

**CONFESSIONS OF A SECULAR PRIEST:
A STORY OF FORGIVENESS**
William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com
770-913-0506

*Prayer and love are really learned in the hour
when prayer becomes impossible and your
heart turns to stone.*
Thomas Merton

On a sunny Easter morning several years ago, I found myself sitting in church, unable to celebrate the resuscitation of a corpse. Instead, I found myself reflecting on what were attributed to have been some of the last words of Jesus as he looked down at his executioners as he hung from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). I wondered what personal significance a crucifixion that happened two thousand years ago could possibly have for my own life today. As I contemplated what kind of man could forgive his executioners during the agony of his death, I found myself praying that I could truly understand what it meant to forgive.

It was only a week later that my prayers were answered. I began receiving letters from an angry patient who threatened to file a malpractice lawsuit. I was so terrified at the time that it was not until many months later that I realized this may have been the answer to my prayers. I remembered the words of the English poet John Ingelow (1820-1897) who wrote, “I have lived to thank God that all of my prayers have not been answered.” Someone once told me to be careful what I pray for because I might get it. I had prayed that I could better understand forgiveness, but I dreaded what was being required of me to understand how to forgive. Although I knew that I had done nothing wrong, and in fact had handled a complicated clinical situation in a highly skillful manner, I felt like my whole world was coming apart around me.

*I had prayed that I could better understand
forgiveness, but I dreaded what was being
required of me to understand how to forgive.*

The fear of an imminent malpractice suit soon began to dominate my thoughts and overwhelm my life. I can still remember the day when my hands were literally shaking as I read the demand letter, from one of the largest law firms in the nation, sent by an angry patient’s lawyer who threatened to file a malpractice lawsuit if I did not pay his ransom by the end of the next week. It was the first of many letters that soon brought on panic attacks each time I checked the mail. Immobilized by fear, I was tense and frightened all day long and I couldn’t sleep at night. When I finally drifted off from exhaustion, I often awoke trembling in fear in the middle of the night. As my legal consultation bills mounted and the case began to take a toll on me emotionally and physically, I realized that there was no such thing as a “frivolous” lawsuit. The persistent threat of the suit was enough to drain the joy from my work. My days were being spent living in fear of an angry patient and an attorney who cared nothing about my life at all.

Trained as a behaviorist and neuropsychologist whose religion was mostly in my head, I had never had a mystical experience. Yet I told no one of that evening in the woods when I heard a voice out of nowhere softly declare, “I will protect you.”

A PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

In looking back at my ordeal, I realized that I learned the most about my faith during its absence. It was during my darkest hours that I discovered some sense of relief. As the old adage goes, when the night gets dark enough, you begin to see the stars.²

I take my faith seriously, partly because there is so little of it. One of my spiritual brothers told me that fear is faith turned inside out. In turning my faith inside out, my fear was tearing me apart. As a desperate survival strategy when I found myself in the midst of paralyzing fear, engaged in endless obsessive ruminations of what might happen next, I consciously tried to anchor myself with prayer. If fear is faith turned inside out, then courage is fear with a prayer added to it. Courage is also prayer plus action. I made a decision to turn the worst event of my life into a victory—and I decided to do it through prayer.

Fear is faith turned inside out.

I stopped myself from praying that the unending burden would be lifted from my shoulders, and I started praying for stronger shoulders. I stopped focusing on what was happening to me, and started focusing on what was happening *within* me. At times, I forced myself to stop thinking about my difficulty and start thinking about God instead. I stopped praying for what I wanted from God, and started praying for knowledge of what God wanted from me. I prayed the Prayer of Gethsemane—“Not my will but *Thy* will be done” (Luke 22:42; italics added). I prayed for God’s will—and the power to carry it out. At every decision-making point throughout the entire ordeal, I reminded myself to pray that I would simply do the next right thing. I used everything I had ever known about prayer, as well as some things I had never known but was

yet to learn. I followed the advice of the Reform Jewish prayerbook *Gates of Prayer* which reads, “Pray as if everything depended on God, and act as if everything depended on me” (1975, p. 376).³

I also remembered the Biblical adage, “Pray for those who spitefully use you”³ (Luke 6:28). In my own case, I transformed the verse, “Pray for those who spitefully *sue* you.” It had been forty years earlier in my life that God had given me a brother whose bright light now lit my dark path. My brother once told me that if I had truly forgiven my plaintiff, I would only have needed to do it once. Yet I found myself constantly praying to be able to forgive my adversary each time a new allegation was hurled my way. At least for me, forgiveness had become more of a process than an event.

I prayed daily and continually for my persecutors, asking that God would “Forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). As I silently spoke my prayers of forgiveness each day, I contemplated what kind of man could forgive his executioners during the agony of his death. I gradually began to realize what personal significance a crucifixion two thousand years ago could have for my own life today. No longer concerned with the resuscitation of a corpse, I began to experience the resurrection of my spirit. For me, the truth of the resurrection is found in the change of those whose lives are touched by it.

As I found myself praying to understand what it meant to forgive, I found myself understanding what it meant to live.

FAITH TURNED INSIDE OUT

It was in looking back two years later that I saw the answers to my prayer. My experience taught me that when we pray to better understand forgiveness, we don't pray for the trials that teach us to forgive. We pray for wisdom, but we don't pray for the mistakes that make us wise. We pray for courage, but we don't pray for the challenges that make us strong. We pray for serenity, but we don't pray for the conflicts that give us peace.

God,
Grant me serenity,
but don't give me hardships that bring
me peace.
Grant me courage,
but don't give me tasks that make me
strong.
Grant me wisdom,
but don't give me trials that make me
wise.

We pray for faith, but we don't pray for fear
that is faith turned inside out.

Notes

1. The original quotation is from Charles Austin Beard (1874-1948) who once said, "When it gets dark enough, you can see the stars."
2. This theme from the Jewish literature has also been expressed in cross-cultural proverbs including Russian ("Pray to God, but row for the shore"), Arabic ("Trust in God, but tie up your camel"), and others. The quote has also been attributable to St. Ignatius ("Pray as if everything depended on God, but work as if everything depended on you").
3. This verse has been paraphrased from Luke 6:28, which states: "Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you." The verse also

appears in Matthew 5:44, which states: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

4. Matthew 27:46 records some of Jesus final words while dying on the cross, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" which was translated as "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These words of Jesus were probably quoted from Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" (KJV)

References

- Huxley, A. (1932). *Texts and pretexts: An anthology with commentaries*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Liturgy Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1975). *Gates of prayer: The new union prayerbook*. Stern, Chaim (Ed.). New York, NY: Central Conference of American Rabbis.
- Merton, T. (1961). *New seeds of contemplation*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation.

**Copyright © 1998 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
Content of this version last updated 1998.**

**This 1998 article is the original unedited article,
including the original first sentence. History of
manuscript prior to 1998 available upon request.**

Copyright © 1998 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Manuscript Versions

Doverspike, W. F. (2005). Confessions of a secular priest: A story of faith turned inside out. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 24(3), 278-280.

This citation is the correct one for the version that was published in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*.

Doverspike, W. F. (2005). Confessions of a secular priest. Invited address to the graduating class of 2005, Psychological Studies Institute, Atlanta, Georgia. May 6, 2005.

This citation is the correct one for the version that was read at the invited address to the Atlanta graduating class.

Doverspike, W. F. (2000). Aspiring to excellence. *Georgia Psychologist*. Volume 54(2), 6.

This 5-paragraph editorial column was a condensed, secularized version based in part on the third paragraph of the 1998 version as well as three additional paragraphs that were later added to the 2005 version that was read to the Atlanta graduating class.

Doverspike, W. F. (1998). Confessions of a secular priest. In W. F. Doverspike, *Putting prayer into practice: Reflections on a spiritual journey* (pp. 27-29). Atlanta, Georgia: Author.

This citation is the correct one for the manuscript contained in this document.

File information in *Index Theologicus*:
International Bibliography of Theology and Religious Studies:
<https://ixtheo.de/Record/1645814947>

Iterations and versions of manuscript prior to 1998 available upon request.

History of Manuscript

September 2005: Copyright of the *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* is the property of Christian Association for Psychological Studies. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv with the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

September 2005: With some mutually-agreed upon edits, the manuscript was published in a revised version in the Christian Spirituality and Mental Health section of the editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*.

May 05, 2005: By prior agreement with Gary L. Moon, Editor, Christian Spirituality and Mental Health section of the editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, the author retains unrestricted use of the material (Thursday, May 05, 2005 3:38 PM).

May 05, 2005: Author retains copyright and unrestricted use of the material before submitting to Gary L. Moon, Editor, Christian Spirituality and Mental Health section of the editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (Thursday, May 05, 2005 10:55 AM).

April 25, 2005: I received request from Gary L. Moon, Editor, Christian Spirituality and Mental Health section of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, requesting a review of the manuscript for suitability in that section of journal (Monday, April 25, 2005 1:27 PM).

Chronology and history of manuscript prior to 2005 available upon request.