

It changed color
Clear and brilliant
A red
A pure green
A blue
A yellow

And then it went away
But in that moment
I knew our Love
Was as pure
And radiant as that gleam
And that I need never be afraid
For God had shown
His love in that light
And together we would strive for the Light and Truth
And when the way grows dark
We will take a minute
And remember
And once again
 See the Light.

Prayer is a process, a way of life that leads us on, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. It is powered by God's presence. Prayer is God's presence.

Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous. Be assured of one thing, the God who is present will give more than we either desire or deserve.

Grace is a gift that is completely undeserved and unexpected. Grace comes from outside, beyond a person. Grace is the presence of God, breaking into our life when least expected. No one has ever seen God but everyone has received grace.

Anne. Her name means grace, and I knew that, I just knew, almost from the very beginning. Anne had never happened to me before and will never happen again. Good or bad, each day spent with Anne is greeted with hope. Every day is not smooth. Some have been unwelcome, marked by death, disappointment, serious illness, and loss. The most memorable days have been most challenging, days when we cried, days that brought depth and strength, refashioning the love that draws and holds us together.

One happened in March. We were driving home from a sabbatical in Santa Fe. Early in the morning, traveling down a tree-lined road, crossing into Georgia from Florida, a fierce pain struck my forehead, threatening to split it open. Slumped in the passenger seat, scarcely able to see, out of no where loomed a large blue **H** at the side of the road. We followed it to the hospital in Thomasville. A wheelchair appeared; someone

rolled me into the Emergency Room and onto a gurney, left us alone and summoned a doctor.

Neither one of us said the words we were thinking, that we were convinced the end was near. Anne fished in my coat pocket and produced the well-worn 17th century silver crucifix she had given me. "Here," she said, "Here, hold this," as she wrapped her hands around mine, and, together, we grasped the cross for dear life.

"I love you," she said. The words were life saving. "I love you, too." Silence. Our marriage might be coming to an end, but now that we had pledged our love **in** the presence of the cross, what else was there?

Singular moments, unexpected, mark each life. They linger, keeping the long ago alive and making it possible for the present to reinvent itself. "Pay attention," Anne often says. "Pay attention to what you've been given. Every moment is a gift."

God dwells in each moment. Each is a gift. Each is marked by prayer. Prayer is the presence of God.