

## "Music and Laughter and Good Red Wine"

by John Shea

Introduction to *The God Who Fell From Heaven* (Argus Communications, Allen, Texas, 1979)

(This book is no longer in print)

In the living room of Andrew's home there hangs a banner. It stretches from the ceiling to the floor and is as wide as five smiling children. In red and blue it reads:

Where'er the Catholic sun does shine  
There's music and laughter and good red wine.  
At least I've always found it so  
Benedicamus Domino!

Stuck in the corner of the mirror in John's bathroom is a card. Every morning when he shaves, his face looks back at him over the words on the card.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may  
not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Above the sink in Alice's kitchen there is a shelf. It is uncluttered. "The only shelf in the house that is not a slum," she often says. On it is a slender glass vase with a single flower and a piece of decoupage wood on a simple wire tripod. Its wrinkled surface bears the words:

The air  
the mothering air, the hollows, nests of birds,  
these things remind me always of a God  
who holds us in herself as in a womb.

Any individual prayer may be, at best, beautiful and poetic or, at worst, routine and uninspired. But the fascinating thing about prayers is where they turn up. The prayer that leaps from Andrew's wall is an introduction to the hospitable man who owns the home. The prayer that John must face in the morning is the prayer which, in muted and subtle ways, people hear from him all day long. And Alice is a woman who dwells within a nurturing god who is bringing her to birth. In other words, what is fascinating is not the prayer itself, but the way the prayer reflects the life experience of the one who prays. Prayers must never be stopped at but must be gone through to the experiences that have generated them. Prayers may be written down in books but their real home is, the mouths of people.

"For all that has been - Thanks! To all that shall be - Yes!" is a beautiful prayer. It was written by Dag Hammarskjold and it reflects his life of praise, commitment, and courage. If we make that prayer our own, it is because it speaks to us. It picks up and expresses a conviction we feel and one which we want to deepen and make a guiding force in our lives. The first page of Nikos Kazantzakis's autobiography, *Report to Greco*, contains three prayers.

THREE KINDS OF SOULS, THREE PRAYERS:

1. I AM A BOW IN YOUR HANDS, LORD. DRAW ME, LEST I ROT.
2. DO NOT OVERDRAW ME, LORD. I SHALL BREAK.
3. OVERDRAW ME, LORD, AND WHO CARES IF I BREAK!

These prayers reflect the lifelong struggle of Kazantzakis to ride the harsh and demanding rhythms of the Mystery he found himself within. If we make his prayers ours, it is because we find in our life a struggle similar to the one which gave rise to his words. Unless the prayers we speak are tightly linked to the lives we lead, they will be babblings we hide behind rather than true speech which reveals who we are in relation to All There Is.

## Encounters

The aspect of life which individual prayers must reflect is the dimension of Mystery. As persons of prayer, we are sensitive that life is more than rocks, stars, and beetles. We are aware that we come and go within a More, a Whole, an Encompassing, a Presence. St. Paul's words resonate: "in God we live and move and have our being." This sensitivity is not the experience of God breaking into life from the outside but the experience of God breaking out of life from the inside. It is at first the suspicion and then the calm assurance that ordinary events reveal the extraordinary. Both the wrinkled skin of the newborn and the wrinkled skin of the aged are paths to the presence of God. Therefore, the goal of prayer is not to contact the missing God but to allow the present God to enter our minds and hearts.

Jesus knew this. Jesus was certainly, as current theology imagines him, a man for others. But he was also a scathing critic. One of his favorite targets was prayer. "In your prayer do not rattle on like the pagans. They think they will win a hearing by the sheer multiplication of words. Do not imitate them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him." What Jesus is rebuking is the underlying image of God which forms the context of pagan prayer. Their God is pictured as an oriental potentate stretched lazily on a divan in the sky. He is inattentive and unknowing. Far removed from the struggles of earth, he merely looks on with a mixture of disdain and amusement. Since this God is basically disinterested, the first move of the human person is to get his attention and the second move is to hold it by constant chatter. The moment the words stop the fickleness of this God takes over and his head turns to other matters. Also since this God does not reside in the human heart, he is a stranger to human need. He clings to the divine prerogative of noninvolvement and so he must be informed about human pain and possibility.

Jesus' experience of God is the exact opposite of disinterest and distance, and therefore his prayer life is radically different. The image of Jesus' God is drawn from the prophetic tradition of Israel. This God does not know coolness. He alternately burns with love and anger. He is an insomniac who paces the night skies, his mind mulling over plans and his heart set on seducing the freedom of his sons and daughters. So urgent are his plots that he does not allow people to sleep. He visits their dreams and his opening line is always the same: "I have something for you to do." We do not need to attract the attention of this God for he is after us. And long prayers about our wishes will only drown out the sound of his voice with its single message about the kingdom of love and justice and peace. This God knows our secret drives and the back wards of our souls.

Yahweh, you examine me and you know me, you know if I am standing or sitting.  
The word is not even on my tongue,  
Yahweh, before you know the whole of it;  
close behind and close in front you fence me round, shielding me with your hand. (Psalm 139:1-3)

For the pagans, God is distant and unconcerned and so prayer becomes an effort at contact and a plea for interest. For Jesus, God is both close and active and so prayer becomes the awareness of divine presence and the discernment of divine will.

Jesus' understanding of the God to whom he prays is reflected in the parables of the unjust judge and the friend at midnight. The common interpretation of these stories is that they are examples of perseverance in prayer. The judge does not give the widow her due at first, but because she is relentless in her request, he gives in. The friend does not gain entry into the house at first, but because he will not stop knocking, the householder finally opens the door and gives him the food he wishes. The point seems to be persistence. God is somewhat like an unjust judge and a sleepy householder, but our never-ceasing prayers will eventually turn him just and welcoming.

An alternate interpretation, leaning heavily on the prophetic tradition, identifies the cause of God with the widow and the friend outside and ourselves with the unjust judge and reluctant homeowner. This interpretation reverses our understanding of prayer. Prayer is not the verbal entreaty of a reluctant god but the way we relate and respond to a pursuing God. God is the widow, and if we will not give justice for the sake of justice, she will nag us till we give it out of embarrassment. God is the friend outside, and if we will not give bread out of friendship, he will knock till we give it out of annoyance. These parables are about prayer but they are not about how we should pray to God. They are about God's prayer for us-that we respond to his presence in the oppressed and the outcast.

In one tradition of the Old Testament the nearness of God is symbolized by what he owns. Human breath and blood belong to God. In the second account of creation God breathes into the nostrils of the man, his lungs fill, and life begins. The implication is that the inhalation of every person is the exhalation of God. Human life is sustained by divine breathing. Blood also belongs to God. When God searches out the murdering Cain, he does not confront him with the

fact that he broke a sacred law. Instead he says, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." Whenever blood is spilled, the God of blood is summoned.

God is as close to human life as breath and blood. But this pervasive presence of God can paradoxically lead to a sense of his absence. For a reality so near can be easily taken for granted and overlooked. Since God is everywhere, the feeling can grow that he is nowhere. The difficulty of becoming aware of the rhythms of our breathing and the rushing of our blood reflects the difficulty of bringing into awareness the presence of the God who is as close as breath and blood.

Awareness of this pervasive presence of God to human life often occurs in "limit moments." When we crash and when we soar, the Mystery we dwell within often enters awareness. When the power of life surges through us and funds us, a prayer of praise arises. "O God, it's good to be alive!" But when the power of the Mystery ebbs and seems to abandon us, we find a prayer of petition in our throats. "God, help me!" In moments of both hope and threat we become aware that we are inescapably related beyond ourselves.

In these times of the outbreak of Mystery, the word God enters the human vocabulary. This word does not point to another tangible object of our experience but acknowledges a felt Presence. The most natural use of God language is not the nominative but the vocative case, not the way of naming but the way of addressing and exclaiming. The example of the skier brings the experiences of soaring and crashing and the use of God language together. The skier stands on the top of the mountain. He looks out at the surrounding mountains which are stretched against the vast blueness of the Colorado sky. He exclaims, "O my God, how beautiful!" Then he looks down at the treacherous slope that twists below him. He exclaims a second time, "God, I could break my neck!" Mystery enters his awareness first through beauty and then through peril, and he acknowledges its presence by using the word "God".

Another example is the story of the girl who was blind from birth. At the age of twenty she received a gift of eyes from a dying donor. After the operation when the bandages were removed, she opened her eyes and quickly shut them. She was dazzled beyond her dreams. Then she slowly opened them a second time and exclaimed "O my God, how beautiful!" She did not see God. she saw the hospital room and bursts of color. This experience of sight catapulted her into the awareness of the infinite Mystery she participates in, and so the word God emerged as a way of address and recognition.

Paradoxically, it is not only in experiences of wonder but also in experiences of horror that people find the word God in their mouths. In situations of great poverty or oppression the prayer arises, "O God, we have to do something about this!" or "O God, this cannot go on!" At these times Mystery enters into our awareness, but the impulse we receive from it is abhorrence. The Mystery and all who participate in it are shamed. The evil situation radically contradicts the nature of God, and so prayer in the presence of this God becomes a summons to change. The ways of the Mystery are myriad and the prayers of the Mystery dwellers are the responses of sensitive souls.

It should be noted that at these moments the Mystery seems to be "on the initiative" and we are in a situation of response. This feeling is the experiential basis for the ancient theological truth expressed by St. John: "God *first* loves us." The traditional definition of prayer is "a raising of the mind and heart to God." What is often not understood in that definition is who does the raising. In so many areas of our life we prize ourselves as self-starters; in our relationship to the Mystery we are responders. Our minds and hearts are raised at the instigation of the Insider God. To say "I will now pray" - or as leaders of public worship say, "Let us now pray" - is most appropriately translated as "Let us be open so that we may respond to the touch of God." Prayer is not an activity we engage in out of a determined will but something that happens as a result of the impact of the presence of God, which comes as a gift.

If the winter winds swing in from the northwest and the weather stays below freezing, a tundra forms along the shoreline of Lake Michigan. If you take the Outer Drive north from the Loop, you can see the rugged peaks of ice, frozen waves, extending into the lake. They are beautiful to look at but dangerous to walk on. They are especially dangerous if you have recently lost two people you love and the day is the twenty-fourth of December. That is why Jim should never have been there. Today he says he isn't sure why he ventured onto the ice but he cannot forget what happened there. He remembers the tears, the loneliness, the hurt - and finally the peace arriving from no where and staying just long enough so the words "It's all right" were in perfect timing with his breath. It has been many years since that day, but in times of panic Jim remembers the words and peace returns like a promise that is always kept.

## Reflections

Since prayer arises out of our encounters with the Mystery of life, praying is fundamentally the way we position ourselves within this Mystery. What we become immediately aware of in praying is that we are creatures. The acknowledgment and addressing of God is simultaneously the acknowledgment and addressing of ourselves as creatures. The presence of God reminds us that we are not God. The prayer of the Pharisee has forgotten this. "I give you thanks, O God, that I am not like the rest of men - grasping, crooked, adulterous. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector. I fast two days a week and I give you one-tenth of my income." God does not hear this prayer, for, quite simply, it is not addressed to him. At the center of this prayer is the man himself. It is an exercise in narcissism. Creaturehood has been implicitly denied and God becomes a mere foil for the false glorification of the ego.

We never explicitly deny that we are creatures. The fact of limitation is so obvious that if we denied it, we would be laughed at. In an episode of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" the death of a friend spurred the members of the news room to speculate on the arrangements of their own funerals. All began their plans with "When I die . . ." But when it came to Ted Baxter, he began with "if I die . . ." Ted Baxter is a character who carries all our human pretenses out in the open. He expresses what we feel but manage to hide. In this incident he voices our misguided tendency to think that we are the indispensable center. The real reluctance on the part of many to pray may be rooted in the fact that prayer is a recognition that we are not self-sufficient. There is an element of dependency in our relationship with Mystery and we often fear situations where we are not in total control. Yet the real function of this dependency is not to debilitate us but to

free us from the burden of being perfect and encourage us in the task of being human. Our inescapable identity is that we, are creatures, and our only consistent access to that identity is through genuine prayer. We pray lest we forget.

Fred is a businessman, successful and self-assured. Stuffed in his wallet among the many credit cards are two holy cards. One was passed out at his father's wake eight years ago; the other was available on the table near the Remembrance Book at his mother's wake just last year. On the back of the cards are traditional prayers for the dead with his parents' names inserted. He has scratched out the formal names and inserted "Mom" and "Dad." Fred says these prayers every day. When I ask why, he says he doesn't know. I ask if he thinks that by praying for his parents he will help them in the afterlife. He says no. He knows they are in the hands of God who is more merciful and inventive than his prayers. He says again he doesn't know but that when he says the prayers, he remembers his parents and knows who he is. He says it is a way of keeping his head straight. In the more abstract language of theology, Fred is bringing to mind his creaturehood and the God who sustains it.

To pray is to affirm implicitly but powerfully that we are not ultimate reality. But after this initial recognition (and it usually entails a shock), a further positioning goes on. From our final and inescapable identity as creatures we ask what is the meaning of various events and how we should relate to them. Our prayer becomes the way we appropriate the depth meanings of the situations we find ourselves in. Prayer centers us in the life stages from the perspective of the basic convictions of faith. In the celebrated parallels of Ecclesiastes there is a time for every season under the sun, a time to live and a time to die, a time for peace and a time for war, a time for planting and a time for uprooting. The implication is that if we live long enough, we will find ourselves in situations of panic and peace, of tears and laughter, of gathering and scattering. Prayer becomes the way we will occupy each of the seasons of our life. Prayer is not an effort to escape the inevitable and ambiguous rhythms of living but a way of participating in them. Through prayer we know who we are and how to dwell in moments of both dance and stillness.

Through prayer Jesus understood and related himself to the events of his life. The Gospels portray Jesus' prayer life as a natural companion of his ministry. He prayed before he chose the Twelve and before the cure of the epileptic boy. On two occasions in particular Jesus' prayer becomes an act of understanding and positioning. After an initial fascination with the message and ministry of Jesus, the powerful and influential among the Jewish people rejected him. The religious authorities, those seemingly in the best position to understand the revelation of God, not only walked away but actively plotted against him. In this situation Jesus prays, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and clever you have revealed to the merest children." There could be many interpretations of this turn of events, but through his prayer Jesus seeks his Father's understanding of the situation and his will for it. The meaning that Jesus' prayer brings is that once again God is reversing expectations and choosing the lowly to bring about his Kingdom.

A second prayer of Jesus positions him with regard to his own death: "Father ... take this cup away from me. But let it be as you would have it, not as I." Here is prayer in the hour of darkness. Jesus' first instincts are to avoid death, but through his prayer he attempts to uncover

God's meaning for his death and to be faithful to it. Prayer is an act of our deepest selves through which we relate to the ongoing processes of life.

Jesus often began his teaching with, "if you have eyes to see and ears to hear . . ." Prayer can be understood as the cultivation of eyes that can see God's meaning and ears that can hear God's word. In both the Old and New Testaments the images of seeing and hearing are prominent. In the incidents of Moses at the burning bush and Peter at the empty tomb, three stages of seeing can be distinguished. At first Moses merely notices the fire on the Mountainside. Then he turns aside "to go and look at this strange sight Finally, God is revealed and Moses' mission is given. At first Peter casually glances into the tomb. Then he carefully scrutinizes it, and finally the truth of the resurrection is disclosed to him. Prayer is a process of sharpening our eyes so that glancing leads to scrutiny and scrutiny to revelation.

The image of hearing also unlocks the meaning of prayer. Solomon is wise because he did not ask for victory or honor or riches but for a "hearing heart," sensitive to the justice of God. The importance of ears that hear is succinctly stated by the psalmist: "Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire; but thou has given me ears." (Psalm 40:6) Prayer is the way we see beyond the flat finish of life to its true depth, and the way we hear beyond the many words the one word that will save us.

Prayer that becomes penetrating sight and acute hearing must be a process of reflection. This means that, on the one hand, it cannot be unconnected with the ongoing events of life and that, on the other, it cannot be immersed in them. If we would pray, we have to get away. We need sacred places and sacred times to remind us of the holiness of every place and every time. The Gospels say that at key moments Jesus withdrew to mountainsides and gardens and deserts to pray. He needed a time and a place to reflect and to search out the intricate ways of God's Kingdom. "His reputation spread more and more, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be cured of their maladies. He often retired to deserted places and prayed." Although prayer as a reflective process may not go on in those moments of life which William James called "booming, buzzing confusion," it is never far from personal problems and concrete possibilities. Prayer is not for its own sake as Jesus' warning reminds us: "None of those who cry out, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in Heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Prayer may occur in solitude but it reverberates in our interactions with each other.

Margaret found a "sack of pot" shoved way in the back of her fourteen-year-old son's sock drawer. She walked quickly from his room to the den where he was watching television and began to hit him. I met her on her way into church. She told me what happened and said, "I can't stand to look at him." She sat in the back of church with her thoughts and feelings and the God who at one and the same time hangs on the cross and lives in eucharistic bread of the tabernacle. On her way out I asked, "How's it going?"

"I prayed about it," she said.

"What did you find out?"

"He's not all bad and I'm not all good." She shrugged.

Prayer is what creatures do to their own lives before God.

## Connections

The notion that prayer arises from an encounter with Mystery and goes further to reflect through that Mystery on the events of personal life can give the impression that prayer is an isolated endeavor, a purely individual project. In fact, prayer is often construed as the way we keep our individual relationship with God alive. Just as we cannot maintain friendship with someone we never talk to, so we cannot maintain friendship with God if we never converse with him. While this understanding is partially true, it can be seriously misleading. The God that Jesus proclaims does not cultivate exclusive, one-to-one relationships. For Jesus, to experience God is to experience his Kingdom, reconciliation among people. To call God Father is to experience other people as brothers and sisters. There is no way we can have a relationship with God independent of our relationships with each other. "The man who says he loves God but hates his neighbor is a liar." Prayer to the God of Jesus must broaden itself to include the neighbor.

This unbreakable relationship between God, the self, and the neighbor is reflected in the parable of the unmerciful servant. The servant sincerely thanks the master for forgiving his debt and his relationship with him is sound. But then the forgiven servant throttles a fellow servant with the demand, "Pay what thou owest!" When the master is informed, he is enraged and considers his own relationship with the servant sundered. The import of the story is that thanking God is not enough. The proper response to God is to imitate his mercy and love. To respond to God, as Jon Sobrino, a Latin American theologian, has suggested, is to correspond to him, to do his work in the world. Genuine prayer is not only the recognition of God and the acknowledgment of our status as creatures but also the expression of our bondedness to one another. The poetess Anne Sexton says it simply: "To pray, Jesus knew, is to be a man carrying a man."

This binding together of God, self, and others is the fundamental dynamic of Jesus' central prayer, the "Our Father." The first two words, *Our* and *Father*, already establish the connection. The divine reality we call Father is something we share between us. For Jesus a person could only say "Our Father" if he had experienced God's love binding together the brothers and sisters. Yet two phrases later the prayer asks: "Thy Kingdom come." The position of the one praying is between an in it experience of God's Kingdom and the petition that it be more fully experienced. The question arises, How does one grow the experience of God, how does the Kingdom come more fully? The answer is cryptically given in the phrase "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." The import of the phrase is not that if I forgive you, then God will forgive me. This would merely be an even trade, a new business transaction that any clever person would engage in. Nor is the meaning only that when we forgive each other, we mirror the forgiveness of God. At its deepest level the phrase suggests that *in the very act* of our forgiving each other we experience the forgiving love of God. The experience of God deepens only when it brings reconciliation, when it is shared with the brothers and the sisters. The connection between God, self, and others is the heart of the "Our Father."



One import of this connection for our prayer life is that we pray for others. But the way of our prayer must be distinctively Christian. We do not observe from afar and then pray to a far God to intervene with solace and strength. We compassionately enter the life of another and pray out of the pain and possibility of that life. It seems that one way Jesus bound himself to others was that he prayed for them with them. With Peter he entered his impetuosity and fear and prayed that Satan not sift him like wheat. With the disciples he entered their temptation to division and prayed that they be one as he and his Father were, one. From the cross he understood the ignorance of his executioners and prayed they hear the word of God's forgiveness Jesus shared the lives he prayed for. We also must "take on" the thoughts and feelings of others, if only vicariously, so that our prayer is not condescension but our own voice joined to the voices of our brothers and sisters.

Jesus prayed for others through God. He did not enter their lives and pray on their own terms, for often those terms were either self-preoccupation or self-hatred. Nor did Jesus merely push his own agenda, thinking that in the last analysis all people followed the same rhythms that he did. Jesus merged and prayed with other people through the reality they shared in common and the reality that was capable of reconciling them the love of God. This means that Jesus' prayer for others is not just for anything. His prayer may include many petitions - strength for Peter, unity for his disciples, forgiveness for his enemies - but they are all variations on a single theme. His petitions for others are the same as his prayer for himself. It is the prayer that begins with his baptism, peaks in the garden, and ends in the life of the resurrection: "Whatever else, thy will be done." Only when the last line of all our petitions for ourselves and for others is the furthering of God's Kingdom will the God of Jesus be present.

These religious reflections on prayer are a backdrop to the actual prayers of this volume. Although they are billed as an introduction, they are really a postscript. I found myself praying the words of the following pages and then asked the possible theological basis for them. If the truth be known, I did not so much ask the question as other people pushed me into asking the question. These prayers are companions to those in *The Hour of the Unexpected*. In general there were two reactions to those prayers: (1) "I like them but how are they prayers?" and (2) "I didn't like them and how are they prayers?" This introduction is a hint of an explanation.

These religious reflections on prayer seem to yield three categories into which the various prayers of this volume can be loosely gathered.

*Encounters* records times when the Mystery clouds or clears our eyes, fills or empties our heart. These incidents differ from person to person and can bring feelings as diverse as wonder and terror. Any time at any place can be an occasion of the outbreak of Mystery. The one prerequisite is that business is not usual. At these times we are beyond the immediate and beneath the surface. We are in the zone of God.

*Reflections* records times of deepening, times when we make the Christian message our own. We may ask what it means to be thirty-five and holding or how Jesus, the Master of Shock, is also the Good Shepherd or what a real grace before meals would sound like. When we do this reflecting, we personalize the faith we have inherited. We allow it to take root in us and we

position ourselves as creatures and believers. Our faith may be encapsulated in single stark statements like "God is love", but its implications burst slowly, like delayed fireworks, over the long days and fast years of our lives.

*Connections* records prayers for other people, both friends and strangers. Hopefully these prayers are compassionate without being sentimental. Author Flannery O'Connor once remarked that sentiment was giving more tenderness to things than God does. Since in the Christian tradition the presence of God is both judgment and love, our prayers for ourselves and for others must be both affirming and challenging. If all our prayers do is stroke us, we only know a God of strokes. But the God of Jesus is the Lord of transformation or, in the little used metaphor of the Old Testament, a potter; and our unbreakable connection with each other is that together we live under the pressure of those shaping hands.

Although prayer is inevitable for anyone caught between birth and death, it can be marginal to the journey. At its best, prayer is not a way of being pious but a creative way of being human. It is an activity by which we own our days and nights and do not let life happen to us like an accident we are in but in no way caused. In prayer we appropriate the times of strength when power has to be channeled and the times of weakness when power has to be summoned. Prayer brings to mind and heart the identity we cannot escape. It holds together the line from Bernstein's Mass "How easily things get broken!" with the running cripples, seeing blind, and hearing deaf of Jesus' God. In the fifteenth chapter of Luke three things - a sheep, a coin, and a son - are lost and three things - a sheep, a coin, and a son - are found. Most importantly, after each finding there is a party. One of Jesus' most persistent images of God and the folks together is festivity. If that is true, in the last analysis the best image of prayer is "music and laughter and good red wine."