

For God's Sake

What 147 elk taught me about prayer.

by Philip Yancey | posted 03/01/2006 09:00 a.m.

The author Brennan Manning, who leads spiritual retreats several times each year, once told me that not a single person who has followed his regimen for a silent retreat has failed to hear from God. Intrigued and a bit skeptical, I signed up for one of his retreats, this one extending over five days. Every attendee met for an hour each day with Brennan, who would give us assignments in meditation and spiritual work. We also met together for daily worship, during which time only Brennan talked. Beyond this, we were free to spend our time as we wished, with only one requirement: two hours of prayer per day.

I doubt I had devoted more than 30 minutes to prayer at any one session in my life. The first day I wandered to the edge of a meadow and sat down with my back against a tree. I had brought along Brennan's assignment for the day and a notebook in which to record my thoughts. How long will I stay awake? I wondered.

To my great fortune, a herd of 147 elk (I had plenty of time to count them) wandered into the very field where I was sitting. To see one elk is exciting; to watch 147 elk in their natural habitat is enthralling. But I soon learned that to watch 147 elk for two hours is, to put it mildly, boring. They lowered their heads and chewed grass. They raised their heads in unison and looked at a raspy crow. They lowered their heads again and chewed grass. For two hours, nothing else happened. No mountain lions attacked; no bulls charged each other. All the elk bent over and chewed grass.

After a while, the very placidity of the scene began to affect me. The elk had not noticed my presence, and I simply melded into their environment, taking on their rhythms. I no longer thought about the work I had left at home, the deadlines facing me, the reading that Brennan had assigned. My body relaxed. In the leaden silence, my mind fell quiet.

"The quieter the mind," wrote Meister Eckhart, "the more powerful, the worthier, the deeper, the more telling and more perfect the prayer is." An elk does not have to work at having a quiet mind; it feels content standing in a field all day with its fellow elk, chewing grass. A lover does not have to work at attending to the beloved. I prayed for, and in a fleeting moment received, that kind of absorbed attention to God.

I never saw the elk again, even though every afternoon I searched the fields and forest for them. During the next few days, I said many words to God and also sat silent in his presence. I made lists, and many things came to mind that would not have come to mind had I not been sitting in a field for hours at a time. The week became a kind of spiritual checkup that pointed out paths for further growth. I heard no audible voice, yet at the end of the week I had to agree with Brennan: I had heard from God.

I've become more convinced than ever that God finds ways to communicate with those who truly seek him, especially when we lower the volume of the surrounding static. I remember reading the account of a spiritual seeker who interrupted a busy life to spend a few days in a monastery. "I hope your stay is a

blessed one," said the monk who showed the visitor to his cell. "If you need anything, let us know, and we'll teach you how to live without it."

We learn to pray by praying, and two concentrated hours a day taught me much. To begin, I need to think more about God than about myself when I am praying. Even the Lord's Prayer centers first on what God wants from us. "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done"? God wants us to desire these things, to orient our lives around them.

How often do I come to God not with consumer requests, but simply with a desire to spend time with him, to discern what he wants from me and not vice versa? When I did that in the elk meadow, I mysteriously found that the answer to my prayers for guidance was around me all along. Nothing changed but my receptors; through prayer, I opened them to God. "For all things sing you," wrote the poet Rilke, "at times we just hear them more clearly."

Some have called meditative prayer a useless act, because we do it not for the sake of getting something, but spontaneously, as uselessly as a child at play. After an extended time with God, my urgent requests, which had seemed so significant, took on a new light. I began to ask for them for God's sake, not my own. Though my needs may drive me to prayer, it is there I come face to face with my greatest need: an encounter with God himself.

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