

When it comes to increasing prayer potential, maybe it's easier than we think

By Theodore Hengesbach

Psychologists say that people use only about 10 percent of their potential during a lifetime. I guess that means that ideally people could achieve 90 percent more in terms of goals, satisfactions, relationships with others and productivity at work.

I don't know how valid this idea is. But the whole idea seems like a companion to that nagging feeling we sometimes have that we could do more if we tried.

St. Augustine had his own way of putting this. It was he who said to God, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." It's just natural: we are restlessly impelled forward.

If it is true that people only use 10 percent of their potential, would that apply also to prayer potential? Most people probably would welcome the addition of even a few percentage points in this area of life.

The first step to developing our prayer potential is to develop a positive attitude toward ourselves as pray-ers. I like to call this "self-talk." It means saying, "I can pray. I've done it before." Or, "Why not? I really have nothing to lose and much to gain." This kind of self-talk disrupts the pattern of negative attitudes that stall us.

Once self-talk gets us moving, it is time for a second step: Make a prayer-inventory. That means making at least a mental list of the moments when one does, in fact, pray.

To prepare this inventory, it may help just to focus on the last 48 hours. Many people will be surprised at how substantial their list is.

Morning and night prayer and prayer at meals will appear on many people's lists. The lists will expand if it is remembered that prayer moments include spontaneous requests for help, expressions of thanks or repentance, as well as moments of reflection that may or may not consciously be directed to God.

Whether long or short, the list holds this benefit: it shows that we have more experience with prayer than we tend to think.

The third step in developing prayer potential is to remember the circumstances surrounding our prayer moments. For example, did we pray at a time of need, sadness, excitement or joy? Did we pray in church, at home, alone on a walk, with friends or family?

It helps to identify the spaces, places and circumstances of our own prayer. They may be due for a rediscovery.

A fourth step in developing prayer potential is to know a little better why we pray. What's the motivation?

Different people are motivated in different ways.

—Perhaps we pray because we need something.

—We may pray in a group where praying together gives a sense of belonging.

—There is prayer that helps us know ourselves better.

—People pray to discover solutions to perplexing situations in life and to find God's will for them.

There is no single correct motivation for prayer, I believe. But it helps to identify why we pray.

Prayer is the expression of an attitude that takes people beyond themselves. It helps when people feel frustrated or under stress. And it provides a chance to be exuberant when life is going well.

By growing beyond the first 10 percentage points on the scale of prayer potential, opportunities increase to express fears, joys, frustrations and needs, and to return to day-to-day life more refreshed and confident.

Increasing prayer potential can, in fact, increase the potential for all of life. And increasing this potential may not be as difficult as people sometimes think.

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FOOD ...

...for thought

Do you want to know yourself better?

Genuine prayer can "move us to a greater knowledge of ourselves." That intriguing suggestion was made by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago in a series of reflections in 1981. At the time he was archbishop of Cincinnati.

The cardinal was discussing the priesthood. But many of his comments seem to apply to prayer in general.

He stated: "Authentic prayer — that is, prayer which brings us into an intimate, loving union with God — will deeply affect how we perceive and deal with ourselves and with others."

But discoveries about oneself can be painful and risky. For people tend to rebel at first when they encounter a side of themselves they find unattractive, he said.

The cardinal cautioned that prayer is not simply self-analysis or introspection. Still, he continued, in order to pray one needs to present oneself honestly to God. This means acknowledging weaknesses, strengths and dependence on God.

Cardinal Bernardin quoted Orthodox Archbishop Anthony

Bloom who observed that people hide their true selves behind the social front they present to others. That's a problem in prayer, the cardinal said.

Another practical implication of self-knowledge for Cardinal Bernardin is learning to recognize what motivates one's actions. This means looking honestly at "what motivates my life, my decisions, my actions, my ministry," he said. For motivation comes in many different guises, including fear, the need for acceptance or even competition with others.

What's the purpose in taking a look at these motivations? According to the cardinal, we may make some interesting discoveries about ourselves. We may conclude that what motivates us isn't exactly bad but it might be imperfect. And it might be leading people away from Jesus and the kind of life he offered.

Self-discovery can be a step along the road to true conversion. For conversion only happens, Cardinal Bernardin is convinced, when people come to grips with their innermost selves.

Prayer and self-discovery. They make an interesting combination.

...for discussion

1. In Katharine Bird's article this week, Neil Parent says that when people share stories about prayer experiences in their own lives, they can be considered resources on prayer for others. What does he mean by this? Can you think of a time in your life when another person's story of prayer influenced your own prayer life?

2. Ms. Bird also interviews Father James Bacik. He advises people "to let life provide the trigger for prayer." Prayer can be built on both positive and negative experiences, he says. How can negative experiences be an entry to prayer?

3. "To meditate is just to stand still at the center." These are the words of Father John Main, whose life and approach to prayer are discussed in Sister Christine Hope Allen's article. What are some of the steps a person in today's hectic world can take to experience meditation, according to Father Main?

4. What is a "mantra" as discussed in Sister Allen's article? What is a Christian "mantra"?

5. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin suggests that genuine prayer can

"move us to a greater knowledge of ourselves." Do you agree with his statement? In what ways can prayer be a path to self-discovery?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Night Prayer" is a paperback book that "offers individuals and groups the opportunity to pray the Liturgy of the Hours restored by the Second Vatican Council." The short prayers included here offer people the "possibility of participating in the prayer of the church, praying in union with Christ to the Father." The booklet contains psalms, readings and prayers for every day as well as a separate appendix with penitential prayers, Marian antiphons, a poetry selection and a commentary on the Psalms used as night prayers. The booklet gives careful instructions on how to pray Night Prayer for people new to this traditional form of church prayer. (Office of Publishing Services, 1976. 1312 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. \$1.25.)

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honest sharing of our sentiments that counts. In fact, Jesus warned us about concern for words in prayer: "In your prayer do not rattle on like the pagans. They think they will win a hearing by the sheer multiplication of words. Do not imitate them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Jesus taught his disciples how to pray by addressing God as a Father. This way of speaking to God as one who cares is important.

Finally, when all is said and done, the ultimate prayer is: "May your will be done" — and may I have the wisdom and courage to recognize and accept it, peacefully and joyfully.