



Eye: photo, Cetna Kenney

Praying Dialogically

practicing Martin Buber's secret

KENNETH PAUL KRAMER

INTRODUCTION

I keep myself in God's presence by a simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon God... an habitual silent and secret conversation of the soul with God.

– Brother Lawrence¹

In the question and answer period following a presentation I gave to a church group on the topic “Praying Dialogically”, a woman who had heard me speak years before about “Why Catholic?” asked a very evocative question. “I remember,” she said, “you talked about having an out-of-body experience while attending a non-denominational worship service. You spoke of hearing a voice that said, “Get to the Eucharist.” Now that you are no longer a practicing Catholic” – I haven’t been for several years – “what happened to that divine directive in your life?”

I was surprised by her question because I hadn’t thought about that episode, which occurred in 1979, for many years. Since then, I’d retired from twenty-five years of teaching Comparative Religious Studies at San Jose State University (earlier than I would have due to the ever-increasing physical limitations of MS). A few years

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later, I had retired from twenty-five years of being Catholic during which, as an oblate of the New Camaldolese Hermitage in Big Sur, I was deeply influenced by Benedictine monasticism.

Pay careful attention to my answer because in it lies the quintessence of everything that I have been saying to you during my presentation.

After retiring from the church, in the absence of any set religious observances, I found myself searching for a renewing spiritual practice.

Therefore, when I responded that she had asked a remarkably perceptive question, I added, “Pay careful attention to my answer because in it lies the quintessence of everything that I have been saying to you during my presentation. Now, I would say, I am having an in-the-body experience of engaging you and the group in real dialogue. The voices that I am engaging (yours and other members of the group) become sacramental right here and right now.”

SEISMIC SHIFT IN MY PRAYER LIFE

The shift in my spiritual life from practicing the seven sacraments to practicing sacramental existence happened gradually. As a result especially of my study of Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, first in graduate school and then in conversations with Buber’s trans-

lator and biographer, Maurice Friedman, I fell deeply under the influence of eighteenth century mystical Hasidic spirituality, which emphasizes the covenant of the Absolute with everyday life. When I rediscovered Buber’s presentation of Hasidism, it was as if a thin film that had covered my eyes was lifted. Both my academic interest in comparative religions and my spiritual connection to God shifted. Driven by the insights that our relationship with God and our relationships with others are fundamentally bound together in reciprocal communion and that real prayer occurs where God’s Presence becomes dialogically perceivable, I began praying differently.

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The seismic shift in my prayer life involved breaking through a view of God as a spiritual concept and instead encountering God’s presence in relationships. God was no longer the one who appears at special times and in special places but instead becomes present everywhere in every moment. Whereas I had been searching for ways to understand God, I discovered that God is already always searching for me. Rather than an object of my experience, God became the immediate, enduring Presence who can be dialogically addressed (not expressed) and whose Spirit can be glimpsed in every genuine relationship. No longer able to imagine

that God's reality and my reality exist in separate and different dimensions, I began to feel myself participating in an

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ongoing reciprocal partnership with the God who is ever-present, a God who needs me as much as I need God.

BUBER'S SECRET

Martin Buber (1878-1965), called by Friedman one of the "universal geniuses of our time," stands among the most significant religious philosophers of the twentieth century. In the words of his friend Hermann Hesse, when Hesse nominated him for a Nobel Prize in lit-

erature, Buber was "one of the few wise men living in the world today." For his part, Buber indicated in several places that the entirety of his work (on Taoism, Hasidism, Mysticism, dialogue, education, psychotherapy, ethics, comparative religion, Judaism, and Christianity) was guided by one *central concern* – the deep bond between genuine dialogue and the divine-human partnership. It is in this fundamental insight, in my view, that Buber's secret is revealed.

Maurice Friedman tells how his chief advisor for his doctoral dissertation on Buber, Professor Arnold Bergstraesser, once amazed him when he asked, rhetorically, "Do you know Buber's secret? It is prayer."² Buber, however, did not spend hours during the day praying in a conventional manner. Rather, he brought himself to everything he did in a spirit of real openness. In a powerfully evocative remark, Buber wrote that prayer "in the pregnant sense of the term" is that speech to God that "ultimately asks for the manifestation of the divine Presence, for this Presence's becoming *dialogically perceivable*."³ God's presence, for Buber, is not like the atmosphere, equally present everywhere, but rather like the spirit of a mother's unconditional love responding to the voice of her child. The single presupposition of prayer is the whole person's "turned-towardness" in unreserved and relational spontaneity. When I am not fully present, I am unable to perceive God's Presence.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Buber would write that when "you pray you do not thereby remove your-



Martin Buber; photo, courtesy of American Jewish University.

self from this life of yours but in your praying refer your thought to it, even though it may be in order to yield it; so too in the unprecedented and surprising, when you are called upon from above, required, chosen, empowered, sent, you with this your mortal bit of life are meant.”⁴ But how can one participate in a seemingly impossible mutual dialogue with God? How does the infinitely invisible presence of God speak? And how is God’s “speaking” dialogically perceivable?

RECIPROCAL DIALOGUES

For Buber, prayer is dialogical. While it might seem that prayer and dialogue function in different contexts – prayer in a place of worship and dialogue in everyday life – it is important to keep in mind that the word “dialogue” here does not simply mean two or more persons speaking to each other. When dialogue (whether with others or with God) is genuine – direct, mutual, open-minded, and open-hearted – it embodies and evokes our most uniquely human birthright: communion with God. For Buber, if we use the word “God” to refer to the signs of life that happen to us each day, each moment, we must try

to forget everything we imagined we knew of God ... keep nothing handed down or learned or self-contrived, no shred of knowledge, and [be] plunged into the night...If we named the speaker of this speech God, then it is always the God of a moment, a

*moment’s God...In such a way, out of the givers of the signs, the speakers of the words in lived life, out of the moment’s God there arises for us with a single identity the Lord of the voice, the One.*⁵

This implies, for Buber, that God is always becoming new and that God’s presence can never be tied to dogma or ritual. God continuously enters into renewed, unique relationships with us. Buber certainly had this insight in mind in 1957 when, about thirty-five years after publishing his little classic *I and Thou*, he added a Postscript to clarify and expand his central ideas. In it, he wrote that God’s voice addresses us by penetrating through every genuine interhuman relationship, especially when the words of others stand out as “instruction, message, [or] demand” that we take a responsible stand.⁶

Praying in this way enables me to notice God’s spirit becoming manifest not only in the natural world but especially as it en-spirits persons with whom unreserved dialogue happens.

At its deepest level, praying dialogically is an outlook that penetrates my being, a life-orientation that is brought into the stream of living. Praying dialogically does not shut out the world. Rather, it means whole-heartedly entering into reciprocal dialogue with the

eternal Partner who is unconditional Love. It also means entering into genuine dialogue with those whom I engage in the physical world. Genuine human dialogues are inspired by and integrate insights from prayerful dialogue with God, while inner dialogues with God help to recollect and refocus one's outer dialogues in the world. These dialogues cannot be separated. One is a reflection of the other. Praying dialogically brings me back into conversation with God in which I address ideas, concerns, and questions and while listening for God's response, recollect words of other dialogical partners as if God's response to my prayer manifests through them.

Praying in this way enables me to notice God's spirit becoming manifest not only in the natural world but especially as it en-spirits persons with whom unre-served dialogue happens.

It is insights like these that have revitalized my relation to God's presence and that continue to bear fruit in my daily life.

GOD'S SPEAKING VOICE

But if what I'm driving at is true, if God's dialogue with us is fulfilled in our dialogues with others, how specifically does God enter into dialogue with us? How, in other words, can we learn to "hear" God "speak"?

Four reciprocal and reciprocating habits of the spirit characterize praying dialogically: turning, addressing, listening, and responding.

Praying Dialogically

Outer dialogue with others	Inner dialogue with God
<p>TURNING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wholly away from self-absorption by giving yourself to relationship Toward encountering the unique other as a dialogical partner 	<p>TURNING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wholly away from self-absorption by giving yourself to relationship Toward encountering the creative Source of life as a loving partner
<p>ADDRESSING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepting and valuing this person's expressed stand Making the other person present as your dialogical partner 	<p>ADDRESSING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Praising/adoring/thanking/loving God immediately and intimately Expressing a question/need/concern vital to your present situation
<p>LISTENING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attentively, with your whole heart, to what is said/not said Imagining what the other is thinking/feeling/experiencing 	<p>LISTENING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Silently, with your whole heart, for God's "summoning" Glimpsing spirit-infused signs, instructions, promptings
<p>RESPONDING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsibly and honestly without agenda or withholding yourself Confirming, even when disagreeing, a willingness for future dialogue 	<p>RESPONDING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating revealed hints which press inward and stir your heart Bringing prayer insights/signs into the dialogic immediacy of life

There is no single way of receiving God's address. God's voice emerges in surprising ways and with surprising messages. Every genuine dialogue is unique. God's numinous voice flashes forth from the recollected voices of others, for instance, resonating within the heart-mind of one who attentively seeks, prays, and listens. As the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote, God "fits Himself exactly to our souls by adapting His Godhead to them; and our souls are fitted exactly to Him by the worthiness of our creation after His image and His likeness."⁷ What really matters is that I enter into the presence of God whole-heartedly, willing to wait attentively without knowing who God is, willing to forget myself.

God's voice emerges in surprising ways and with surprising messages.

Once, after I prayed, a truck driver beeped and yelled angrily "be careful!" as I pulled from my parking spot into traffic. As I drove, my spirit was suddenly elevated by the realization that this could have been the voice of God yelling at me to focus my attention on driving. Or when the phone rings and a dear friend's voice enters into dialogue with me and in the course of our conversation something is said, or understood, or asked that stays with me. In the context of prayer, what this person has said points me in a responsible direction. Just as for Buber "any natural act, if hallowed [made holy] leads to God," for me any word – written, spoken, sung,

or thought – can possibly lead to God's message.⁸

A stranger, for instance, once introduced himself to me at the health club where each morning I swim in an outdoor pool. The buoyancy of the water enables me to move in ways that my disability would otherwise not allow. I parked my walker next to the twin, chrome, curved ladder rails at the end of the pool. Holding onto the tops of the rails, I leaned backwards before shifting my position to one rail, swinging my right foot to the pool's edge, preparing to jump in feet first.

"Ken," I heard a voice coming from behind me. Still holding tightly to the rail, I turned my head enough to see a young man stepping from the indoor sauna area. Though I had seen him before, we had never talked. The young stranger reached out his hand, touched my left shoulder and said, "I see you all the time. I watch your struggle. Keep it up. It's the only way. I was hurt once. But it healed. Keep up the good work. You're doing a great job."

"Thank you," I said appreciatively as he walked back toward the sauna.

Then I pushed off from the rail and threw myself into the seventy-nine degree water. My one-armed crawl is strong enough to pull my body from one end of the pool to the other and back. While swimming, I have time to think, to pray, to listen, to become aware. Only in prayer did I come to understand that the young man's words bore a message of encouragement as if from God's spirit to mine.



Praying Alone; photo, Cetta Kenney

PRAYING ALONE

Buber wrote that, “In certain moments, some of them rather regular, some others just occurring, I am in need of prayer and then I pray, alone of course, and say what I want to say,

And the practice is simple. It combines setting aside time (at least a half hour each day) with fidelity to the task. Once established, the practice regenerates itself.

sometimes without words at all, and sometimes a remembered verse helps me in an extraordinary situation; but there have been days when I felt myself compelled to enter into the prayer of a community, and so I did it.” Trusting that I am living every moment in the presence

of the One who perfectly listens and perfectly responds to innermost needs, I realize how much my life depends on turning my attention wholeheartedly toward God. And the practice is simple. It combines setting aside time (at least a half hour each day) with fidelity to the task. Once established, the practice regenerates itself.

I encounter God, not as an image, but rather as a loving presence who needs me just as I need God.

While every individual’s prayerful dialogue with God is unique, several elements most often repeat themselves in my practice. It is important to select a place for praying where one will not be interrupted. It is equally important to bring a concern, question, or doubt into the prayer. To begin, I turn with my whole heart away from the activity of the day. Recalling how a Zen teacher I once studied with used to initiate meditative sitting, I take a deep, clearing breath and exhale. To practice rhythmic breathing, I repeat silently on each inhalation the word “Thank” and on each exhalation the word “You”. When I find myself distracted during prayer, I often return to these words to renew my concentration.

I begin praying by engaging God’s presence, by recollecting the infinitely unimaginable other, and by paying attention. I encounter God, not as an image, but rather as a loving presence who needs me just as I need God. Sitting, breathing gently and rhythmically

cally, enveloped by silence, eyes closed, heart open, I sink deeper into prayer, letting thoughts and distractions pass. As I listen and wait, God's presence addresses me in the quiet of our communion.

As I turn to address God as my invisible, unprovable yet experienced dialogical partner, shared words take shape:

Sacred Spirit, Companion, Creator, open my mind and my heart. Inspire me in what I am about to do. Thank You for always being ready to listen and respond. Thank You for needing me to need You. Thank You for calling me into relationship, for praying dialogically with me. Assist me. Guide me. Co-create with me so that Your/our kingdom comes here and now. Enable me to perceive Your signs, Your signals, Your questions, even unspoken words that address my spirit.

Then I listen for God's speaking voice, waiting attentively in the silence to glimpse traces of God's response to my life-questions. At times, nothing seems to happen that quickens my awareness or deepens my relationship with God. At other times, as if from nowhere, recollected words, passages, events, and encounters arise which, in the context of prayer, take on new meaning.

While still listening, while still breathing rhythmically, I then meditate on ways of implementing God's response into my daily life, into my dialogues

with others as well as my dialogue with God. Usually, integrating these glimpses into my life involves entering into real dialogues with persons recollected in prayer. Praying dialogically takes flight in my responding to God's response.



Partners; photo, Cetta Kenney

OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

God is the consummate dialogical partner, always the perfect listener who hears every word of our speech and thoughts – even those we are not aware of yet. God completely understands what we mean by everything that we say and don't say, and always responds honestly, compassionately, and justly. And, as Buber wrote,

You know always in your heart that you need God more than everything; but do you not know too that God needs you – in the fullness of His eternity needs you? How would man be, how would you be, if God did not need him, did not need you? You need God, in order to be – and God needs you, for the very meaning of your life.

If we pray, Buber continued, “Thy will be done,” we must in truth add “through me whom Thou needest.”¹⁰ Impossible to understand, yet necessary to imagine, God needs me for our partnership to flourish, needs me to accept God just as God is ever-ready to accept me, needs me to pray and to listen attentively for signs in daily life, and needs me to live dialogically and relationally. Approaching prayer in this way, my role in praying is shifted. I bear a new responsibility, and with this new responsibility comes a new attentiveness to everyday events, encounters, and exchanges in which the Voice speaks.¹¹

Impossible to understand, yet necessary to imagine, God needs me for our part- nership to flourish

One morning, as I was finishing getting dressed after swimming and showering, my good friend from the health club Dana was about to take off to the exercise room. Dana is barely fifty, a jazz pianist and attorney whom I see often. What impresses me about Dana is his straightforward, highly articulate honesty. Our conversations are sprinkled with episodes from family life to politics, the arts, literature, jazz, and the movies. Having overheard me tell another club member about framing each day in a prayer of gratitude for the gift of life and seeking grace to do God’s will, Dana said: “Not me. I have no intention for the day. I do my best to let things unfold.”

“I understand,” I responded. “However, for me it is important, as I have said to you before, to frame each day within Jesus’ prayer – “not my will but Your will be done” – in this sphere of creation that I affect.”

Dana’s response was brief, but its significance remained with me because of his honesty. “No, you’re right. That’s just what I needed to hear,” he said. “Thank you, Kramer,” he finished, as he walked through the doorway.

The way he walked off toward the exercise room led me to believe that what I had said had struck a chord in him. It was as if he had been reminded of something that he already knew but had forgotten, abandoned, or rationalized away. I was frankly surprised by his response. There was no hesitation on his part. It seemed genuinely dialogical. I realized, once again, the ongoing significance of praying dialogically. What I was saying, I believe, had a validity that reached beyond its significance just for me.

The next day, this impact was reversed. When Dana saw me in the men’s locker room struggling to take off my clothes, he said, “It looks like a workout just to get your clothes off. It’s all part of your exercise, I see.”

“You’ve got that right, each step I take is exercise. By the way, have you thought more about what I said to you yesterday?”

“About...?” he said quizzically.

“Your saying that you choose not to have any daily intention versus my saying that I frame each day by prayerfully attempting to follow God’s will.”

“Yeah . . . No. Where does that story take place in scripture?”

“In the words ascribed to Jesus on the Mount of Olives prior to his trial, sentencing, and crucifixion. He says ‘Father remove this cup from my lips; nevertheless, not my will but Your will be done.’”

“No,” Dana said with emphasis. “The message is our will be done, baby!”

His response, likely reflecting a former conversation in which I mentioned Buber’s insight that God needs us, caught me short. “Perfect,” was the only word I could say. And it was.

Dana’s response was precisely what God had intended for me to hear in that moment. As I ponder this encounter, I realize that when a person’s words stop me in my tracks and reverberate through my heart and mind, I experience the spirit of God engaging me. In the blink of an eye, God’s presence manifests in what a person says. Then it disappears. Either I catch it (and am caught by it), or I miss it until the next moment of dialogue.

CONCLUDING QUESTION

I conclude with a brief encounter with Thomas that occurred after a small seminar I gave titled “Praying Dialogically.” “If dialogue is important for getting unstuck from my anxieties and my anger,” he said, “what do I do when I am alone at night in a Costco parking lot with no one around? I feel like I need a technique to use.”

“If I were there in that situation,” I responded, “I would say to the infinitely invisible, ever-present

Companion: ‘Well, here we are. What’s next?’ And then I would move into the following moment in that spirit.”

“But to do that,” he responded, “I would have to avoid going into my thoughts, the stream of worry about this situation or that possibility, which is what I usually do. I feel as if I need a technique to avoid this.”

“What works for me, and it’s really the only thing that works, is to make sure that at least once a day I set aside a space of time (at least a half hour) in which I pray alone. Like meeting a friend each day for coffee and conversation, daily prayer solidifies my connection with God’s presence. By praying dialogically daily, the practice becomes second nature. It reveals that I am not alone in the universe and that, in fact, I share this life with a living dialogical partner. That’s why I referred to the Sufi poet Hafiz in our group, especially when he said ‘there are two of us housed in this body,’ and that when he awakens he asks God what ‘love-mischief’ can we do today? Here’s a technique: stand on your tip toes, as it were, and pay careful attention to God’s promptings sprinkled through the day’s events.”



Love Mischief, photo, Cetta Kenney

NOTES

¹ Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of The Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (New York: Image Books, 1977), 68. Lawrence viewed prayer as a continual, intimate conversation with God whether at times formally set aside for prayer or in the midst of daily life. His understanding of prayer was based on a complete trust and confidence that God is present at every moment in our lives, and that practicing God's presence leads not away from others but into the midst of interacting with people. Those familiar with brother Lawrence will recognize significant similarities between his simple wisdom and Martin Buber's more philosophically expressed spiritual insights.

² Maurice Friedman, *A Dialogue with Hasidic Tales: Hallowing the Everyday* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1988), 134.

⁷³ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 126. Italics added. This presupposition is destroyed by over-consciousness that I am praying and that I am praying.

⁴ Martin Buber, *Meetings*, ed. and trans. by Maurice Friedman (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1973), 46.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 14-15. My translation.

⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald G. Smith, 2nd edition (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1958), 136.

⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 122.

⁸ Martin Buber, *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), 20.

⁹ Martin Buber in a letter to Maurice Friedman (1952) quoted in an unpublished manuscript by Maurice Friedman, *My Friendship with Martin Buber in America and Jerusalem*. Elsewhere, Buber writes that this kind of prayer – a “direct, ‘world-free’ relation to God” – is called by the Byzantine hymnist “the alone to the Alone.” *Philosophical Interrogations*, eds. Sidney and Beatrice Rome (New York: Hope, Rinehart, & Winston, 1964), 85-86.

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 82, 83.

¹¹ Buber's good friend, Abraham Joshua Heschel, spoke about prayer a bit differently: “We do not communicate with God. We only make ourselves communicable to Him. The purpose of prayer is to be brought to His attention, to be listened to, to be understood by Him; not to know Him, but to be *known* to Him.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 10. Agreeing with Heschel's point, which views prayer from God's perspective, Buber also views prayer through the perspective of the *relationship* between God and the one who prays.