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Praying With Others

By Lindsey O'Connor
author, journalist

Under a near cloudless blue sky people walked in twos and threes, with families and alone, onto the lawn of the Castle Rock town square. With "The Rock" -- the landmark butte and namesake of this small town south of Denver -- rising behind them, they gathered just as they have every year for the past 20. Parents with babies sprawled on blankets and the business crowd in suits stood shoulder-to-shoulder with a tattooed man in camouflage pants and a woman in a T-shirt that read "Finding Faith Should Be Fun." An older man, sporting a plaid cap, eased into his place in the crowd. The green and gold clock on the town square struck twelve, the guitarist began to strum, and the emcee spoke into the mic.

"As we observe this National Day of Prayer," said Dan Weidman, pastor of Christ the King Church, "we recognize our dependence on God . . . Today's theme is Prayer: America's Hope." Thirty seconds later, the 190 people became quiet and the fire department's blue uniformed color guard lifted the American flag. "All uniform personnel, color guard, atten-tion. Carry colors. Hut. Forward march."

I'd been seriously thinking about prayer for the past month, not because of this National Day of Prayer event earlier this month, but because of Sarah Palin. And The Washington Post.

In an April speech, Palin mentioned that during the campaign she'd searched for someone in the GOP posse to pray with right before the vice-presidential debate, before settling on praying with her daughter. This made the news. On TV's Hardball, Washington Post reporter Lois Romano asked, "Why did she need to pray with anyone?" Newsweek journalist Lisa Miller asked the same question moderating

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The Washington Post online discussion group, **Women On Faith**. "What does that mean?" Miller asked. "Couldn't she do that by herself?...I don't get it."

But many evangelical Christians get it. Mollie Hemingway on the GetReligion blog posed this rhetorical question to Miller: "Does she really not know that Christians pray individually, in groups and corporately in worship?" Well, of course we do, but -- like a gnat buzzing my head -- I couldn't quit thinking about the question. Why do we pray together? Well, tradition, obviously. If I were Catholic, I'd pray the rosary. If I were Muslim, I'd pray towards Mecca. If I were Jewish, I'd don a prayer shawl. I cherish the richness of traditions, but I also want to understand and be able to articulate why I do what I do.

Then I thought of the scripture in Matthew 18:20 where Jesus said, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." As a kid I thought two or three others was The Ticket if you really wanted God to show up. I grew to experience the depth of solitary prayer, of resting, worship, meditative relationship prayers over "asking to get" prayers, but Matthew 18 still speaks to me. We believe God hears, cares, answers. That God can choose to work through our prayers is one of the great faith mysteries, right up there with grace.

Praying with others is also a comforting custom, in the way going to the movies and dancing and eating a fine meal is enriched in fine company. Sometimes, I pray with others for strength-- to receive it when I'm too weak or shattered or out of sync with God to go to him alone, and to lend it when someone else is weak.

Not everyone's comfortable praying aloud with another. Exposing bits of your soul before God with another is an intimate action and we are more comfortable with some people than others. Once as a kid I was paired up with someone for morning prayers at camp, a relational mismatch I dreaded as much as the powdered eggs. More often though, praying with others provides community and support. This idea led my friend, Kathy Groom, to found the non-profit organization, Prayer Sisters International, a network of women who meet regularly to pray.

Hearing others pray has also expanded my view of God, showing me different faces of relationship with Him. I've knelt with women and been awed at the depth and differences of prayers on lips and hearts other than mine.

In spite of my God-please-help-me prayers, I've learned that prayer, in whatever form, is so little about getting, so much about relating. Patricia Raybon, prayer advocate and author of "I Told The Mountain To Move," says most of us who call ourselves Christians get it backwards: "Ironically, most people pray first with others, probably at church or in a prayer [group] at work or even online, asking for things--not simply seeking Him. If they never develop personal prayer time, however, they can be in church for years and still not know who God is. (My own personal history!)" Raybon thinks Christ's example suggests we reverse our prayer priority.

Under the dappled shade of the budding cottonwood, the last prayers prayed, the last notes of "Amazing Grace" sung, the color guard marches down the sidewalk, then pivots

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right, carrying the flag away. As they walk under the county building flagpole, the large flag overhead snaps in the wind, as if on cue, saluting small town pageantry and faith. The crowd disperses, moms shake grass from blankets, business people walk across the lawn toward offices, the tattooed man leads his dog away. I see the old man with the plaid hat. He folds the green canvas seat of his camp stool over his arm, and ambles away from his place in the crowd, one minute in community, then alone. Like in prayer, I think, one is not a substitute for the other. This week if I pray with another I will have thought about why. I'm the better for having pondered the question.

Lindsey O'Connor is the author of several books, including "If Mama Goes South We're All Going With Her," "If Mama Ain't Happy, Ain't Nobody Happy," "[Working at Home](#)," and "Moms Who Changed the World." Her nonfiction work has appeared on American Public Media's Weekend America, and in Christianity Today, MomSense, and other publications. Her new memoir will be published next year.

BY LINDSEY O'CONNOR | MAY 19, 2009; 3:45 PM ET

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These posts sound shockingly like what we would have called "ugly Americans" displaying their ethnocentrism. In the past, we would have told the ethnocentrics, that what makes up another culture's understanding is not immediately accessible through our own cultural lenses, so simplistic critiques only display one's own vulgarity.

POSTED BY: MAILFORREBECCA | MAY 20, 2009 10:21 AM
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The thing I thought when hearing about Palin's comment was it sounded like Palin didn't think highly of her own daughter and if she doesn't like her own daughter what does that mean for the rest of us.

POSTED BY: NOSMANIC | MAY 20, 2009 3:05 AM
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Kinda disappointed in this article. Thought it was about *praying with others,*.... turns out it's about one group praying with *themselves.* :)

And apparently our flag.

Calling it 'national.'

Hrm.

Didn't realize any Evangelicals had a hard time getting together among themselves, only themselves, doing it near a military ceremony, and confusing it with America.

As Americans, if there are to be 'National Days Of Prayer,' it's not really *supposed* to be about individual Evangelicals getting over some not-really-there shyness about praying with more Evangelicals.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | MAY 19, 2009 8:27 PM
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A rewrite:

The recycling Big Bang started this all some billions of years ago. With it, came the gifts of Free Will and Future to all the thinking beings in the Universe.

This being the case, it is not possible to alter life and requests/prayers will not be answered. Statistically, your request might come true but it is simply the result of the variability/randomness of Nature.

So put down your rosaries and prayer beads and stop worshipping/revering cows and bowing to Mecca five times a day.

Instead work hard at your job, take care of aging parents, volunteer at a soup kitchen, donate to charities and the poor and continue to follow the commandments of your religion or any good rules of living as gracious and good human beings.

POSTED BY: CCNL | MAY 19, 2009 6:53 PM
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