“Compassion fatigue” is sometimes used to describe the feeling I am trying to get at, though technically the phrase refers to secondary trauma. Perhaps the best word is just “overwhelmed.” You open the newspaper to see a young father in Gaza carrying his dying child; anguish marks his face. You turn on the radio and hear about thousands mourning as they watch hearse after hearse travel across The Netherlands. You listen to an eloquent sermon on sanctuary and picture a fearful child shivering at the border so vulnerable, so far from home. The ache and outrage are deep; you cry out to God. But then, too, a strange and guilty numbness sets in.

Prayer may never have been harder than it is today. The ancients knew there must be an Other, whether as near as a tribal god or as far as the sun. The Bible announced a God who sought humankind in covenantal love, who created all and said “it is good.” Our medieval forebears inhabited a sacramental universe. Celtic Christians discerned a deep, interconnecting fiber linking earth and heaven, sense and spirit.

Now, such straightforward confidence is rattled by complex and wonderful learnings about the cosmos, and by centuries of suffering witnessed by history, literature, the camera. At night in the bathroom as a 12-year-old, I pored over pictures of the Holocaust, wondering how I would be able to endure such persecution if Jesus asked me to go through it. How else could I explain it? Like Dostoevsky’s Ivan, we find no adequate answer to justify why even one innocent child should suffer. The spiritual knowledge we seek cannot be reduced to one theology, one perspective, one containable narrative.

How could this not affect our prayer? To believe in a loving God, to trust that justice and mercy for the least of these is central to the kingdom of heaven Jesus taught, and to live with our hearts open to others—leaves all pat responses to suffering and grief like sawdust in our mouths. Of course, in the end, our best recourse may be indeed to name mystery for what it is truly: “mystery.” Indeed all theology, which is a very human undertaking, is a dance with the Unknowable.

Nevertheless, Love urges us on, God calls to us from a deep place in our psyche and soul, to risk a faith in search of understanding. Theology sounds dry, and certainly
can be, but wrestling with it can also bring hope, new possibility, energy for the work of justice, and life to our prayers.

Anne Lamott, in her recent book on prayer, describes her agnostic childhood. When they thought about it, her parents blamed God for some of the world’s suffering, citing the Crusades and the Inquisition. They were “too hip and intellectual to pray,” seeking spiritual food instead from the likes of John Coltrane, William Blake, and Billie Holiday. The New York Times was their trustworthy text. Not bad sustenance, but definitely not enough for Anne. She would eventually find her way to prayer through her missionary grandfather and a Mennonite babysitter. She hid it carefully so that her parents wouldn’t find out.

Probably for her parents, and for us, one of the biggest problems in prayer is what to do with our notions of power. Traditional views of power are equally hopeful and terrorizing. The power to defeat one’s enemy, to set things right, to provide a world safe for children is all too often the same kind of power that warps the good, kills the innocent, and continues the Hatfield and McCoy feud generation upon generation. Coercive power bends another to its will; by its very nature, it is not benign.

In 1998, I became acquainted with the Maori/New Zealand version of the Lord’s Prayer that we read today. It revived my regard for the prayer that Jesus taught. Here was the Trinity beautifully described: “Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver.” Here was the call to justice and well-being for all creatures. Here was the plea for forgiveness united with a spiritual prescription: “Forgive us the hurts that we absorb from one another.” Wow. Yet the most provocative and life-changing moment for me was its reframing of the last line: “Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever.” Triumphant and beautiful as these words are, the reframing to “For You reign in the glory and power of all that is love now and forever” was transformative for me.

Perhaps at first glance, this shift seems wimpy: so love is it? That’s the way that God’s power works? Where is my light-saver when I need it? For as long as it works well, we’d much prefer a power of immediate, concrete results. Yes, imperial force looks good on paper, but it doesn’t work in the long run. Just ask Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesus himself. In the complexity of the terror and sorrow reigning in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the only answer that force comes up with is more force. The end is destruction, or maybe a partial peace, but a peace fraught with unfinished business, erupting in dis-ease and violence over generations.
We need a different imagination, new metaphors for the way the Divine works. What if God’s power is like water, Marjorie Suchocki asks:

Water rushes to fill all the nooks and crannies available to it; water swirls around every stone, seeps into every crevice, touches all things in its path—and changes all things in its path... Would it be so strange to consider that the omnipresent God pervades us without at all displacing us? Energy waves regularly go through us. And we know that even within us there is a host of life forms such as bacteria. But this co-occupation of space doesn’t make us less ourselves. Why can’t the higher life form that is God also co-occupy us, flowing through and around and in us, even while remaining God, and while we remain ourselves?

Jesus often applied metaphor to describe God’s power in the form of parables. We head two short ones today about a mustard seed and yeast. Hidden in soil, in dough—what emerges over time, with the energy of light and a kneader’s hands, is something that—if we didn’t know to look for it—is quite amazing. Jesus revealed that God’s grace is not unilateral, but that the germinating power of love, in cooperation with the sower and the baker, with the soil and the flour, yields a surprise. Marge Piercy in her poem “The Seven of Pentacles” describes this hidden magic:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.
Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet...
Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.

Prayer works within this kind of power, joining Holy Mystery in the persuading, persistent multiplication of love. In our prayers as in our actions, we join God in the work of justice against the powers of coercion, greed, bitterness, enmity, and lies. We bring our minds, our hearts, our bodies... trusting the Spirit to multiply our tiny offerings of love into an exponential power for healing and hope, for bread and justice.

Sometimes there are words for this prayer, and in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus gives us an outline to begin. We are not to pray for me and mine at the expense of others, but to ask “our Abba” for the food that all need, for the forgiveness of sin and debt for everyone, for the Divine way of justice and peace to come to full flower on earth as it is in heaven. And we pray, O God, to strengthen us in the face of trials and temptations so that we stand firm in our conviction.

Yet there are times when no words come for our heart’s prayer: just a sigh, a longing, an ache, doubts, tears, anger, even despair. I remember when I learned that
sighs speak deeply of one’s sadness and one’s longing, and now when I inadvertently sigh, I try to listen to it. What is my sigh saying to me? And so the Spirit hears our words, spoken and unspoken, Paul says, helping us in our weakness, interceding with more sighs, “sighs too deep for words.” That which is barely coming to consciousness, that moment of empathy, that despairing glance at newspaper photo or an online headline—these moments are heard, are acknowledged by the holy ears of Love.

Prayer is drawn on the specific tablet of our person, and indeed for some, creating art is a way to pray, or taking photos. For many, music speaks the hopes and longings of the soul. Others find that contemplation and meditation, like inhaling to exhale, gives them peace and strength for the journey of justice. Some pray through visualization. A friend of mine has invited me and others to join him in imagining his tumors of red being swallowed by a blue Light. I often find myself praying when I write or read poetry or even theology. Others pray through work, through swimming, in the midst of pruning and mowing, while running or walking. There on the beach, where ocean meets shoreline, wordless prayer is perhaps the loudest spoken. As the Quakers say, “God meets our condition.” Prayer is turning our intent, however fragile, toward the Love that pervades the universe, the Love we call God. This is the Love that goes to the end of the earth, “losing nothing that can be saved.” iv

Lest we think that our praying could be in vain, we hear Gandhi reflecting on his life:

I know that the phrase ‘God saved me’ has a deeper meaning for me today, and still I feel that I have not yet grasped its entire meaning. Only richer experience can help me to a fuller understanding. But in all of my trials—of a spiritual nature, as a lawyer, in conducting institutions, and in politics—I can say that God saved me. When every hope is gone, ‘when helpers fail and comforts flee,’ I experience that help arrives somehow, from I know not where. Supplication, worship, prayer are no superstition; they are acts more real than the acts of eating, drinking, sitting or walking.

Let us pray in that hope, in that reality, in that Love. A-men.

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