

Psalm pilot

You won't need a reminder if you've committed your favorite prayers to memory.

ANY OF MY GENERATION CAN REMEMBER how in school we were made to memorize things: times tables, dates in history, the Gettysburg Address. A few years ago I started memorizing psalms. I had been praying the Liturgy of the Hours off and on for years. But when I could not find time or place to open my prayer book, I missed not being able to recite favorites, like Psalm 90 (“O Lord, you have been my refuge through all generations”) and Psalm 92 (“It is good to give thanks to the Lord”).

Memorizing the psalms has had many benefits. First, I can pray them without having to find a prayer book or Bible, or stopping what I am doing. Another benefit is the way the psalms have become a part of me. Literary critic George Steiner refers to poems that we have “by heart” as “ballast for the soul.” I have confirmed that insight many times over. In times of stress, anxiety, or grief I have resorted to the psalms, literally, at all hours of the day or night or as Psalm 92 puts it: “to proclaim your kindness at dawn, and your faithfulness throughout the night.” I can’t count the times I have fallen asleep with the verses of a psalm echoing and then becoming disconnected in my mind. The psalms I memorized are now as much a part of me as the breathing out and breathing in that sustains my life: “I love the Lord because he has heard the voice of my pleading, because he inclined his ear to me when I called upon him” (Ps. 116).

C. S. Lewis’ *Reflections on the Psalms* acquainted me with the richness of the psalms, but it was Kathleen Norris’ observations on the psalms in *The Cloister Walk* that square most with my experience of them. She writes, “You find that the psalms do not deny your true feelings but allow you to reflect on them, right in front of God and everyone.” She also refers to the way “it can come to seem as if the psalms are reading and writing us.”

I am not a theologian, but in the course of memorizing psalms I have acquired a sensitivity to their language and rhythm. From that awareness I have learned more about the way the psalms work. Take Psalm 147 (“Praise the Lord for he is good”), for instance. It is a marvelous celebration, a fulsome hymn of praise and confidence, yet also personal, even intimate. Rooted in the exilic experience of ancient Israel, it uses wounding and healing as the occasion for a reflection that takes in the universe: “He has numbered all the stars, and called each by name.”

Of course the Hebrew psalms were composed to be sung rather than recited. Christianity took over these hymns and lyrics meant to be accompanied by the psalter – an ancient stringed instrument – and made them the basis for its communal prayer.

When I decided to memorize psalms, there were some from the daily Hours that I felt I nearly knew “by heart,” so I started with them, like Psalm 90. First I typed out the entire psalm and reduced it to the size of a 4-by 6-inch notecard. And even as I typed the psalm, I began to appropriate its style, meaning, and flavor. Then I carried the card with me, reciting the psalm at least once a day. In a short time I found that certain lines were easy to repeat. In a couple weeks I could recite whole sections without looking at the notecard. A few weeks later I could glance at the opening of a stanza and recite the rest by heart. Having committed the whole psalm to memory, I found that I needed to recite it at least once daily for a while in order not to lose it from long-term memory.

IN HIS LITTLE BOOK OF APHORISMS, *THE GRAIN OF WHEAT*, the late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar observes: “When our strings are well tuned, God can spontaneously play on our soul. And we should aim at nothing more than this: to stretch out toward and be attuned to God.” Memorizing psalms has “attuned” me to the special spirituality contained in them. Thanks to memorizing and reciting psalms, prayer has become as necessary to me as eating or breathing.

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