

## ***A PRAYER AT THE END OF MY ROPE***

**By Michael Ventura**

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I have a friend in Alcoholics Anonymous in Los Angeles. Let's call my friend Smith.  
"Hello, Smith!"

Actually, I have a surprising number of friends in AA.

"Hello, Michael's surprising number of friends!"

Because of these friends, I know AA saves lives.

I've never been to a meeting, but Smith called me the other night to tell me that, in a disembodied way, I'd participated in Smith's meetings.

"I hope this doesn't piss you off," said Smith, "but when I've shared at my meetings lately, I've read the Really Fucking Difficult Prayer." Smith detailed responses to the prayer, tending, as Smith does, toward the dramatic. "People asked for copies. I took their email addresses and told them I'd send it. Should have asked you first, right?"

I told Smith, "Nobody owns a prayer."

Felt myself get a little panicky – which isn't like me. Not anymore.

Smith knows me pretty well. Smith knew I was spooked.

"Are you shook?"

"No," said I in a shaken manner, "it's just that..."

I thought of a reason, sensing, as I said it, that it wasn't the real reason – it was true, but it wasn't the reason I was spooked. I told Smith I'd intended to write about my prayers sooner or later, maybe or maybe not, and, if I did, I didn't want to be accused of plagiarizing something on the Internet. "So," said I, in an uncertain voice, "sure, send it. Put my name at the bottom."

Now I'd spooked myself, proof positive that the reason I'd given wasn't the reason. Fine. Now I'd have to figure it out. Damn.

As usual, figuring required some mental time travel.

Praying when I was a boy did no good. "God, save my family." God didn't. Not then. So God and I ceased to be on speaking terms. Whether that bothered God, I can't testify; it bothered me. Later, as a teenager, I toyed with becoming a priest, but still I didn't pray. Just sat in churches waiting for a sign and facing my unbelief. I thought often, then, of the most poignant sentences in the New Testament, Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief."

Fast-forward to a drafty, falling-apart, high-ceilinged house on Austin's East Sixth Street during a mid-Seventies winter. Rain poured outside. I sat in a wooden rocking chair, chilly all over, reading Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

Borowski was a Polish communist who survived Auschwitz. He killed himself after the war, but not before he wrote his book – a dry-eyed, tough, slim volume. I'd read of the Holocaust before. A lot. But nothing like this.

Suddenly I was on the floor, on my knees, weeping, praying, thanking God for my life, my suffering, my family's – thankful that it was not Auschwitz and not remotely like Auschwitz. I thanked the God-thing for my life.

That's how I discovered that, in my bones, I believed in some kind of God.

It was years before I prayed again. During those years I thought about my belief in God a great deal but rarely spoke of it. Didn't write about it either.

I knew I didn't believe in the God of the Bible. Wasn't really much of a monotheist. Didn't believe in a God that took a particular interest in me (it's a big universe).

Something Joseph Campbell said to Bill Moyers helped. More or less, it went like this: "Good and evil, order and chaos, are human categories. 'God' is a metaphor for what is beyond human category."

That led me to this: A God I could define wouldn't be God. A God I could understand couldn't be God.

From there, my feelings took over. In whatever I felt about God there was a many-ness and a oneness. I felt a spark of God in everything; in the bad as well as the good, in the inert as well as in the lively, in chaos as well as in order. I felt that the Universe, as it is, and Nature, as it manifests, is an endless map of God. A map with no place names and with nothing to measure distance.

These thoughts, these feelings, were for myself alone. Occasionally I spoke of them with intimates, and wrote, for myself: "There's what you think and what you think you think. There's what you feel and what you feel you feel. How do you learn the difference?" Later I wrote a note underneath that: "How? You pay attention, stupid."

Then, more than 20 years ago, I felt the need to pray.

At my core, in all things, I'm a writer. For me, to feel the need to pray was to set myself the task of writing a prayer. Turns out, I wrote several. They evolved over the years but stayed consistent in their attempt to abide by what Leonard Cohen told me during our only conversation. I don't remember his exact sentence, but the sense of it was this: The crucial element of prayer is "no alibis."

The prayers I wrote were not meant to be public. But, as my prayers became daily, inevitably (and rarely) they were shared, as when my friend Smith visited last December, full of trouble, as I've often been and no doubt will be again. We hadn't seen each other in years. We talked a lot, cried some. One night, when it became time for what I've called my "practice" – meditation and prayer – I asked if Smith wanted to join me. I do that occasionally when a friend visits. Some accept the invitation; some decide it's time for them to go to bed or watch a movie. Either response is fine by me. As Butch Hancock sings, "I have tall tales to tell and nothing to prove."

The prayer I prayed with Smith I call the Really Fucking Difficult Prayer. I don't say it every night or even every month. It was the first prayer I wrote. At the time I was at the end of a very long and frayed rope, and it didn't seem that rope would continue to hold. Even right now, I don't want to type that prayer. Because I now know why I felt so spooked when Smith reported sharing it and asked to send it around.

I felt exposed. Outed! (I'm laughing as I type that.) But when people ask for a prayer and you have one, you can't say no -- even though I'm no spiritual teacher (as they say, Heaven forbid!); I'm not Christian, Moslem, Jewish, Hindu, or Buddhist; I'm nothing more than somebody who writes and who needs to pray.

When Smith told me the prayer had been shared, I knew the discipline of my writing would demand that, if my prayer is scooting about out there, it would have to find its way here.

Ok, enough stalling. Here it is, the Really Fucking Difficult Prayer:

Dear One, Many-Beautied Many-Bodied One, thank You for these days. Thank You for the blessings I go among, and for the blessings that come through me to others, and for the blessings bestowed upon me. Thank You for the light and the dark, and the dark in the light and the light in the dark. Thank you for the coming and the going – the beginning, the continuing, and the ending. Thank You for the truth and the lie – the joy and the horror – the wellness and the illness – the closeness and the distance. Thank You for all the ways You turn Your face toward us and beckon us toward You, and thank You for all the ways You turn your back on us and make us long for You. Thank You for all the ways the teachings come. Many-Beautied Many-Bodied One, with You all things are possible. Your will be done. Halleluja and Amen.

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