

A Christian Learns to Pray by Andrew Love

Prayer can be very difficult. I know this because many of my friends and acquaintances, from various backgrounds, have expressed to me their struggles with prayer.

Some do not know what to say. Others think it is pointless and some are extremely uncomfortable, even offended, by group or public prayer. From a personal perspective, I too have struggled mightily with prayer throughout my faith journey. My parents raised me in the United Methodist Church and taught me to pray as soon as I was able to speak. These particular prayers (one for meals and the other before bedtime) basically constituted my entire prayer life from the time I learned them until my junior year of undergraduate studies.

I'm not kidding, I said the exact words before every meal (when I remembered) and every night before going to sleep. As the years passed, these prayers transitioned from a somewhat meaningful ritual to empty, mindless, heartless words. When I reflect back on these years, I realize that my Christianity became an empty faith- I went to church (sometimes), sang the hymns and said the prayers, but it was just "going through the motions," just like my prayer life. My junior year of college, I reached a point of transition in my spiritual life when I stopped "going through the motions" and became serious about my faith. I felt better about all aspects of my spiritual development, but there still seemed to be something missing from my prayer life. I now said different words and attempted to speak from the heart, but I still felt there was a hole in my prayer life. This hole has been closed by a very powerful experience with a very faithful Turkish Muslim student from [Hartford Seminary](#).

Harun walked into the room and introduced himself as my roommate for the weekend. We were in New Braunfels, TX attending the 2012 [Seminarians: Sharing Our Faith Traditions Retreat](#) sponsored by the [Multicultural Alliance](#). The retreat focused on interfaith dialogue and education and I was there as a student representative from [Perkins School of Theology](#). I muted the college football bowl game I had been watching and we exchanged small talk about our backgrounds. We found we had several things in common. We both enjoyed sports, we both had a full time job other than our graduate studies and we both lived in Texas.

Harun lives in Houston and takes classes at [Hartford Seminary](#) through a distance-learning program. Harun checked the time on his phone and informed me that it was time for his *Asr* (afternoon) prayer. This intrigued me as I had observed Muslim prayer in various mosques, but had never been in the room with a Muslim during his or her individual prayer. Nevertheless, I offered to leave the room and Harun told me this would not be necessary. Little did I know at the time, but this marked the beginning of a

permanent transformation of my understanding and practice of prayer. Harun went to the bathroom to perform *wudu* (ritual cleansing prior to *Salah*- Muslim prayer).

After a few minutes he emerged and as I observed him pray, his focus, the beauty of his words (even though I do not speak Arabic) and the intentionality of his movements forced me to reexamine my Christian prayer experience. Could it be the reason I did not have a strong prayer life was simply due to lack of focus and intentionality? Why did Harun's prayer seem so much more passionate, powerful and sincere than mine? Harun finished his prayer, I thanked him for allowing me to observe, but said nothing else, and we headed to the opening portion of the retreat program.

That evening, when the time came for Harun's *Isha* (evening) prayer, I asked if I could pray with him. As he began his prayer, facing Mecca in the corner of our room, I kneeled beside my bed and began to pray in my Christian tradition. The level of focus and connection I felt were unprecedented in my prayer experiences. This was not a prayer of empty words or specific requests, but my emotions, spirit and mind flowing into the prayer in a way that I cannot describe with words. I felt a deep connection with Harun as we prayed together, as well as a deep connection to God. The intentionality and focus I learned from observing Harun pray one time had totally transformed and enhanced my entire experience and understanding of prayer. Harun and I continued to pray together for the remaining days of the retreat.

Through this time of prayer, our friendship and connection developed. Since this experience, I pray more often throughout the day rather than just "unloading" before I go to bed at night. My prayers seem more sincere, more passionate and most importantly, I still feel the overwhelmingly strong connection to God that I first felt when Harun and I prayed together. Of course, my nightly prayer ritual continues before I go to bed, but it is no longer empty words, but rather a deep meditation that involves my entire being not just my mouth. I will forever be grateful to the Turkish Muslim who taught an American Christian how to pray.

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