

## From generation to generation A conversation about prayer

Lois Schertz and Don Yost

*In this intergenerational interview Don Yost converses with Lois Schertz, his mother-in-law, about her practices of prayer, and those of her husband, Russell. Don's comments are in italics, Lois's in regular type.*

**W**hen you are all by yourself, do you pray before you eat?

I do—not all the time, but often.

For years praying was a formality, a deeply ingrained habit formed in my childhood. I never heard my parents pray audibly. Praying in some form, however, was mandatory. We were not allowed to taste the food on the table until we all sat down and had a silent prayer.

As a child, I was irritated when we entertained a minister or some church person, and the person spent a lot of time praying for everyone and everything and added the food at the end. I sat looking longingly at the food. My brother and I got into trouble when we giggled or failed to bow our heads.

Finally I asked my mother why prayer was so important when it was time to eat. She replied tersely, “Don’t you know that food is a privilege? The least you can do is say thank you.” I knew that she had known hunger as a child, as her father used the grocery money to buy beer.

Now that I am older than my mother was at the time, I see the value and the correlation between prayer and hospitality. I will explain this in detail later when I incorporate some of Russell’s prayers.

*How are your prayers before a meal different from your prayers at night?*

Prayer throughout the years has become a more integral part of my life. Private prayer is now much more meaningful to me than

public prayers—especially prayers before a meal in a restaurant—are.

Prayer and faith in God are the only absolutes in my life. Through difficulties, prayer is the one place where I feel free to complain, grouse, and even try to impress God with my idea that life is unfair. I feel the presence of God. I know someone is listening, and usually I ease into a sense of peace and calm, which leads

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me into a time of confession, thanksgiving, and petition for forgiveness. I don't know what I would do at times if it were not for the comfort of prayer.

I want to know how you answer these questions.

*I feel differently than you do about public and private prayer.*

*I have a hard time praying by myself. I think it's because I have a pretty keen sense of God's presence almost all the time. There's a way in which I sense God speaking to me and listening to*

*me every moment of the day. It seems like God already knows what I think and feel.*

*Public prayer seems more useful. (I sound like a pragmatist.) When we pray as a family or a congregation, we're listening to each other. Our prayers help us know what we as a family or a community want and need—what we feel bad about, what we are celebrating.*

*Even though I'm not good at solitary prayer, I try to pause before eating, mainly for the reason you mentioned. It's so easy to miss feeling grateful for the precious gifts of food and weather and breathing. The moment before a meal is like touching a cornerstone.*

*Tell me the stories about Russell. I remember his mealtime prayers as a combination of jazz and poetry. He had a whole litany of lyric phrases that he improvised into a whole.*

When I think of Russell's table prayers, I think about hospitality. One way my thinking of table prayers has changed is because Russell and I entertained so many people in our home who are either unbelievers or just not interested in church or prayer.

When I was teaching school, I was one of the few teachers in my school system who attended church regularly. It was not that

the others were against church, but they were often just plain busy. When new, younger teachers who had no family in the area came into the school, I enjoyed inviting them into our home for dinner. While I was busy putting food on the table, these guests would sometimes start filling their plates before we had a chance to pray. This bothered Russell, and in respect for him, I finally told them we had a custom of saying prayer before the meal. They graciously participated in the prayer, but it often evoked interesting responses.

One young woman, who was working on her PhD in counseling, spent some time with students in my classroom. In conversation I learned that she was an agnostic. I invited her to dinner, and after the customary prayer, she immediately countered Russell by asking, “And sir, do you create a new one each time?” This led to a conversation that went on long into the evening, as she became interested in our faith, church, etc. She had no religious background and had not heard of Mennonites.

Another young teacher spent a lot of time in our home. Our friendship continues. She and her husband are members of the Catholic church but do not attend regularly. They live in Chicago and visit frequently. When they would call, they’d often say, “Life at work is hectic. The kids are driving us crazy. May we come for your good food and Russell’s prayers?”

Some years ago, our former daughter-in-law called from Philadelphia and informed us that her mother, who lived in South Bend, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The mother had no connections with a church or a minister, and her daughter wondered if we could visit her mother and pray. She said her mother remembered the prayers we had before meals when she visited our home. This call led to three meaningful visits before her death.

One time when grandchildren were visiting us, something funny happened, and they could not stop giggling during the prayer. Grandma did not help the situation (I was giggling too). Grandpa (Russell) said, “Since no one is listening, Lord, I’ll just ask you to bless the gigglers and sign off—Amen!” Recently one of those grandchildren told me he hoped I was continuing Grandpa’s prayers.

*So prayer before a meal with company is a kind of witness.*

It may have that result, but I think of it more as creating an atmosphere.

*Right—you said prayer was a form of hospitality.*

It helps people of different faiths or no faith feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts. It puts everyone at ease when the prayer is simple and remembers those sitting around the table.

*That's why humor is so important. When we laugh during table prayer, it's a way of saying that we all mess up. We are all human. We can relax in front of God. None of us is too good or pious for a little self-deprecating laughter.*

You talked about feeling God's presence at all times. Sometimes I think life is a constant prayer. I like the quote, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, unuttered or expressed."<sup>1</sup>

*I agree. It's interesting that when I write plays or screenplays, the most important thing I need to know about a character is what that character wants. In plays, we learn about this desire through action—what a character decides to do. But in life, I think we often learn about what we want as we pray.*

When I'm alone, my table prayers are often hymns. When I am most alone and I feel abandoned and discouraged, this hymn keeps running through my mind:

Alone with God, the world forbidden,  
Alone with God, O blest retreat!  
Alone with God, and in Him hidden,  
To hold with Him communion sweet.<sup>2</sup>

*What about praying in restaurants before a meal? Do you find that this kind of prayer nurtures hospitality?*

To be honest, I am bothered when I am with friends who want to pray aloud in a restaurant. I have heard remarks that this is a way to be an example. Isn't there a verse in the Bible where Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and admonishes them to go to the closet to pray?

*Does that mean we have to eat in the closet as well as pray there?*

You'll be the only one eating in the closet if you keep making fun of me!

*One phrase that Russell often used in his mealtime prayer was, "Bless this food and the hands that prepared it." Do you ask for God's blessing? What does God do when God blesses? Are we asking God to do something, or does this phrase have a different meaning?*

I do not think I use the words *blessing* or *bless* as much as Russell did. When I pray for my grandchildren, I often ask God to bless them, and my intention is that they will feel the presence of God in their lives.

**Part of the atmosphere of hospitality that our table prayers create is a sense of forgiveness and acceptance. We're just people. Joking during prayer makes things relaxing and intimate.**

*Knowing you, that prayer comes from the deepest longing of your heart—"the soul's sincere desire."*

You asked about Russell's prayers. The one phrase that the family questioned was when he prayed, "Bless this food for its intended use."

God gives us sustenance. We can choose to use that gift to do God's will or to do the opposite. To me, Russell's phrase was a way of saying, "Help us do your will."

I think the thing that endeared Russell to people who heard his prayers at the table was that he always mentioned each one of them, a special thing about them. He thought about this ahead of time.

*I didn't know that. No wonder his mealtime prayers were so special. The family often gave him a hard time.*

Hard time?

*We always hold hands around the table when we pray. There was often some hand squeezing and peeking and giggling. Participants often interrupted Russell's prayer to comment or joke about something he said or about the family. Did you or Russell ever get annoyed that the family wasn't more reverent?*

I never got annoyed. In fact, I often did and still do contribute to the giggling. Part of the atmosphere of hospitality that our table

prayers create is a sense of forgiveness and acceptance. We're just people. Joking during prayer makes things relaxing and intimate. Being formal gives an air of stiffness and distance. You know my personal prayers are not pious. There are times when I feel the need to laugh and joke with the Creator!

*It's just like when we laugh and joke with the people we love.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>From the hymn text "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire," by James Montgomery (1818); no. 572 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>"Alone with God"; text by Johnson Oatman Jr. (1856–1922).

## About the authors

Lois Schertz is a full-time, professional grandmother and a retired educator. She grew up and lived near Lowpoint, Illinois, until 1980, when she and Russell moved to Goshen, Indiana. Lois served on the executive committee of the Illinois Mennonite Conference. Don Yost directs Bridgework Theater and writes screenplays. Both Lois and Don attend College Mennonite Church in Goshen.