Spring-Source

Phenomenology
of
Writing a Prayer-Request

Randolph J K Ellis

The Spring-Source Seminar Series

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Phenomenology of Writing a Prayer-Request was first presented on 15 October 2015 at the St Mary's Centre Annual Symposium in Practical Theology and Religious Education. The paper exemplifies a new approach to exploring the phenomenology surrounding the experience of writing a prayer request.

The challenge

Having have been challenged by a colleague, who is active in the field of prayer-request research, to write a prayer-request and then pin it up on the prayer-request board in the local cathedral (*'why don't you try writing a prayer-request and then a report on the experience and I'll do the same'*), I find myself beginning to sense that this challenge is something whose importance might all too easily be disguised by the slight and insignificant piece of paper upon which it may eventually be written. I have always been struck by the smallness of the paper slips traditionally provided at places of worship. They have suggested a certain parsimony on behalf of the ecclesiastical authorities and an assumption that people wouldn't have much to say anyway, even if they were provided with bigger pieces of paper.

I have never found myself poised in front of a prayer-request stand with pen in hand ready to inscribe a paper slip nor have I ever pinned one up. Nor have I have never put the pen and paper down and turned away as one who has failed

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to complete a task. But the very existence of prayer-requests and their public exposure upon prayer-request stands in places of pilgrimage, in cathedrals, at shrines and in out-of-the-way country churches, has served as a continual background prompt to my imaginative prayer activity. As a consequence, even though I have never written a prayer-request, I have found myself _as if_ writing one, as if the request were a latent and gradually emerging concretion.

But the smallness of the slip upon which my request might soon be written seems all too vast in light of the position I now find myself in. I find myself imagining that my request has *already* been written and about to be pinned up on a prayer-board and discover that it does not in *any way* encompass everything contained within its brief utterance. The written material seems to be more representative of *unstated* prayer material (somehow connected to it) than it does to what is actually written down. There are planetary bodies so dense that even a square inch of mineral weighs several hundred tons. This paper slip now resembles those bodies more closely than it does a piece of paper (but its smallness seems perfectly appropriate to the vast condensation now accruing upon it). Also, the apparent fixity of the words is now revealed as a chimera. The paper becomes a screen upon which an open channel is ever splayed, one continuously fed from behind. When I have pinned it on the prayer-request board and left it there and walked away there seems no good reason for that process to stop.

In some strange way, the writing of a prayer-request is one of endless preparation. It is a sortie of ceaseless preliminaries. Not so much a ritual that might precede an unfolding of some mystery but more the generation of experimentations upon what might be desired. These revolve in a spiral and at each revolution some barely come to completion but are *suggestive* of what might be possible. Others barely exist in coherent form but remain suspended in incompletion (as if their coming to completion might be too fearsome). Some hang there full of possibilities but are without reference (as if awaiting some connection to significance). Others follow one another in discrete seriality barely registering anything except their own existence. One or two turn again and again, resisting amendment. These latter are sources of discomfort for they seem fully formed without a creator or origin and arrive without notice as something persistently alien.

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Occasionally, there is something which resists language. It almost breaks into utterance but cannot. Utterance seems opposed to it. It seems not its destiny. This something exerts a powerful resistance upon the formation of any coherent prayer-request whatsoever. This resistance holds within itself a hint that coherent prayer *ought not* to be the intention of written prayer-request (that any attempt to enclose it within language is really an act of foreclosure). It is almost as if *written* prayer-request is not appropriate. What is of interest here is the *pressure* generated by the challenge.

Almost without exception, the prayer-requests I have read have been short, intelligible and lucid as if clarity and brevity were the unspoken practices assumed by their creators. I cannot get behind the persistence of these practices and whatever the motivations of their authors there does seem to be a general common tradition, almost a literary typology attaching to these creations. So, when I am challenged to write a prayer-request, it seems I already know *how* they are supposed to be. I am entering a tradition, practising a custom, attuning myself to a convention. All my forebears are there hanging before me on the prayer-request board. They have already been written, they have already been published. Am I resisting joining them because I do not want to be absorbed as yet another shard of starkness on a plane of terse misery? Do I want to divest myself of any *association* with them and their apparent commonality beforehand? Have they been lumped together inappropriately by me so that they are more massively assembled than they need to be? Do they resemble my own would-be creation and are similarly dynamically active, constantly being fed by unknowable streams and sources? Whatever the situation, there does appear to be a predominant tension around the appearance of prayer-requests on a prayer-board, my challenge to join them and the strange refusals at play behind my bringing one to completion.

Paper and pebbles
In many churches and cathedrals it is now not uncommon to find a "pebble-pool", often alongside a prayer-request board, as an alternative way of offering prayer. Typically, a pebble-pool consists of a container holding pebbles (or sometimes glass marbles, shingle or small rocks) together with another container alongside holding water. There is usually a written prompt adjacent

to this arrangement inviting the user to move the pebble into the pool whilst quietly (and maybe inwardly) forming a prayer. The pebble is deemed to represent the prayer uttered (and sometimes the written prompt makes this explicit). Sometimes there are similar prompts alongside votive candle stands, with doubtless similar intentions. Prior to receiving this challenge I had, for the first time, formed a prayer in this way by using the pebble-pool at my local Cathedral.

In using the pebble-pool I felt encouraged to be spontaneous. When I placed the two pebbles in the pool I did not in any way consider them to be representative of my prayer (despite the urging of the written prompt). My prayer was not *other than* the two pebbles I sensed resting in the palm of my hand and when the pebbles entered the water, that sensation went with them. They carried with them my bodily apprehension of the prayer being offered. This apprehension was entirely explicit. It seemed that the pebbles *already* embodied my prayer. It was as if they had already offered themselves to me even as I approached the pebble-pool. All I did was pick them off the pile and place them in the water.

Earlier on, I claimed that in using the pebble-pool I felt encouraged to be spontaneous. If the understanding of spontaneity contains the notion of doing something without hesitation simply because it seems to be "a good idea" then this is not the understanding being used here. My intention at this moment, is to convey the sense of *immediacy*, one that already contains within itself the fluidity of my approach from the Cathedral car park, through the Cathedral grounds, over the Cathedral threshold, into the North porch, down the nave, up the South aisle and into the Lady Chapel to where the lifting of the pebbles and the placing of them into the water revealed itself as part of a process that had begun a lot earlier.

At all points along the spectrum of this action its process had been essentially connective. This connection flowed towards the pooling of the pebbles and then backwards to all that led up to it. In other words, it was both connective and integrative. It allowed a coherence to be revealed, one that had a strong sense of *pre-existing*. This pre-existence continued after I had walked away. There was little sense of abandoning anything or being severed from it. I seemed to be doing what had already been done, what had already been

completed. It seemed that the unique temporality surrounding this prayer action flowed in both directions simultaneously, binding the whole together. Yet there was nothing along this spectrum which was either redundant or superfluous. There was a strong sense that it *had no beginning*. It was something I did not have to prepare for. Yet none of this would have been possible if the pebble-pool had not been in the Cathedral. Likewise the prayer-request boards, I would not now be contemplating writing a prayer-request if it were not eventually to be pinned up on one of these.

   At first sight there appears a great difference between the phenomenology of writing a prayer-request and the phenomenology surrounding that of using a prayer pebble-pool. The experience of using a prayer pebble-pool seems to have about it notions of being embodied, immediate, connective, coherent, integrative, pre-existing, flowing, continuous, revelatory, uninhibiting and outside the ambit of ordinary chronological time. Yet none of this would have appeared unless the pebble-pool prayer action had actually been *completed* by me. It is as if the completion of the action already contained within itself all the elements for its fulfilment, as if the seriality of one thing apparently following on from another became cancelled out, as if the very notion of an *event* was itself inappropriate. So the question now arises, is there any connection between the phenomenology of writing a prayer-request and the phenomenology surrounding the action of placing a pebble in a pebble-pool and would any such a connection be useful in responding to the challenge?

   On one level this appears not the right question as the outstanding characteristic surrounding the writing of a prayer-request (so far discovered) is that it exists as a contemplated future event whose completion seems *dependent* upon some sort of process immediately preceding it, a process that appears to have a definite seriality. In addition, there is nothing about the prayer-request experience that can be described as 'immediate'; in fact, it resembles more a methodical hermeneutical process of unfolding, more a spiralling course of explication, one existing (and experienced as existing) within the ordinary experience of chronological time. Above all, it appears as an inhibited and slowed-down process that relies upon a sort of *disconnection* from its purported purpose. By contrast, there is nothing within the pebble-pool prayer action that induces a particular attitude nor does it seem to require one. It is pure enough

to freely stand alone as entirely itself, as something surrounded by superfluities.

Other questions now obtrude: is there anything present within the written prayer-request process that in any way resembles that of the pebble-pool? If so, would such a presence enliven or inhibit the formation of a written prayer-request? As to their differing temporalities, does the prayer-request belong more to the dynamic world of interpretation and meaning and the pebble-pool more to the *nunc stans* (the standing 'now')?

That which resists language

Earlier on, I maintained that there is something which resists language, something which *almost* breaks into utterance and that this something exerts a powerful resistance upon the formation of any coherent prayer-request whatsoever. It is as if the written prayer-request contains within itself elements of the pebble-pool, elements which cannot easily be extracted or ignored. Does the very existence of the pebble-pool (and its popular presence in many places of worship) already betray a recognition that *woven into prayer itself* is something that *resists* language? Does the creator of any written prayer-request have to *deal* with this kind of resistance in order to arrive at what they want to say? And if they ignore this resistance, will they end up requesting something that does not lie at the heart of their prayer?

In the formation of my prayer-request, I always arrive at a point of wanting to say something, but when I come to it, it appears as unconvincing (and *not* what I want to say). No matter how much time has been spent on it, this arrival is always too 'previous'. It exists in a lingering state of prematurity (but one having about it an air of appropriateness) as if it is now signalling that I am somehow enmeshed in something not lightly to be undertaken. The smallness of the paper slips, the provision of drawing-pins, the ready availability of a pen, the presence of other prayer-requests, the solidity of the prayer-board, the serenity, endurance and consoling steadiness of the church building, the knowledge that other people have done this before me, the sense that I am participating in an established practice, have all deceived me into believing that this is an easy thing to do. All I have to do is write a little note.

I also discover that I do not want my prayer-request slip to be treated disrespectfully nor do I want it to be misinterpreted. I particularly do not want

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its special temporality to be curtailed through its being mishandled or misused. There is also a sense in which my prayer action has not yet reached completion simply because it has now been rendered into written form. The written prayer-request is not a terminus. Do I want it to be treated as if it were a pebble? Does it actually resemble a pebble now? One thing seems clear; a pebble cannot be interpreted as if it were text, as if it were language. There is something about a pebble's '*objectness*' that allows it to keep its secrets very close. Objects do not yield themselves up quite as easily as some might think. The fact that every day we use them as raw material to transform them into useful instruments might well encourage us to believe that an object is simply something in transition awaiting its final perfection according to human intention. This habit of thought skates over the unyielding aspect of what an object is. A pebble sunk beneath the waters of a pebble-pool is very much akin to other pebbles in the container alongside. It has not been treated as raw material. It retains its '*objectness*'. It has not been transformed into something else. It cannot be interpreted (as its unyielding nature does not allow it).

Do I want my prayer-request to be unyielding? Do I hope its secrets will not easily be prised open? If its meaning simply remains at the level of what I have written then it becomes another object in transition simply awaiting interpretation. It becomes another object subject to human will. I do not want my prayer-request to enter that hermeneutic of understanding. I do not want it to be subjected *again* to the many processes that have already led to its apparent completion. I want it to avoid this. I want it to be tangential. Yes, I do want it to be treated as if it were a pebble. If I pray quietly or inwardly to myself then nothing of my prayer enters the hermeneutic of human understanding. I cannot be challenged on my intentions. I cannot have my motives disputed. My human complexity cannot be reduced to another person's attention. But when I write a prayer-request and pin it up on board, I am going public. I am allowing my private intention to become interpreted. The prayer-board then becomes a portal through which I have volunteered to enter. Why should I do this?

Perhaps a prayer-board is not really a portal at all. Perhaps the metaphor of my volunteering to 'enter' anything is entirely inappropriate. Perhaps it more resembles an icon. Icons are not intended to be interpreted. They are not intended to enter the aesthetic hermeneutic of good or bad art. They are not

intended to be gazed at as if they were objects. Yet there is something about them that retains the unyielding nature of an object. They somehow gaze back, out of this unyieldingness. It is because of this unyieldingness that they are **able** to gaze back. Perhaps I want my prayer-requests to be like that. I want people to *look* at them (more than I want them to read them). When they are looked at I want them to gaze back. Perhaps I want the greater capacity to remain with that which is gazed at than with the person who is gazing.

Overcoming the reader

It is always been my practice to read prayer-requests whenever I have found them pinned up on prayer-boards within cathedrals or churches. But I have never been convinced that that was what I was actually doing. I have always been uneasy in the area of prayer-boards, particularly if other people have been about. I have also never been convinced that this uneasiness has been generated by an oversensitive sense of self-consciousness. I have never wanted to be seen as the person who is simply 'reading' nor simply as the person who might be 'praying' the prayer-requests. In fact, I do not want to be seen at all. I want to vanish. I want to become the person who is now being gazed at by the prayer-requests. I also do not want other people to make assumptions about what I might be doing. I want them to understand that I am not 'doing' anything at all. I am certainly not 'receiving' anything as if I were being transmitted to. I am not inserted within some informational stream. I am not picking up handy tips about human misery and misfortune. Above all, I do not want to be seen as motivated by casual curiosity. Yet, in my approach to the prayer-board that is exactly the posture I adopt.

Why do I want to deceive? Why do I want to positively misrepresent my true situation? Why do I want to be camouflaged? Perhaps I want to remain as tangential as the prayer-requests themselves. If I cannot become an icon myself, perhaps I can clothe myself in some of its unyieldingness. In 'looking at' the prayer-requests I am already becoming changed. I am already behaving differently. I am already becoming altered as a social being. These small and insignificant slips of paper have, out of their unyielding iconic capacity, worked upon me a change I cannot avoid. Yet there is nothing personal in all this. I have not become changed in the way I might have done had I come up against, for

instance, the magnetic sway of some charismatic life-coach. Anything *I* might be undergoing has not in any sense derogated from the prayer-requests themselves. They are not there simply to change me. They are not instruments of anything at all. That they steadily *remain* iconic is the essence of the change in me. They cut across the very notion of 'content'. It is as if they undermine the very idea of 'reader' (and the very understanding of being something created). It is if they have foresworn any connection to the personal. When I 'read' them (and am observed doing so) I am engaging in some extreme fakery. It is not only that I want to vanish it is as if I am vanishing.

What prevents me is the actual or presumed presence of others. If I am completely alone in front of the prayer-board, I still cannot rid myself of these others (and their capacity to interpret). This capacity to interpret seems almost too 'previous' too quickly exercised (almost as if the prayer-board is to be approached in order to be 'regarded' in an inspecting kind of way). In this way, the prayer-slips become objects in transition, transforming into something else and the person 'reading' them becomes the means of their conversion. Much in the same way that names on ancient gravestones are re-animated by the casual attention of passing visitors, so these prayer-slips may similarly end up. In both instances, the position of the casual reader and that of the passing visitor occupies *the* primary position. The prayer-slips call out to be treated otherwise. Their '*objectness*' invites a *diminution* of the 'readers' position. They call for the reader to be overcome in such a way that they may enter him or her *immediately* with the least possible inhibition.

It is as if the 'content' of the prayer-slips is a mirage much in the same way that perspective is a mirage for creating an illusory sense of depth in drawings and paintings. But here there is a double deception. An icon has no perspective. From the outset it is entirely flat. There is no attempt to deceive or to create an illusion of depth. Sometimes this absence is regarded as a deficiency and icons themselves regarded as examples of primitive art. But the prayer-slips *do* seem to recede into a depth created by meaning and appear to have perspective through their 'content'. They seem connected to their authors as written artefacts created to communicate a message. Their brevity and their physical slightness leave room for little else except 'content'. But it is this mirage of 'content' that provokes the interpretative response and this same mirage that

masks their iconic quality by an illusion of perspective, (hence the doubling of the deception).

As has been noted, it is perfectly possible to treat an icon simply as a painting that has no depth (one that would improve if it had) by regarding its flatness as a deficiency. In this way the essence of the icon is evaded. Likewise, it is perfectly possible to treat a prayer-slip as having depth by interpreting its 'content' as the complete extent of what is comprehendible. In this way the essence of the prayer-slip is evaded. In both instances there is a curtailment of some further process that might unfold. Does the extensiveness of my preparations to write a prayer-request already embody some awareness of this curtailment and does it also embrace the notion 'that I do not want my prayer-request slip to be treated disrespectfully nor do I want it to be misinterpreted'?

Severances

Part of my activities, along with my colleague who initiated this challenge is (on a weekly basis) to count the pebbles in the pebble-pool at my local Cathedral, to move them out of the pool and to replace them in their container alongside, also to change the water in the pool and, on a monthly basis (again with my colleague) to count and then remove the written prayer-requests from the adjacent prayer-board. I have become very aware that these two activities are very different and that their impact on me varies considerably in intensity. When I remove the pebbles from the pool and place them with the other pebbles in their container I have no sense that I am transferring them from one condition into another. They are still pebbles whatever I might do. They neither increase nor decrease in their 'pebbleness'. Nor do I feel that I am bringing to an end any process. I am not *interrupting* anything that might still be going on. If there is something still going on, then it is no longer anything to do with this pool. The pebbles have not been exhausted, emptied out nor become redundant neither by entering the pool nor by being removed from it (nor have they been filled out or become saturated with petitionary content). Even as they now lie within their container I have no sense of any prayerful potentiality. There is nothing about them that is presumptive of how they might be used, nor is there any sense of gravitas as I scoop them out. I am not carrying with me the weight of silent prayer or latent misery. The pebbles are also inherently substitutional. I can

substitute them at any time with glass marbles, rocks, ceramic beads, decorative baubles or any other suitable material. But despite their concrete physicality there is something especially *abstract* about all this, it as if the whole prayer process exists entirely in an action that has now become hidden and occluded. Nevertheless, the physicality of these materials does not in any sense derogate from this abstractness (it is as if it makes it possible).

A pebble-pool is 'contentless' it cannot be interpreted in the same way words and language can. Either full or empty it remains an enigma. Even its very essence can be substituted for in so many ways. It evades analysis of its prayer action. The prayer content of a full pebble-pool cannot be derived from its contents. Pebbles in the pool are evidence that something has occurred. Prayer action may actually be absent (a child may have been playing a game with the pebbles). If prayer action has occurred then it remains entirely abstract. This abstractness guarantees a sealed privacy, one subsisting within the simple one-way action of the pebble-pool action. This abstractness is recognised as releasing the supplicant from creating 'content'. It allows the possibility for inarticulate prayer to be formed. It allows for prayer to be formed without a clear intention. It allows for prayer to come into being *simultaneously* with the act of moving the pebbles. It allows for prayer to be partially formed and for that partiality to be sealed when the pebble enters the water. Its completedness undermines any lingering connection when the pool is departed. It is a secret act publicly displayed.

A pebble-pool has no history. A pebble-pool evades memory. Unlike a prayer-board, it does not become a location for retention. It neither records nor accrues. It is not an archive of anything. When prayer-requests are taken down a unique connectedness (of one prayer-slip's proximal relation to another) is destroyed. It is an act that obliterates provenance. A prayer-board is an archive and like an archive it creates a record. These records gradually accrue. They assemble as collections and when prayer-boards are deemed full the collections are complete. A prayer-board may become saturated; its petitionary contents can spill out onto the floor. Requests removed from a prayer-board enter a discipline of order or a discipline of destruction. In both instances (unlike pebbles) they become transformed. A discipline of order may include being publicly placed upon an altar within the liturgical activity of the church. They may become

orally 're-prayed' as individual items within an office of the church. They may be stored in a cupboard with no clear plan for their future. Sometimes, they may be deliberately collected together and stored under archival conditions for research attention. A discipline of destruction may include being destroyed by being burnt. Alternatively, they can simply be bundled together and put it in a rubbish bin. Often, a discipline of destruction follows a discipline of order.

Whenever I remove prayer-requests from the prayer-board, I do not subject them to a discipline of destruction instead they follow a disciplined order of removal, storage, transcription, research, archiving. Whatever the intention of their authors, these prayer-requests have a future that lingers well beyond their creation (and well beyond their public exposure upon a prayer-board**)**. Even as I witness them accruing week after week, first one and then another (until the whole prayer-board is full) I already apprehend them as something else. By being removed, counted and placed within an envelope the original spread of their coverage over the prayer-board is reduced to a compact and convenient seriality. They become miniaturised, hidden and already standardised enough to be incorporated within a system of other envelopes holding collections of other full prayer-boards. When I look at a full prayer-board I cannot escape the apprehension that a world deliberately put together is now confronting me. Not only is each prayer-slip an original creation (with a unique individual authorship) but the full prayer-board itself is a gathering of individual choices. It is not simply a convenient surface upon which to advertise petition. The apparent random chaos of a full prayer-board (with prayer-slips pinned one above the other masking those below or skewed at right angles or pinned onto the frame of the prayer-board or even neatly occupying a space all of their own) appears muddled and disordered when compared to the eventual neat containment within an envelope.

When I remove the prayer-slips from the stand, I am engaged in an irreversible process. I can never create again that unique configuration. I am now dismantling a world. Where there was once order and connection I am now creating disorder and disconnection. When I select a handy hard surface to tap the prayer-slips into a single standard shape I am already altering them. I had thought destruction to be a final process but here it is discovered as an *intermediate* one inserted between conservation and incineration. There can be

nothing seamless here, no svelte graceful efficiency whereby the prayer-board becomes quickly emptied and its contents proficiently packaged. It is an act of severance, one of radical interruption which divides one domain from another.

This severance is not very clear. Already I am harking back to the original location as a blank space being readied for use. I have forgotten what I have done. I am already imagining prayer-requests yet to be written and remembering those I have packed away. Between future imaginings and past recollections I have assumed a continuing connectedness. This assumption allows me to usefully engage with the routine maintenance of the prayer-request area. Perhaps this is more than an assumption and more an act of necessary forgetfulness. Either way, this severance is an element of prayer-request formation that I cannot avoid in my own attempt to write a prayer-request.

Misinterpretation as freedom
A while ago I came across a prayer-request on the prayer-board at my local Cathedral. It was written on a piece of A5 paper and said simply in uppercase letters 'R.I.P.' Of all the requests this was the one that hammered itself into me. It seemed to approach a form of written prayer I might be able to attempt. It also seemed to approach a condition of almost not being there whilst also maintaining the barest connection to intelligibility. Almost on the point of vanishing it had the greatest impact. Perhaps there was something about the boundary between 'almost there' and 'not there' that was especially powerful. Perhaps this prayer inhabited such a place. Did I want my prayer to come from there? Would I want it to stay there? Would I have to be there in order to create it? What appealed to me was the riskiness involved in its being overlooked as something informationally impoverished. This seemed a worthy possibility, one that embraced some sort of gamble of its being rejected through its simply not being *recognised*. Perhaps I did not want my prayer to be intelligibly accessible. Perhaps I did not want it to speak in order to make things *clearer*. Perhaps I wanted something to be recognised in my prayer that was somehow *not* there. In the same way that an icon has to be there in order for it to gaze into the gazer I wanted my prayer to be there in a similar way. But an icon is arrestingly static. If anything is going to move, it is certainly not *it*. In a sense, I wanted my prayer to be 'justified' by the possibility of its being misinterpreted (and overlooked).

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I wanted it to be static so that movement would occur in the gazer. I wanted any correlation between the intelligibility of what might be written and the possibility of a simple singular interpretation, to be minimal.

Misinterpretation keeps free a domain for further possibilities. It allows free play. It is evidence of not being hooked onto *one* thing. It also sets up the possibility of some kind of dialogue between prayer-requests and whoever might view them. This dialogic possibility must not be overtly invitational. It has to generate a discourse that is more 'intra' than 'inter'. It itself must retain a steady implacability (one not readily de-stabilised by naïve lucidity or lengthy explanation).

That there might be others embedded in prayer-request creation is itself a surprise. I had always expected others might be present as *subjects*, but not as this! Here they are, faceless, unformed figures (but always male or female) standing implacably waiting to be involved. Perhaps I have avoided them. Perhaps I have assumed their existence a little too casually. One thing now seems certain I now *have* to take them into account. But here they are, diverting me from: 'all I have to do is write a little note'. Are they as unformed as my would-be prayer? Must a stronger recognition of their identities *precede* any attempt to write? Is recognition one thing and identity another? Whatever the situation, this fresh possibility now enters the phenomenology surrounding the creation of my prayer-request and modifies its formation-in-progress.

There are those I do not want here as part of this process and I certainly do not want them as witnesses, either silent or vocal. But they will not go away and I have to take them into account. In the way that character is often formed by rubbing up against the prejudices, antipathies, negativities and dislikes of others, so my prayer-request must similarly be exposed. It must take shape under the passive or active pressure of their existence. Likewise, there are those I want as part of this process. Silently, they already endorse my intentions. But there is nothing homogenous about this endorsement. It is not one solid standardised validation. In a sense, I find myself embedded within a nuanced context, one characterised by subtle variations of encouragement. This variety both enriches and complicates. Each endorsement subsists within the singularity of each figure, as if each figure exemplifies one feature unique and discrete, many different figures with many different singularities; communal without being

associative. They do not 'know' each another but they stand together. Those whom I want and those whom I do not, stand separately apart. But I must experience their closeness and their distance.

It is a setting where proximal relationships are *crucial* where each configuration rearranges itself as a unique experiment, one that tests, one effectively pre-formative, one where *mood* predominates. Often, within dreams, mood lingers as the most instructive element (one frequently ignored within the detail of narrative). But there is no story here, no easy plotline pointing towards a dénouement. There is no finale in view rather an atmosphere of insistence. It is as if proximity has purpose, but one primarily non-directive. Either near or far, mood prevails. Mood is silence; it does not speak but presses for attention.

'R.I.P'., 'Rest In Peace' or 'Requiescat In Pace'? In whatever form, it does not seem intended *for* the viewer (but neither is it completely private). There is nothing here of the generalised cliché. It retains all the pain of personal angst whilst simultaneously dissolving it. If this prayer-slip were taken from its context and placed in another part of the Cathedral (dropped on the floor perhaps, or left casually on one of the pews) would it be mistaken as something incomplete; a trial version of a work-in-progress? Would it simply be another piece of Cathedral litter? Would it be an unconnected purposeless fragment? Here on the prayer-board, whilst risking all the foregoing, it opposes collapsing into disconnection.

Prayer requests as encrypted messages

But why is it here at all? Why has this place been chosen, this site? What exactly *is* this process of writing prayers on slips of paper and exhibiting them publicly? Why should I want to be involved in all this? Despite the apparent slightness of the task ('all I have to do is write a little note') there is much within this challenge other than writing prayers on paper. The prayer-board is evidence of positive acts through the gradual accruing of prayer-slips. But what about that multitude of absences, those who have chosen not to join in? Their silence intrigues me. Perhaps the writing of prayer-requests is a very *special* activity one reserved for out-of-the-ordinary conditions. It certainly begins to feel an uncommon and exceptional act when I cannot bring myself to start

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writing. Above all, it seems so *unfamiliar* despite my repeated exposure to prayer-boards and their contents. There is also something *puzzling* about this whole issue. It has about it an alien and distancing foreignness, something *incomparable* that cannot be rendered into the commonplaceness of the day-to-day. It has somehow dissociated itself from conventional ways of being. It has about it a sense of emerging from the *unpredictable.*

Certainly in my attempt to write a prayer-request I have little motivation to be anything other than exceptional (and perhaps I have to prepare by identifying that exceptionality). It seems to involve an earnest commitment to whatever I might inscribe on paper. There is nothing here that invites or encourages triviality or banality. Perhaps I am conflicted about what I am to be committed to? Certainly, the writing of prayer-requests is a definite species of literature, one readily identifiable by its proximity to institutions (churches, cathedrals, hospitals, shrines and schools) and by its brevity and by its linking to grief and heartache. But to whom might this literature be directed? To those who pass by, to God, to an institutional community, to those who possess special qualities of mercy, tenderness, insight, prayerfulness, sensitivity, to those with the gift of healing or to no-one in particular? Do I have to be *clear* about this intended focus before I can make a move? It does seem that the writing of prayer-requests has something of the confessional about it and perhaps by preparing for this I am attempting to mitigate its effects beforehand. In reading the prayer-requests I am struck by the revealing nature of what has been written. It has an exposing starkness that does not seek any amelioration through qualifying terms. It not only *is* brief, it seems to *seek* brevity. There is simply no room for endless adverbs and adjectives. It is as if the request has been *already* understood and the inscribed words are merely a coded sketch of something larger and more comprehensive.

The prayer-requests are therefore *encrypted* messages that point towards another reality largely unexpressed. In that sense, they contain more silence than noise. Is there an awareness that the passer-by has to be a cryptographer? Or are these messages aimed tangentially so that they only partially incorporate the viewer in their trajectory? Is there a sense that the viewer *already* understands (and accepts) that he or she has to be missed in order for them to continue on to a further target? Does the viewer also accept that he or she also *has* to be

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present for them to have any efficacy at all? There does seem to be a presumption that there already exists a community of regard who will overlook whatever is to be created on the prayer-board. There is also something blatant about this expectation. It would be perfectly possible to secretly write a prayer-request and then ritually and privately incinerate it as an offering. In the writing and in the burning would be incorporated a whole plethora of presuppositions; that hidden eyes would be already present, that they would *already* have seen and understood. It would no longer be necessary to filter the message through other eyes. The little pile of burnt paper would close off forever any involvement of a community of regard. That there *are* other eyes seems crucial to how prayer-boards function. But is there something of the little pile of burnt paper (something of its final concealing power) already embedded within the coded conciseness of the prayer-slips? Have the creators of these prayers already partially destroyed them in some ritual of offering (of which their final presentation on the prayer-board is only part?). Do they have to possess this element of sacrifice to have any efficacy at all? Is a prayer-board really an altar whose surface has been vertically upended to aid this process?

Certainly there is something plainly sacrificial about prayer-slips. They not only have a short existence they are *expected* to have one. Their intercessory and supplicatory content are the ephemera of church literature and the slight paper on which they are inscribed, registers this from the outset. These prayers have a life-span. But is their termination natural or induced? I do not want my prayer-request to be a candidate for *Dignitas* the moment I set pen to paper. There is a sense in which *I do not know* the life-span of my would-be prayer, it is something somehow concealed from me. It has a temporality other than the convenient process of disposal that seems its destiny. In addition, I do not want it to be *assumed* that I have finished with it at the arbitrary moment when the prayer-board becomes full up. I do not want others to make these assumptions and decisions. Why is this? It is to do with the understatement of the method.

In setting pen to paper I appear not to be getting the whole of me under the terms of the prayer-request. Yet there is a sense that this is patently not true. I do not want the eventual disposer of my paper slip to be so hypnotised by what is written down that they *overlook* its unique temporality and fail to comprehend that there is more of me present than its slightness might suggest. Yet there is a

radical partiality here, voiced in and limited to, the specificity of the particular request. It cannot be otherwise than specific. It is in a convenient form in order to enter a very restricted dimension with very definite determinants. These impinge in such a way that the productive flow of prayer-request creation does not begin at the prayer-board with the exhibiting of the prayer-slip, but begins beforehand with a narrowing of focus engendered by the system itself. There is something inherently ambiguous at play here. The narrowing of focus has the potential to have its productive outcomes *deemed* as ephemeral by the eventual disposer. These productions look evanescent through their very slightness and apparent ad hocness.

I am surprised that the disposer has so prominently come to the fore. I had not expected him or her to occupy such pre-eminence, yet throughout this exploration there has been a gradually accruing sense that *what* this person does might well influence how prayer-requests are created. Up till now this disposer has stayed in the background much in the same way that death is pushed aside, forgotten about, denied, repressed or trivialised *('Death? It's just a fact you've got to accept it.')*. But like death, the disposer has been embedded in this process from the beginning. Was there always a hope, perhaps implanted at the very moment of creation, that these prayer-slips would be treated in such a way that they would become sacrificially efficacious? Was there a sense that they had to be *prepared* for such a final transmutation (one whose completion had always been imagined)?

If the prayer-slips themselves bear the enormous existential weight of misery, hope, desire, desperate petition and ordinary human pain, is the prayer-board itself an adequate bearer of such on-going accumulation? That a prayer-board cannot bear such weight might well inhibit the creation of any written prayer-requests at all. Certainly, the design of prayer-boards as simple functional surfaces (akin to notice-boards) effectively transforms prayer-slips into signs and posters (into little flyers promoting an individual world-view). Such a curtailment of the sacrificial process (its divergence into an advertising medium) creates its own kind of audience by inviting a particular kind of attention. The eye of curiosity flitting over the brightly coloured pictures and announcements continues its questing by incorporating the contents of the prayer-board into the ambit of its interest. Incorporation is also reduction, it

downgrades and restricts heartfelt petition to another engagement of the viewer's attention. It impels a certain kind of response by turning the viewer into a consumer, a role that is begrudged by the suddenness of its demand. Do I want my would-be prayer-request to be simply another item on the smörgåsbord of someone else's choosing? Do I actually want them to act? Do I want them to have anything to *do* at all?

Dark material

When the challenge to write a prayer-request was first made, there was no elaboration other than *'why don't you try writing a prayer-request and I'll do the same.'* But there was already a bundle of expectations embedded within this: a prayer-slip, an institutional context, a prayer-board, a viewer, a time-scale, a disposer. That I might *not* write a prayer-request or that I might write one and then ritually burn it were not options (both are now fully possible). In the beginning, the task seemed small as the paper, 'all I have to do is write a little note.' But what this challenge has revealed is that there are many complications in this prayer-request cosmos, one of which is 'dark material'. This material is entirely hidden (its existence only inferred from its absence). But the 'bundle of expectations', in contrast, occupies a positive field of prayer-activity. It is entirely detectable and extends both into the social world and the built-environment. It constitutes the fabric of what is examinable.

My period of immersement within this challenge has exposed dark material not as something ostensively defined as 'over there' but more the position of one experiencing *not* writing a prayer-request. This dark material cannot be detected by looking at it. It does not 'jut out' into existence. It is not extended (nor can it lend itself to being counted or coded). In effect, this dark material is *me* as one who has never written a prayer-request. I am brought to realisation that my experiences have gradually uncovered its textured variety and found that it is *not* a homogenous mass of unknowability but it is me <u>as</u> that darkness (and my coming to an understanding of it as such). In bringing to light this dark material I no longer take for granted that I can get the whole of me under the term 'I'. Perhaps I had developed an expectation that the whole of me could *always* be available and present whenever 'I' was invoked (certainly the whole of me seems invoked in the creation of this prayer-request). Is that something I

can no longer do? Is it something I should stop attempting? Was it always a false expectation?

Right at the beginning of this task I noted that 'one of the first experiences that impinges itself upon me is the strong notion that writing a prayer-request is itself a challenge (irrespective of whatever a colleague may ask me to do). It now appears as something whose importance might all too easily be disguised by the slight and insignificant piece of paper upon which it will eventually be written.' At that stage I had barely registered the existence of dark material, though I was aware that in responding to the challenge I was somehow in a process of *emerging* from it. I had not begun the introspective attentiveness required to interpret the phenomenology surrounding the *experience* of writing a prayer-request. As it turned out, my attentiveness became increasingly drawn to the experience of *not* writing a prayer-request. The overall direction of this was certainly below my horizon of awareness. It not until the term 'dark material' formed upon the page that the interpretative thread shot backwards through all that had been previously written to expose its primary focus.

In lighting a candle on a votive candle stand, or placing a pebble in a pebble-pool, the whole of me is not invoked, yet its absence is not a loss (it feels more like a relief). I am not burdened by extra considerations of how I have to be. I do not have to collect myself beforehand into a state of attentiveness. Anything I might have to be can occur *afterwards*. In fact, any prayerful attentiveness can be postponed or infinitely *delayed*. This sense of not being responsible frees me to engage in these prayer activities. I can light any number of candles or fill the pool with pebbles. That I am not the focus of my own activity seems strangely alien and strangely familiar. It reminds me of what it was like to *play*. That absorbed seriousness in which there were few barriers. I do not have to gather myself into a state of authenticity as proof beforehand of genuine intention. In fact, I do not have to *be* anything beforehand at all. Sometimes, even the most hardened of people seek the accepting unconditionality of a pet's affection. All the conditionality of human existence becomes irrelevant in that relationship. Language simply drops away as the medium of judgement. In that simplicity of contact lies relief from expectations. When I hold a pebble or light a candle I experience that unconditionality. There is nothing *there* that can interpose itself; it is all offering (that I do not have to *know* what I am to do, frees me to simply

do it).

Invisibilities and tangents

It seems that there is much in creating a prayer-request that is tangential. Sometimes this tangentiality finds itself concretised when a prayer-slip is folded up and its contents concealed from public viewing (whilst still remaining pinned onto a prayer-board). Anyone who looks at this might gather that someone has deliberately withheld its contents from their gaze. It is a secret publicly exposed, one that isolates itself from the open prayer-requests surrounding it. In one sense it hides itself from encounter and evades the medium of ordinary attention. In another sense, its folded-up state indicates a kind of formal cancellation (as if it has *already* been seen, already been encountered and already been dealt with). It is almost like a receipt. Certainly, it has ambiguous status and puts the viewer in an equivocal relationship. Does the viewer unfold the paper-slip and thereby enable it to enter the ordinary process of public regard? Is he or she rescuing it from remaining as something simply potential and undeveloped? Is leaving it in its folded-up state an act of abandonment? Is viewing it an act of revealing 'a secret never to be told'? Or is there something calculatingly alluring in its 'almost but not quite' availability?

Do I want my would-be prayer-request to be a folded up paper-slip pinned to a prayer-board? The immediate answer is 'no'. Why is this? An open prayer-request pinned to a board makes a claim on whoever views it. There is something promiscuous in the wideness of its exposure. A prayer-board is the scene chosen for this uncovering. Even a prayer of thankfulness offers itself to something. It is essentially projective. A folded up prayer-slip has something solipsistic about it. Even its physical configuration points towards an ultimate self-referencing. But is it simply a one-page book with its surfaces folded? Books are rarely pinned shut, even in an ancient chained-library it is not the pages themselves that are secured but the whole volume itself, the pages are free. Here, on this prayer-board, the page itself is closed off. In creating a closed prayer-request would I be attempting to engage the viewer whilst at the same time ignoring him or her or would I wish they put their hands in trusting benediction upon its blank surface and quietly and unquestioningly endorse my hidden supplication? Would I thereby *bypass* the judging eye of interpretation

and go straight to unconditional acceptance?

A folded up prayer-request makes a claim of invisibility whilst also remaining visible. It is as if it requires concealment as something to be *seen*, as if it were being said: '*Here is concealment as something blatantly visible (unless you see it you don't know it's there and if you don't know it's there then it won't really exist) you need to know it exists in order to look at it, then you will know that something is being hidden from you.*' An open prayer-request pinned on a prayer-board allows for the maximum engagement by the viewer, ranging from languid indifference to fulsome identification. It exposes itself to the riskiness of random personal response. In a sense, it has abandoned any notion of control other than the words used in creating it. A folded up prayer-slip imposes an extra restriction in that it constrains the width of response to that of an *associative* one. The viewer can do no other than associate with its content as someone who is denied direct access to it. He or she is *still there* as viewer and the necessity for his or her presence is suggested by the very existence of the prayer-board itself. Is the prayer-board's function as a medium for public display undermined by this folded up slip, or does it undergo a radical re-interpretation? There is a sense that the prayer-board is perceived as *launching* something, as if the trajectory of the prayer-request is initiated when it is pinned up. Whatever vital track is initiated during this installation *includes* that of the viewer but does the folded-up paper-slip set the curve of its flight in another direction?

The viewer is denied the power to directly interpret (even the capacity to infer has no real attachment point here). Nothing travels in the direction of the viewer except the outside of an implacable blank surface. Nevertheless, the viewer is forced to be in relation despite his or her powerlessness. Each open prayer-request, though imbued with own singularity, relates to any other according to the matter of what is written on its prayer-slip. There is variety arising from the difference among them. The prayer-board is textured by the diversity of its contents. Some are strongly associative, others weakly. Areas or patches of the prayer-board may be 'busy' with associate bustle whilst others relatively 'idle'. In other words, prayer-requests may connect up with many or only some. A folded-up prayer-slip, however, has the capacity to relate to <u>all</u> the others. The associative response of the viewer, formerly interpreted as

constraining, may actually *gather* all the prayer-board together around this one. The capacity to relate may register as either positive or negative. In the latter case, the folded up prayer-slip may be *isolated* as a result of its extreme difference. It 'stands out' in relation to all the others as a gathered isolation, its apparent peripheral position not marginal in the sense of being subsidiary or insignificant. Either positively or negatively it becomes radically connective.

The various traces signifying the existence of my dark material seem to indicate that much militates against the creation of a written prayer-request. It is not simply a matter of 'all I have to do is write a little note'. Of the many who turn away and ignore the invitation of prayer-board, pen, paper and the companionable alliance of other written prayer-requests, does my dark material include these? Am I of them? Perhaps at this point I should interject by asserting that all the foregoing, right up to the first sentence on the first page, constitutes a phenomenology surrounding the experiences of writing a prayer-request. There is no special attitude or hived-off experience reserved for this, no closet-like attentiveness that keeps its focus on the prayer-request slips *per se*. In fact the prayer-slips are discovered as existing within an already given context, one that has many cross-linkings and connective pathways. It is the intricate and complicated relations of these connections (and my own immersement within them) that constitute the scope of this on-going explication.

Disciplined protocol

The delicate and complicated relations of these connections include the desire to be *recognised*. I do not want to be misrepresented by my own hand. I do not want to be *limited* to the subject matter of my request. I want the *whole* of me to be somehow taken into account. I want to remain *intact* as the one who retains his complication. I do not want my prayer-request to be a mode of *separation* (as if a part of me is preparing to split off). I do not want my prayer-request to be a *label* of my *identity*. In particular, I do not want to be *profiled* by the content of what I write. I desire an open pathway to an attentiveness that is able embrace all this. I want my name to inhere every part of my request, but I do not want to name my name. I want its reality to be understood and accepted, whilst retaining its integrity, (to remain startlingly visible under some *constructed code*, one that conceals). I want a disciplined protocol that permits the least

interference with my intentions (one that warranties the continued openness of the pathway). I want my prayer-request to resemble something like a neutron star, one of unimaginable density having within it the condensed complexity of my petitioning. I want it to remain *energised* after I walk away and for that energy to be unconnected with anything I might do subsequently. In *leaving* it behind I am withdrawing so that its surface is left exposed without any further intervention. Of all the created appearances that can occur in the world, this one has a capacity to be irruptive. It is not simply a sign denoting something else. It has space and power to *evade* collapsing into an endless informational stream. Its exposed surface is positioned to be one end of an arcing relation. When pinned on the prayer-board it commences its connectedness. It is entirely *original* (even a perfect copy would not resemble it at all) and nothing can be substituted for it. Why is this?

A prayer-request pinned onto a prayer-board is never an announcement. It does not give notice of something. By being read it can become a *distraction*. It can collapse into 'for the attention of'. Its being read is always *in addition to* the trajectory of its directedness. It is always associative. <u>As</u> one end of an arcing relation its very visibility has the power to overwhelm. Its arc passes through any viewer who interposes him or herself within the course of its bearing. This interposition is never an interruption. It does not deflect the arc from its streaming. The presence of the viewer is not causal. The arc does not come into being as a consequence of his or her presence neither does it cease when the viewer is absent. A prayer-request pinned on a prayer-board is always proximal to an attentiveness presupposed. This proximity is hidden by an absence of anything the viewer can readily turn to. In looking *at* the prayer-request, the viewer may be looking *through* an attentiveness that is able embrace all this. As a consequence, the viewer may be 'backed off' and always *further away* than the *other* end of the arcing relation. Even a prayer-request of the form: '*Please pray for the soul of Donald Parker and all his grieving family*' (which seems restricted to inviting others to be in association with it) is *already* embedded within (and directed towards) a previously assumed attentiveness.

In responding to the invitation, the viewer becomes an associate to something *already* in action. What therefore is the *purpose* of the viewer? Prayer-action is not limited to the form it takes. The minimalist position does

not constitute the most authentic. There is no 'default' position for prayer-activity. Humans create one end of the arc and set it in being. The 'setting in being' is not exclusive (it is not a personal message transmitted on a wavelength wholly reserved for it). The prayer-creator is not able to impose restrictions on his or her own requests. They are never able to 'get back to' the origin of their request. They cannot uncover an authentic basal line from which they started. Their prayer-requests have no provenance in the sense of anything *foundational*. Nothing can be uncovered that would point towards something more 'pure' as central to their petition. There is no heart to a prayer-request nor anything that approximates to a birth. Its coming into appearance already brings a plethora of hidden contexts. These pre-existing environments and settings cannot be separated from the prayer-creators. In writing a prayer-request, the creator is already more complex than his or her ostensive intention. That to which it is directed is not limited by or to this ostensive intention. Such attentiveness already *recognises* the complexity hidden from the petitioner. The existence of the arc is not identical with the purposes of the ostensive intention. The arc does not bring into appearance the extent of its scope. It resists any notion of controllability through the unknowability of what is to be controlled.

The arcing relation

A prayer-request is not raw material for something else. It lacks the capacity to become transformed. There is nothing transitional about it. No matter how small it may appear it is never incomplete (it is never a fragment of something greater). A prayer-request pinned on a prayer-board always remains a 'thing' but not simply as 'the-thing-for-the-person-who-looks-at-it'. It does not first come into existence by being looked at. It comes into existence when it is complete. This completeness does not signify that it is 'over' but that it is now 'ready'. This readiness is immediately present when the prayer-request is complete. A viewer looking at a prayer-board is directly and instantaneously incorporated within this readiness. He or she does not have to *wait* in order to be incorporated they simply have to *arrive* at each completeness. This arrival does not initiate the arcing relation (neither does it amplify or derogate from it). To be a viewer of prayer-requests is to be an associate in powerlessness.

This powerlessness is not akin to infantile helplessness. It simply points

toward the *scope* of the viewer's associative action. This associative action is restricted in that it cannot take into account the complexity hidden from the prayer-request creator him or herself (nor can it fully engage with the completeness within which this complexity is embedded). This lack of engagement is structural in that it subsists outside any notion of empathic identification. The arcing relation is not rendered *less* by the absence of empathic activity. Any empathic engagement may be experienced as 'adding to' the completeness (but the *intensity* of this engagement does not modify in any way the structural elements of the arcing relation). This relation is dynamically mundane in that it *incorporates* the *whole* of the prayer-creator's world. The prayer-request is integral to itself. It has its own structure. The associative engagement of the viewer is extra in that it remains *other* than the prayer-request proper and is not 'parallel' with it as a simple accompaniment (but holds the possibility of establishing another and yet distinct arcing relation of its own). A written prayer-request cannot be separated from its arc. The arc is neither an object nor a process. It does not produce anything nor is it directed toward any output or outcome. The question now arises: is there any connection between the *specificity* of the individual prayer-request and its context and the nature of the arcing relation?

Its context is not simply an environment within which things come to appearance. It is not a firmly circumscribed setting with definite boundaries. It does not 'contain' in the sense of enclosing (as a jug holds water). In many respects a prayer-request may be regarded as a stimulus. It starts something off. It does this by being itself stimulated. '*Please pray for the soul of Donald Parker and all his grieving family*' is preceded by the death of Donald followed by the grief of his next-of-kin. Prayer-requests arise from such specific contexts. Their 'content' is often startlingly explicit. The frankness is often amplified by terse brevity. The prayer-request often pulls back the curtain on tragic dramas which the viewer infers. The inference the viewer makes remains anchored to the paucity of information. This paucity effectively limits the viewer's engagement whilst focusing and intensifying it. In a sense, the viewer lacks capacity to escape the slightness of what is presented. The viewer is 'sealed' within the slenderness of whatever is presented and cannot easily seek out an interpretive escape-hatch. Being 'sealed' allows the possibility of empathic

activity. The viewer enters the prayer-creator's world under meagre conditions. These meagre conditions regulate the range of empathic engagement. This range is profoundly undisclosing of its context. The context remains concealed whilst providing the *energy* for the prayer-request itself. The scantiness of words invites imaginative engagement. The viewer is stimulated to 'fill in' for informational absences through acts of imagination. These imaginative responses fashion a narrative structure out of the prayer-traces and form a dominant feature of the *associative* relationship. This imaginative engagement is basically a *secondary* process (or even a tertiary one) in that the viewer has no access to the *primary context*.

Proxies and prayers

There is actually no encounter between the viewer and the prayer-creator. Whatever relationship they have is via the proxy of the prayer-request. Its language is often tersely imperative (as if the smallest distance must be created between whatever is desired and its eventual fulfilment). Imperatives often function as embedded commands and effectively short-circuit the circumlocutions of conventional courtesies. They are blunt and direct and their tone resembles that of a superior addressing an inferior. To utter a command is to be explicit. To command is to possess a certainty of intention. A command is essentially social in that in presumes a community of response. Between what is uttered and what is heard a genesis of action is expected. Someone is always *expected* to hear. If I choose the language of authority I am setting myself up as more powerful than I am and though I might disguise this within prayer-request conventions, I know where its real provenance lies.

I do not want to persuade but I *do* want something to be said. To persuade is to possess a secret, its secret is power. During persuasion, power flows in many directions, backwards, forwards and sideways attempting to 'level out'. At one moment someone has some of it, at the next, none. To be rendered powerless is to have exited the persuading process. The art is to remain neither powerful nor powerless and to know where one is. If I am powerless how can I ever persuade? How can I ever enter this specific process where power-exchange is so crucial? If I am powerless I must present a good case or be ready to beg (and

hope for the best). Begging is gambling. It is always reckless. It presumes mercy as the default answer to its prompt. At its heart lies resentment. Resentment substitutes for courage and inspires the beggar to become indignant beforehand. Indignation is a simulacrum of real power (one that attaches itself to a fake dignity). Resentment and fakery bolster each other up and hide the hollowness at the core of the begging plea. So I ask: in the absence of real dignity will fake dignity do? Is resentment a legitimate catalyst for creating my prayer-request?

In issuing a command or in begging, things are over quickly. Both function as immediate imperatives (persuasion though, takes time). The 'outcomes' of persuasion are ambiguous in that they lack clear identifiable markers. How do I know when something will happen? When I write my prayer-request (and after pinning it on a prayer-board) can I treat it as something now redundant that can be visited and re-visited as evidence of my *original* intention? Can my visits constitute significant moves within the power-dynamics of persuasion? Might a written prayer-request be more a *trace* of something that _is_ to exist rather than something *already* made and largely done with? This latter notion is very appealing in that it casts me forward into what might become possible. This casting forward is not a provisional occupancy of some fake future in which all my hankerings are imagined to exist. Nor is it a merry exit from present miseries into utopian preferences. Nor does it substitute as a phantasy that can be pulled into awareness. There is nothing of the 'bespoke' here in terms of customized reality. Rather, it has a sense of 'gathering' in which the hidden elements of who I am cluster in powerful focus. The word 'focus' is Latin for 'hearth', the domestic centre around which the whole household gathers. This gathering unites through the common proximity of the whole domestic assembly. Each are brought together not by command of a central directing force but by the common purpose of sharing. This sharing arises from an assembly of *difference* not of cloned replication nor a convergence of preferences of who I want to be (but I do want my dark material to be *more present*, to cluster around the hearth in a more *original* way).

In order not to derogate from my complexity my written prayer-request has to remain more a *trace* of something that _is_ to exist rather than something *already* made and largely done with. It has to remain a trace in order to oppose its dispersal into clauses and sub-clauses and to avoid becoming minimalist as a

more 'pure' or sifted medium of my petition. It has to retain the capacity to become *symbolic*. As symbol, my prayer-request must already embrace my dark material and that which is hidden. As symbol it must not refer backwards to a solid pre-existing entity. It must be essentially *projective*. To be projective is to enter the arc of relation. In that relation I must not claim solidity as being foundational for who I am. As symbol it must not *represent* me as something solid and complete but rather *re-present* me as someone continuously engaging within that relational arc and, in that sense, it must always be more a *trace* of something that <u>is</u> to exist rather than something *already* made and largely done with.

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Spring-Source