

PERSONAL ESSAY

In Our Prayers

On a visit with her grandparents, writer **Brittany Shoot** witnesses the heartfelt beauty of epic, narrative prayer.

“HONEY, DO YOU want to join us for prayer?” Grandpa asked. Through the window of my grandparents’ trailer along a Florida state highway, the evening sun glowed orange on the horizon. Local news blared on the living room TV. In the bedroom, I could hear my 82-year-old Gram hoisting herself onto her creaky bed.

In my other life as a journalist in San Francisco, I don’t pray. Attending church is a compromise to please my grandparents or in-laws; blessedly, I’m rarely asked to go.

But my grandparents and I are unusually close. I visit them two weeks a year and call at least once a week. Grandpa, a retired minister, confides in me about his financial troubles. When she’s upset about a rift in the family, Gram calls me in tears because I’m the only one who can soothe her. Even though we don’t often pray together when I visit, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for them. So I sat down on a wooden rocker next to Gram’s bed and clasped her papery, pale left hand in my tanned, freckled right one.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this time together,” Grandpa began, launching into a recitation of our day’s activities. “And then, Lord,” he intoned, “Be with Clyde. Clyde can only wiggle his fingers now. He has that motorized chair so at least he can wheel around a bit. Hospice workers have probably gone home. Help the caretakers rest well, and give Clyde and his wife, Margaret, a good night.”

I listened as Grandpa worked through a mental checklist of several dozen names, one request flowing easily to the next. I learned my grandparents’ mail carrier, Linda, had recently lost her husband. Included in Grandpa’s mention of grieving Linda was a prayer for everyone in the whole world who had recently lost a loved one.

Shifting on the hard chair, I glanced at the clock. Grandpa had been praying for five minutes and had yet to mention anyone I knew. He’d managed to zoom out from one person’s loss to consider global suffering, and then back again.

“Lord, be with Kat, who lives in a tent in Apache Junction,” he continued. When he then mentioned her mother and brother, I had context: Grandpa was praying for a second cousin I’ve never met. I rarely even think about her. As far as I know, my grandparents aren’t in touch with her, either. Kat’s troubled life has been dominated by abuse and unemployment. According to Grandpa, she’s homeless, camping near Phoenix. How does he know that? Could Kat know he prays for her every single day?

Kat wasn’t the only fascinating revelation during that first night I sat in on Grandpa’s epic, narrative prayer—which lasted more than 20 minutes and included nearly everyone he and Gram had ever known or cared about. I learned that one of my stepbrothers was battling cancer. A cousin with a newborn daughter had difficulty nursing. Another cousin who’d gotten a job through nepotism was excelling despite his lack of qualifications.

Most stories were tragic; some amused me. But Grandpa passed no judgment; he merely gave thanks for the Lord’s continued blessing on all of his children, grandchildren, and our spouses. For years, Gram had been telling me that they pray for my husband and me. For the first time, I could appreciate the significance of being included in his lengthy blessing.

I also learned that the TV news wasn’t merely filling the silence. Every evening, Grandpa, a World War II Navy veteran, prayed for nations embroiled in war. He prayed for President Obama and the complex decisions his job demands. One night, after watching a devastating report on rampant sexual assault in the military, Grandpa asked special blessing for servicewomen and hoped aloud that the military would work to reform from the inside out. Even though we discuss current events and he asks about the stories I’m reporting, I’d somehow not known any of this was on his mind.

Praying to God is second nature to Grandpa, but perhaps more importantly, so is his sincere concern for others. Listening to him work his way down a mental checklist



in a time when wishing mattered 
Amanda Blake

compiled with heartfelt intention, I felt I was intruding on an intimate ritual. I also realized how obviously my life lacked a similar practice. When did I ever spend 20 minutes systematically wishing the best for all of the people I love?

One night, after we'd all agreed, "Amen!" and Grandpa and I kissed Gram good night, I stopped him in the kitchen. "Grandpa, I, um, like the way you pray," I said, suddenly bashful. Is the ability to pray a gift or practiced talent you can compliment? Grandpa's been a minister for more than 60 years. Of course his prayers are a powerful reflection of his personal style. He wasn't embarrassed. "Thank you, honey," he said, patting my shoulder. "You know, they say you're just supposed to talk to God." He paused thoughtfully. "So, that's what I do."

Just like that, I understood that we don't have to share a belief system. I can model his outwardly focused meditation practice in my own way and experience the same benefits. And I do.

Now, when I happen upon a quiet garden or chapel, I take five or ten minutes to reflect on the people I love and focus

intently on their deepest desires and well-being. I think about my husband's aspirations, big and small. I wish the best for his aging parents who love me like their own, and for his elderly godfather, gracefully coping with terminal cancer. I'm thankful for all our wonderful friends around the world. And of course, I think of my grandparents and their powerful example. In taking a few minutes to celebrate the individual dreams of everyone I know—and to grieve our collective struggles—I'm ever more grateful for our powerful, interconnected, far-flung support system.

On my last day in Florida, Grandpa told me that their friend Catherine had passed away the week prior. "The Catherine you pray for? You didn't know she died?" I asked, dumbfounded. He hadn't. No one had called to give them the news until that afternoon.

I realized that it really didn't matter. Before and after her death, two faraway friends had wished Catherine well every single day. That night, and in the weeks to come, they would continue to honor her memory by praying for her family instead. —S&H