

About Prayer: A Retreat

The late **Tom Flynn** (Obituaries page 75) wrote a yet-to-be published book on prayer from an ecumenical perspective. It has a very universal view – about the good heart, mind-training, virtue, and prayer as a form of meditation. Here is an excerpt:

You have lived a full, long life and are now in bed at home surrounded by your loved ones. See the situation. You are frail but conscious. Those you love, your family and friends, are gathered around. Death is always sad and discomfoting. Your family and friends will be experiencing sadness and distress. Now, as you lie there, look at the face of each person gathered around you. Soon you will never see that face again.

You will have made many happy journeys with your family and friends. You will have accompanied your children to and from school day after day, travelled to collect them after ball-games, gone on vacation together, joined them for birthdays and graduations. You will have journeyed to visit your children and grandchildren. Much as they love you, no one will offer to travel with you or join you on this final journey which you are about to undertake. This one you must make alone. Glance into the eyes of each person gathered around you. Think of that person and your relationship with that individual. How will he or she remember you? Were you a kind, loving, generous father, brother, son; a great-hearted, giving, gentle mother, daughter, sister?

Think about how quickly your life, this brief-flamed spark between two profound shadows, has passed, and try to recall what you always wanted for it. Have you reached anything near your full potential or fulfilled your purpose while on this earth, or have you paid lip service, or through tokenism, stifled your deeper inner yearnings, the quiet whisper of the Spirit and compromised for the sake of others, comfort, reputation, money – you name it. And remember that to her to whom much has been given, much, much more is expected. There will be many thoughts that



will come to your mind. Please stay with them and make whatever determinations are right for you....

During our brief lifetime we can choose the music and the lyrics to accompany that beat. While the drum beats we have the option to create a melody to accompany it which will help others on their journey or a solo we

play exclusively for ourselves. We can compose a song which will inspire and speak to others or we can sing silently just to please ourselves; one that will touch hearts, change minds, one that will be remembered and live on after us continuing to bless others. It's our choice. It's our song. It's our life.

And when you do think about death, doesn't it seem unfair that we have to leave our physical bodies so soon? Deep within we know there must be and is more than this; it just doesn't make sense to end in this way. Something indefinable inside us is always reaching out and inexpressibly hoping for more, but a more that will last. Somehow there has to be more. If we are favoured to live to old age, we may even be getting a glimpse of what it's all about when, bingo, the drumbeat stops and we have to vacate the planet. Like an escalator which we've been unconsciously standing on, we've suddenly arrived at ground level, we are no longer moving and now have to step off it...

In so many ways life is like a search for something we believe is missing and which we hope will satisfy us; and so often we wrongly choose the glittering fool's gold in the windows of our malls or in the shops of our towns and cities which we think will bring us happiness and freedom. You know the frustrating way that things in life never wholly satisfy us. No matter what we do or whatever we try, things are never wholly

fulfilling. We seem to be hard-wired into believing that there must be more. We think if we go there, have that, or do this, we'll be really happy. If we hear that there's a miracle-worker in Mumbai with whiskers coming out of his left nostril and one arm permanently extended towards heaven who every evening for thirty minutes replies in prophetic tones to every question asked him, we'll get on-line and reserve flights to India. If someone tells us that it's all happening on a mountain-top outside Auckland on the uppermost edge of an exhausted volcano that emits speckled green ash which, it is claimed, has miraculous healing powers, we'll apply for a visa and pack our bags. If we

loaded gold-mine, the ultimate winner's enclosure which will satisfy all our searching and all our needs.

For your sake, for our world's sake, please, please pray!

There is a world out there that is in desperate need and is waiting for us to fully participate in it. Who is going to rescue and, caringly, look into the frightened eyes of a young girl, stolen from her home and repeatedly used for sex; or an inconsolable mother, who to feed her younger children, has had to sell her five-year old daughter for a few miserable dollars? Who will comfort the battered, broken bodies of soldiers fighting unnecessary wars? Who will befriend and

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read that it's buried at the bottom of a deep underground cave which is half-filled with antique bat droppings, like children, we'll travel there, buy a shovel and bucket and start digging. If a book is published which contains a witches' brew of half truths, confused dogma, esoteric solutions and great-sounding, quick-acting, simplistic ideas, we're first in line to buy it.

We think so many things will do it for us, but time and time again, we find that they just don't cut it. A surfer can travel to every beach of every ocean looking for the perfect wave – the ultimate 'badass'; she'll never find it. She won't be precisely ready or it will break just a little too early or a fraction late. There is always something not quite one hundred percent right about things. A wine-lover who tastes every vintage available, will never find one that is precisely right and will satisfy him for evermore. Even if he does find a wine that he considers perfect, and buys in or lays down cases of it, he will either tire of it, his taste buds will decline or it will turn and he will begin his search anew. Operators and staff in the most acclaimed and highest starred Michelin restaurants become bored with dining in these sought-after establishments and look for alternative food to eat.

Throughout history this dissatisfaction has been noted by philosopher and mystic alike. Yang Chu, a Taoist who lived four hundred years before Christ, pondered, "*What is man's life for? What pleasure is there in it? Is it for beauty or riches? Is it for sound and colour? There comes a time when beauty and riches no longer answer the needs of the heart and when an abundance of sound and colour becomes a weariness to the eyes and a ringing in the ears.*"....

Clearly, despite all our searching, we are looking in the wrong places. We must stop looking outside for miracles ... prayer is the way into the inexhaustible treasure house, the

raise hungry, scared little children, whose parents have died of AIDS and who are left to fend for themselves in a hostile grabbing world? Who will heal the crumbled, needled bodies of deliberately induced drug addicts lying on the back streets of the inner cities of our world? It so frightens me that these are the neighbours I am called to love; that this is the brotherhood of compassion.

No, if you are really serious about making a change in your life, go a further step. If you are unable to think of anything suitable, choose from one of the following: Deliver food to the homeless for a week. And if you usually wear a nice suit and tie, or an elegant dress during the day, make sure you wear that when you do your delivery. Find a local soup kitchen. Go there and volunteer to chop vegetables, serve meals, and clean up afterwards. Go to your nearest food bank; help out for a few days. Visit someone who is sick and alone, and cook a meal for that person. Use public transport for a week. Call into a nearby prison and ask one of the chaplains, is there one thing you can do to help a prisoner in need. Read the local newspaper and find someone who has been hurt in an accident, a family who has lost a child, a soldier killed in a senseless war; anonymously send a generous bunch of flowers or a bank draft to that person or family. Commit yourself to reading, slowly and prayerfully, a chapter of one of [Buddha's teachings] every day for a month. Whatever action you choose, if it involves others, mix with the people, look into their eyes, listen to their stories, really see and meet them. And do it humbly, quietly, privately – remembering that "*I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.*" – Pope Benedict XVI