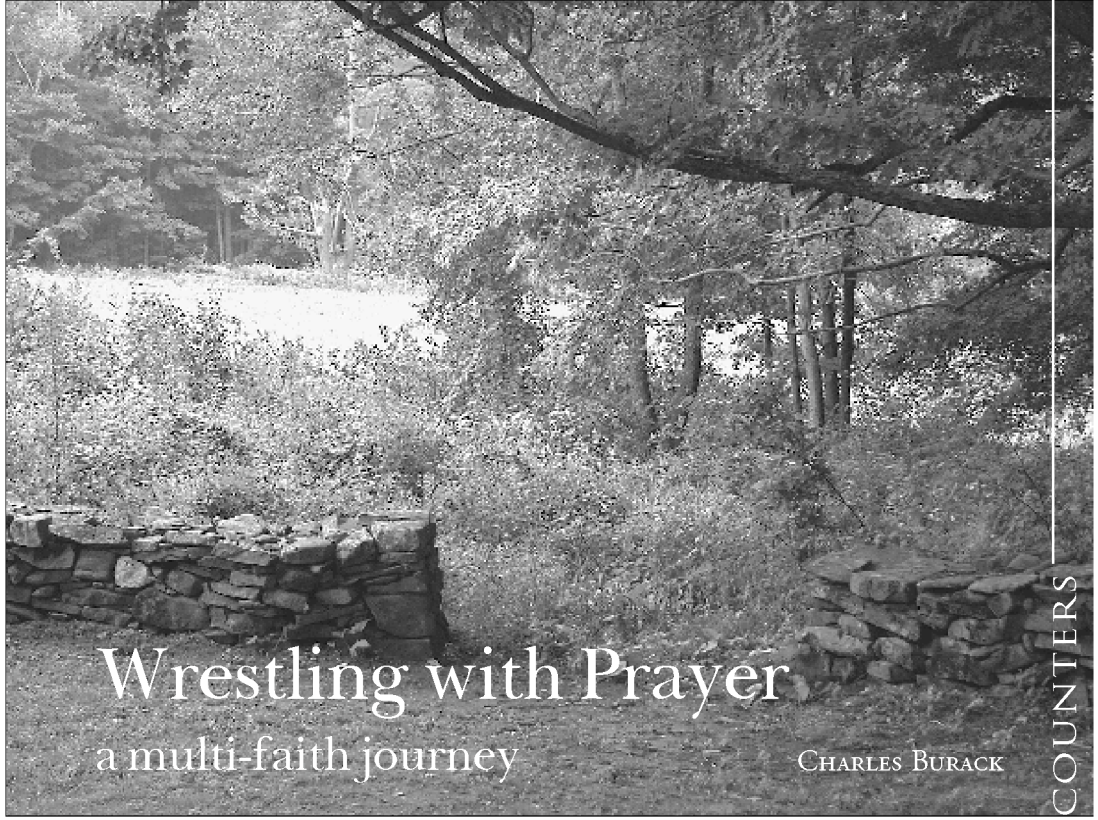

Wrestling with Prayer

a multi-faith journey

Charles Burack

Woods; photo, Cetta Kenney

When I was a boy, praying was as natural as breathing. I prayed when I needed to. I don't remember anyone teaching me how to pray. I just talked to God when I wanted to. I am not even sure if I thought of our talks as prayer. I just had an ongoing relationship with him.

In those early years, I experienced God as a kind of invisible great grandfather figure, very kind, very loving, ever willing to listen and help. I shared with him both the joys and sorrows of my little life. Though I knew God created everything and looked after everyone, I don't think it ever occurred to me to blame him for whatever difficulties I experienced – like the death of my grandmother or the torment caused by a neighborhood bully. I simply sought out and received God's sympathy and understanding.

At this time I also used to talk to the animals and the plants. It was obvious to me that all living creatures are sensitive and intelligent. I could also see that they were probably spending their days trying to be happy, healthy and safe. Behind our house

Dr. Charles Burack teaches literature, religion and creativity at St. Mary's College of California. He also teaches at Naropa University, Oakland, and the University of California, Berkeley. A widely-published writer and award-wining scholar, he is author of two books, including D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). He is actively involved in interfaith education, arts and counseling and can be reached at www.charlesburack.com

was a large woods filled with many varieties of trees, flowers, grasses, birds, reptiles, insects and small mammals. There were innumerable creatures to watch, listen to, and talk to! The chattering squirrels were particularly amusing as they scurried up oak trees, looked around and quickly ate their

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acorns. I never thought of my conversations with the animals as prayer, but in looking back, maybe it was an extension of my relation to God and his creatures.

Sometime in Hebrew school, we were taught the formal Hebrew prayers. Suddenly, there was a right way or best way to pray – perfectly pronouncing the Hebrew prayers aloud. Often, it seemed that perfect pronunciation was more important than understanding the meaning of the prayer. Indeed, the emphasis was on learning how to read not on how to make the prayer your own or even to understand its multiple layers of meaning.

My next great prayer challenge was to learn – memorize – all the prayers necessary for my bar mitzvah. This was no easy task! There were dozens and dozens of prayers, not to mention the Torah and Haftorah portions. For a year, I worked one-on-one with a tutor. My bar mitzvah day was wonderful. It's not that I prayed with deep fervor but that I "performed" the prayers with confidence and without mistake. Indeed, I often had the sense that formal prayers were performances. After all, didn't the cantor blow into his little pitch pipe before reciting certain important prayers? The singing of prayers could be fun, even uplifting at times, but it never quite seemed like we were really addressing God.

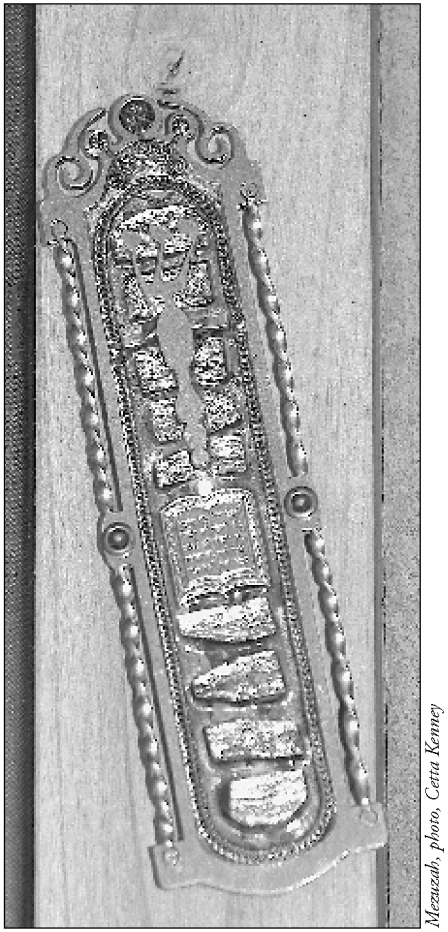
"Services" became authentic prayer to me midway through high school. I became involved in a United Synagogue Youth group at our local Conservative synagogue. In our weekly service, there was real "davening," real prayer. It was clear that a number of the kids were truly trying to communicate with God. You could feel the energy of yearning, of devotion, of sincerity. As I became more involved in USY, my appreciation of formal prayer deepened.

Also at this time, my friend Dave and I decided to take a synagogue adult study class on Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. The class was taught by an inspirational Orthodox rabbi and Jewish philosopher who normally taught at a nearby yeshiva (religious school and rabbinical seminary). Dr. Berkovits changed my life because he gave me a language – a powerful and beautiful language – to speak about my spiritual life. This was Buber's language of I and Thou. What I learned was that I often sensed God's presence whenever I related in a deep, mutual and unselfconscious way to another being. When I truly met another as a thou, we both experienced the divine Thou. In prayer, there was the opportunity for a direct I-Thou relation with God.

In high school I had already begun to question the existence of evil in the world. After all, the Viet Nam war was in full swing, and other wars and tragedies were afoot over the globe. And then there was the dark and ever-present fact of the Holocaust. Throughout my Hebrew school years, I had seen many documentaries about the horrors at Auschwitz and Dachau and Treblinka and had read books by Elie Wiesel. I also knew older members of the congregation with tattooed numbers on their arms. How could a good God allow such nightmares to occur? Yes, humans were created with free will, but why did God allow them to commit such depths of depravity?

In college, my relationship to prayer began to wobble. My faith in Judaism was soon shaken by my experience of other religious traditions. The town I had grown up in was half Jewish, and most of my grammar school and high school friends had been Jewish. Though I had some Christian friends, we didn't have many serious conversations about religion. My childhood world was mainly a Jewish world. But at a big state university, I suddenly found myself in a pluralistic world. Soon I became friendly with Catholics and Protestants and even a few atheists. I also met a number of Muslims from Middle Eastern and African countries. We had conversations on religion and politics that were both enlightening and disconcerting. Courses on psychology and philosophy also shook up my beliefs.

During my first year of college, I was already questioning if Judaism had all the answers, and even if there was a God. Was the Bible really the Word of God? How could a universal God have chosen one people over all others? How could a loving God sanction patriarchy, sexism, genocide? Why was there so much murder and mendacity in the world? In my sophomore year, I declared myself an agnostic and decided to no longer keep kosher and the Shabbat. I resolved to put Judaism on hold until I sorted out my convictions. Periodically, I would attend Shabbat services, but my heart wasn't in it. Prayer began to feel empty, almost delusional. Was religion, after all, the opiate of the masses, as Marx had said? Was religious experience nothing but a memory of the "oceanic experience" of being a fetus in the womb, as Freud had proposed?



Mezuzah, photo, Cetta Kenney

But my love of Jewish tradition was too strong to be put on hold for long. I loved the Shabbat, I loved the ethics of the prophets, I loved the festivity and meaning of the holidays, I loved the wisdom of the Sages, I loved the joy and loving-kindness of the Chasidim, I loved the honoring of life in traditional practices like *kashrut* (dietary laws). So I decided to go to Israel to learn more about Judaism before either rejecting or re-embracing it.

At a yeshiva in Jerusalem, my life was transformed. For the first time, I was living a fully traditional Jewish life, which included praying three times a day and fulfilling the many other mitzvot (religious commandments). In that year in yeshiva, I tasted the ecstasies of a semi-cloistered religious life. We were not confined to the yeshiva, but in fact most of the bochers (students) spent their days there praying and studying. I had some friends at Hebrew University, but I too devoted most of my day to prayer and study at the yeshiva. There was an intensity, even an ecstasy, to my daily life. The yeshiva community was truly a community of lovers of God. Their common kavanah (spiritual intention) was to perform every mitzvah with the aim of serving the divine and bettering the world. You could literally feel the divine presence during our davening (prayer) and our study of Torah and Talmud. The air was electric with the divine presence.

In yeshiva, the purity of my prayer as a child was finally wedded with the grandeur, power and wisdom of formal worship. Three times daily I would try to release myself into the spirit of the prayer and become one with it. The Hebrew words, which I now more fully understood and more deeply loved, became the carriers of my heart's longings and struggles, praises and petitions. As I learned more about the deep spiritual meanings and patterns in the prayers, I was transported even higher. And that

Labyrinth, original art, Lonnie Hanzon

spirit of prayer infused our study as well as our meals and informal conversations. Never before had I experienced such a devoted group of God lovers.

But the price of God intoxication was seclusion, or at least a very limited world. Soon after returning to the United States, when I was finishing my last year of college, I realized that the intensity of my yeshiva experience had been based on living in a relatively closed and contained world. It was a religious life, a spiritual existence, based on being cut off from much of the diversity of the world. I also remembered that when I had started yeshiva I had decided, under the influence of William James, to willingly "suspend disbelief" for the year. My experience of a traditional religious life had been based on the suspension of my doubting-questioning-modern mind.

Back at college, I was back in the thick of diversity, and my doubts were again raised. Yes, I had been profoundly transformed by Orthodox Judaism in Israel, but how good and godly was a religious life that now, upon my return to the U.S., seemed to cut me off from my family and my friends. Was religious life supposed to alienate me from the people I most loved? Once again, I was troubled by the twin issues of inclusion and diversity. Didn't an authentic spiritual life need to encompass the diversity of human beings as well as the diversity of existence? Wouldn't an authentic divinity be inclusive? Wasn't real love necessarily inclusive, even of those who had deviated from "the way"?

With all of these doubts and concerns, I still decided to enter orthodox rabbinical school upon finishing college. My interest in rabbinical school had arisen in my early teens. During my three years in USY, my love for Judaism became a consuming passion, and many kids in the youth group thought I would end up a rabbi. Even some of my public school teachers had encouraged me in that direction.

But during the first year of rabbinical school, all of my doubts, questions and dissatisfactions with traditional Judaism intensified and finally exploded. The end result was that I walked away from rabbinical school as a bitter, disappointed and disillusioned atheist. I not only rejected Orthodox Judaism, but also God and my own soul. All spiritual claims seemed like spurious constructions of the human imagination – fabrications which had done as much harm as good to humankind and to the earth.

The leap from boy mystic to adult atheist was immense, and the fall almost broke me. This was the darkest time of my early life. Sometimes I wondered if life was worth living at all. If so much of what I had loved and cherished about life was mere illusion, then maybe life wasn't meaningful or worthwhile.

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When I left rabbinical school, my prayer life was dead. There was nothing to pray to! And prayer itself seemed childish, foolish, a waste of time. Over the next few years, I sometimes drifted into a High Holiday service, but the whole experience was empty and alienating for me. I felt myself resisting and criticizing, not surrendering and affirming.

Life is full of unexpected miracles. In my late twenties, a half dozen years after leaving the religious life, I found my spirit slowly reviving. It was a gradual, subtle and spontaneous process. I did not will it to happen; it simply took place of its own accord, almost without my awareness. The cold shell of my skepticism and cynicism began to dissolve, and as it did, the magic of

Walking; photo, Cetta Kenney

life slowly returned. Once again, I was starting to feel that mystical sense of presence in my relations with people, with nature, and with my own inner being. Once again, I was beginning to experience the wondrous mystery and joy that graciously emerges when I truly encountered another. Once again, I was willing to affirm the reality of soul and spirit. But I was not willing to affirm the traditional God I had rejected, nor the traditional Judaism that went with it. I could only affirm an impersonal force that created, sustained and enlivened the universe.

It is hard to pray to an impersonal force. It seems silly, odd, and even unnecessary to speak to a mysterious, vast, impersonal energy. At this time, I certainly had a sense of appreciation for life and would share that appreciation with friends and family, but it seemed strange to express that appreciation in a prayer addressed to a nonhuman force. In short, my spiritual life had returned, but my prayer life had not.

In 1988 I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area not only to attend graduate school but also to experience the diversity of cultural and religious life. I knew that the Bay Area was a kind of Mecca for spiritual seekers, and I sensed that living there would further my spiritual renaissance. It has.

In graduate school, I met a young couple who were quietly Pentecostals. They were warm, hospitable people who invited me into their home for meals and wonderful conversations about religion and literature. When we sat down for a meal together, they would always offer a prayer. Though I had rejected the idea of a personal God who listens and responds to prayer, I was moved by the naturalness and sincerity of their prayers. Clearly, prayer was central to their lives. I enjoyed our times together so much that I asked my friends to teach me the Gospels.

About six months after we began our weekly Bible sessions, I was taking my daily morning walk in the Oakland hills. Suddenly, toward the end of the walk, I found myself thanking God aloud for the beautiful day. It was the first personal prayer I had uttered in years! I was amazed: spontaneously, I had offered a prayer. A part of me must still believe in prayer and want to pray! This realization delighted and confused me. The door to prayer had been opened again. While I didn't rush into that open door, I knew it was there and probably could not be closed. I also knew that the opening had been catalyzed in part by my experiences with my new friends.

Around this time, I discovered a new form of Judaism, called "Jewish Renewal", that blended the mysticism and joyful celebration of Chasidism with the best of progressive thinking and values. Jewish Renewal was a way for me to reconnect with Judaism and not lose my connection to and reverence for the diversity of the world. It offered a way for me to balance the particular and the universal. It also offered some of the best services I had ever attended. The *ruach* (spirit, fervor) was wonderful! There was joyous singing, dancing, chanting, and praying. Indeed, it was all prayer! It almost felt like I was at the yeshiva but without the sense of being in a small, closed world. Indeed, many of the Hebrew prayers (and their English translations) had been made more inclusive and gender balanced. This egalitarian spiritual approach felt right. It was an approach that honored both particularity and unity. It also brought body, mind and emotion fully into the spiritual life where they belong.

Over the next decade, I became more immersed in Jewish Renewal as

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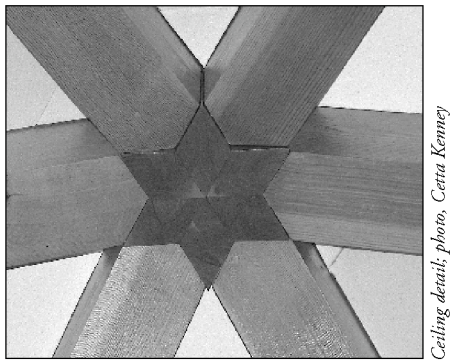

Ceiling detail; photo, Cetta Kenney

well as more involved in other spiritual communities. In the early 1990s, I began regularly attending a Buddhist meditation center. In *vipassana* meditation I discovered a spiritual practice I had been seeking all my life. Though I had done various forms of meditation since age fourteen, it was the practice of insight meditation that enabled me not only to attain a deeper sense of peace but also to gain life-changing insights into myself and the nature of existence. In some ways, "bare attention" meditation seemed a purer and more direct way than prayer to connect to the divine. Instead of imposing or projecting words and images onto the divine, one simply brings full, unmediated awareness to creation and to the divine presence in and beyond creation.

Meditation has both enhanced and marred my relation to prayer. When a prayer service includes meditation, the prayers become deeper and more transformative. Meditation opens up a peacefulness, spaciousness, alertness and clarity that can really enrich prayer. And yet the silent, wordless experience of meditation can also make prayer seem limited by the words and emotions it attempts to voice. Somehow the receptive silence of meditation seems to say more and include more than even the most heartfelt words of prayer. It is true that meditation can be considered a form of prayer, but it was verbal prayer that I had been struggling with for so many years.

My ambivalence toward prayer was present when I attended a workshop on Sufi healing practices in 1999. I was there because I had been hit by a terribly debilitating pneumonia the month before. The workshop leader was a former Jew who had converted to Islam after meeting a sheikh from Jerusalem who changed his life. The healing practices we learned were Sufi prayers. The Sufis believe that it is only Allah who can completely heal us. Human healing is at best partial and impermanent. During one of the workshop breaks, I spoke with the leader about some concerns I had. First, I had trouble chanting "Allah" because I associated the word with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. Second, I still found myself ambivalent toward prayer because it seemed kind of childish to pray to a Father-like God. In answer to the first question, he encouraged me to either substitute a different divine name or just try to let go

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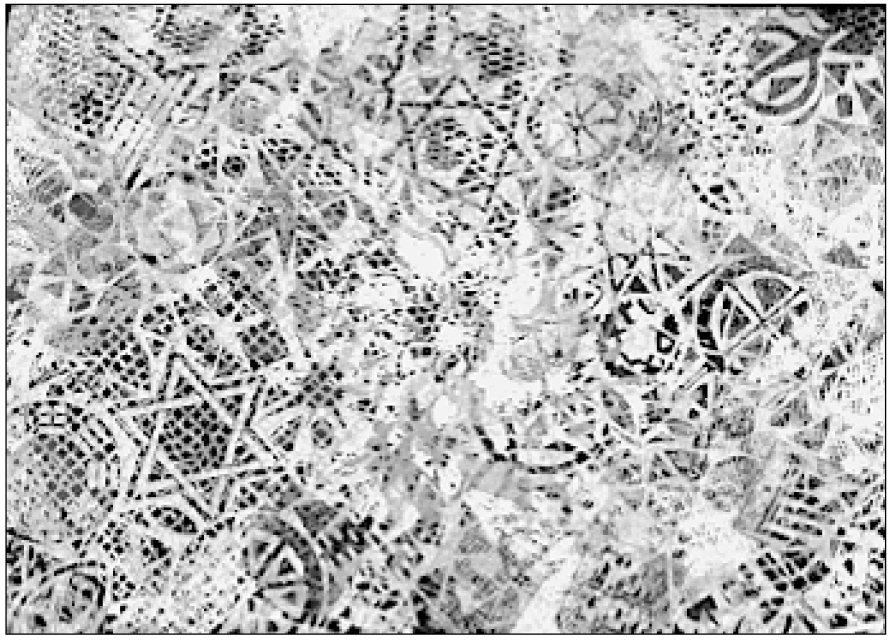
of my associations with the word "Allah" and allow the divine love to come into me. I decided to stick with "Allah" and let go of my resistance. In answer to the second question, he said "Well, maybe it is a childlike part of yourself that wants to communicate with God as a parent. What's wrong with that?" This simple reply pierced my heart, and tears filled my eyes. Yes, I said to myself, what was wrong with that? What was wrong with allowing a vulnerable, childlike part of myself to speak to the divine? When I returned to my seat, I realized that I didn't want to deny expression to the part of my being that wanted to pray. Nor did I want to judge that part of me by adult standards. It was important to relax my adult judgments and just let myself pray.

It took much more time to get over my ambivalence toward the word "Allah." But having been deeply moved by the workshop, I soon started attending Sufi zikrs. "Zikr" means "remembrance" and is a Sufi service that mainly involves "remembering" the divine presence and love. One of the central practices in a zikr is to continuously chant "Allah" and to simultaneously engage in various body and head movements. I immediately found zikr to be God-intoxicating and soon came to treasure it as one of the most powerful forms of worship. Amazingly, in the last few years, "Allah" has become one of my favorite divine names! Indeed, the very sound of "Allaaaaaaaaaaaaaah" is often enrapturing.

Last year, I married a Sufi woman. At our interfaith ceremony, both "Adonai" and "Allah" were intoned in the wedding prayers and blessings. How beautiful, how wonderful, to hear the two names in the same holy ceremony! The two ministers – one Jewish, the other Sufi – offered deep and heartfelt ecumenical messages. The service included a candle lighting ceremony honoring all the world's religions. Our guests were Jews, Sufis, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists and Hindus as well as friends unaffiliated with any tradition. Several guests told us that the ceremony was not just an interfaith marriage but also an interfaith healing. One of my wife's friends said the service helped her to let go of some resentments she felt toward Judaism.

In the last two years, my worship life has blended Jewish prayers, chants and meditations with key Buddhist and Sufi chants and meditations. Occasionally, I also attend Hindu *kirtans* (chant services) and a variety of Christian services. I have incorporated practices from other traditions because I have found them powerfully transformative and because they enable me to feel greater solidarity with and appreciation of the peoples



Unity and diversity; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

who have created those practices and traditions. My prayer life seems to be shaped by the rhythmic play of unity and diversity, tradition and innovation, stability and dynamism.

I try to shape my prayer life so that it is in alignment with my deepest convictions about love. I believe that the deepest, truest love is all-encompassing. I consider it essential to send love, blessings and healings to all peoples and to all beings – including those who are wreaking havoc on the world. The latter need blessings the most because it is from their sense of their own unblessedness – or pseudo-blessedness – that they maim and destroy others. I hold the nondual view that it is essential to see ourselves in "the other" and to recognize that we are all capable of the full spectrum of good and evil thoughts, impulses and actions.

My wrestling with prayer has not ended. I still struggle with the verbosity of prayer and with the sense that divinity is so much vaster and more mysterious than a Presence who patiently and lovingly listens to prayer. I often have a sense that prayer works in ways we don't understand. It is probably not about some intelligent, caring force simply listening and responding to our requests and praises. It is probably much more complex, subtle and mysterious than that. And yet an emotional part of me, and of many others, does need to express itself to the Source in heartfelt words.

In the last couple of years, I have noticed two contrary trends in my prayer practice. One trend is toward greater simplification. Often, I pare down a traditional prayer to its central line and then chant that line over and over and allow the verse to fill and transform me. Sometimes, I identify a central word in the prayer and chant it over and over again or simply hold it silently in my heart. Simplification is a way to reduce verbosity and to delve deeply into the essence of the prayer. The diverse impacts of sound and silence on prayer remind me that prayer is much more than the meanings of the words.

The second trend in my prayer life moves in the opposite direction. I find that when I stay with the simplified prayers for several weeks or months, a longing arises in me to give fuller expression and beauty to the prayers in my heart. I start to miss the grandeur and gorgeousness of certain traditional prayers and so decide to reinstitute them in their full form. Of course, after another few weeks or months pass, the simplification trend again reasserts itself. Perhaps this oscillation simply reflects my need to worship the divine in all the ways that I am capable – with words and with silence, with poetic gorgeousness and with simple plainness, with long verbal sequences and with very brief ones, with rapturous emotion and with deep equanimity.

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