



HELP,  
THANKS,  
WOW

*The Three Essential Prayers*



ANNE LAMOTT

**Overview:** The document explores the nature of prayer, emphasizing its simplicity, honesty, and personal connection to a higher power.

### **Nature of Prayer**

Prayer is defined as communication from the heart to a higher power or force beyond comprehension. It is a private act, even when shared with others, and can take many forms.

The document encourages a personal understanding of God, using various names and concepts.

### **Simplicity in Prayer**

The author advocates for keeping prayer simple, using phrases like "Help, Thanks, Wow."

Prayer can be a cry for help, expressions of gratitude, or even feelings of anger towards God.

It emphasizes that all forms of communication with God are valid and meaningful.

### **Honesty in Prayer**

Honesty is crucial in prayer; expressing true feelings, even negative ones, brings one closer to God.

The document suggests that vulnerability in prayer can lead to deeper connections and understanding.

It highlights that prayer can occur in moments of desperation or joy, reflecting the full spectrum of human experience.

# PRELUDE

## Prayer 101

I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple.

Help. Thanks. Wow.

You may in fact be wondering what I even mean when I use the word “prayer.” It's certainly not what TV Christians mean. It's not for display purposes, like plastic sushi or neon. Prayer is private, even when we pray with others. It is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let's say it is communication from one's heart to God. Or if that is too triggering or ludicrous a

cry from deep within to Life or Love, with capital L's.

Nothing could matter less than what we call this force. I know some ironic believers who call God Howard, as in "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Howard be thy name." I called God Phil for a long time, after a Mexican bracelet maker promised to write "Phil 4:4–7" on my bracelet, Philippians 4:4–7 being my favorite passage of Scripture, but got only as far as "Phil" before having to dismantle his booth. Phil is a great name for God.

My friend Robyn calls God "the Grandmothers." The *Deteriorata*, a parody of the *Desiderata*, counsels us, "Therefore, make peace with your god, / Whatever you conceive him to be— / Hairy thunderer, or cosmic muffin."

Let's not get bogged down on whom or what we pray to. Let's just say prayer is communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or Goodness, or Howard; to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something

lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake . . .”

Wait, *what?* What did you say? I could die in my *sleep*? I’m only seven years old. . . .

“I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

That so, *so* did not work for me, especially in the dark in a strange home. Don’t be taking my soul. You leave my soul right here, in my fifty-pound body. Help.

Sometimes the first time we pray, we cry out in the deepest desperation, “God help me.” This is a great prayer, as we are then at our absolutely most degraded and isolated, which means we are nice and juicy with the consequences of our best thinking and are thus possibly teachable.

Or I might be in one of my dangerously good moods and say casually: “Hey, hi, Person. Me again. The princess. Thank you for my sobriety, my grandson, my flowering pear tree.”

Or you might shout at the top of your lungs or whisper into your sleeve, “I hate

anger or desolation or praise. Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence.

We can pray for things (“Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz”). We can pray for people (“Please heal Martin’s cancer.” “Please help me not be such an asshole”). We may pray for things that would destroy us; as Teresa of Ávila said, “More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones.” We can pray for a shot at having a life in which we are present and awake and paying attention and being kind to ourselves. We can pray, “Hello? Is there anyone there?” We can pray, “Am I too far gone, or can you help me get out of my isolated self-obsession?” We can say anything to God. It’s all prayer.

Prayer can be motion and stillness and energy—all at the same time. It begins with stopping in our tracks, or with our backs against the wall, or when we are going under the waves, or when we are just so sick and tired of being psychically sick and

these are probably the best possible conditions under which to pray.) Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite may be true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such miserable shape.

But in any case, we are making contact with something unseen, way bigger than we could ever imagine in our wildest dreams, even if we are the most brilliant, open-minded scientists and physicists of our generation. It is something we might dare to call divine intelligence or love energy (if there were no chance that anyone would ever find out about this). Prayer is us—humans merely being, as e. e. cummings put it—reaching out to something having to do with the eternal, with vitality, intelligence, kindness, even when we are at our most utterly doomed and skeptical. God can handle honesty, and prayer begins an honest conversation.

My belief is that when you're telling the

could use a hand,” it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real—really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table.

So prayer is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with Truth, with the Light. It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth in the world, instead of darkness and cold. Even mushrooms respond to light—I suppose they blink their mushroomy little eyes, like the rest of us.

Light reveals us to ourselves, which is not always so great if you find yourself in a big disgusting mess, possibly of your own creation. But like sunflowers we turn toward light. Light warms, and in most cases it draws us to itself. And in this light, we can see beyond shadow and illusion to something beyond our modest receptors, to what is way beyond us, and deep inside.

This is all hard to articulate, because it is so real, so huge, beyond mystery. Rumi said that all words are fingers pointing to

besides the silence, the pain, and the pause  
sufficient for me to stop, close my eyes, and  
turn inward.