

## UNTANGLING

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Reverend Dick Garland

We are now well into the Season of Lent, arguably my least favorite time of all the Church Year. All the 'dos and don'ts,' the 'shoulds and oughts,' and the 'don't you dares!' That aside, invariably, somewhere along the way in Lent I begin to think about my prayer life, or, to be honest, my lack of it.

I'm in a dry period.

It hasn't always been that way. There were times when my prayer life was intentional, regular, even robust. Once I even wrote a prayer each day. When I read some of these prayers years later, I am surprised by their content. Of late, though, I mostly listen. The caring is still there, but the words don't come.

I've had some good role models for prayer: Paul Hessert, a professor of theology whose classroom prayers grounded us in our study; Bobbie Chapman, a 'tough as nails' social worker turned pastor who spoke to God as a beloved mentor; George Butterick, a professor whose book "Prayer" was a guidebook for several generations; Howard Thurman, Dean of the Chapel at Boston University School of Theology whose voice in prayer was like sitting beside the Throne of Grace. I hear their voices still.

Katherine May, in her book, "Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times," reflects on what prayer means to her: "It is a sharp breathe of pure being amid a forest of words. It is an untangling." That description came like a welcome rain after a dry spell. Wow! Of course!

Untangling requires patience - never my strong suit - imagine a tangled maze of old cords in an electronics drawer - you get the picture. May spoke of a forest of words that interfered with prayer. To be sure, it's not hard to get tangled up in words when we are trying to pray. What to do?

There is a fallen log along one of my walks in Ryan Park where I always sit and rest, watching and listening. It has become a sacred place. It grounds me. When I'm not there, the memory of what I did there, or didn't do there, seems like a prayer with few words added. When I'm not there, I remember it as a communion with my roots - a place where I could exchange my forest of words for the forest - a place to explore deeper meanings.

I grew up with an understanding of prayer that always involved words that were rooted in my experience with church and scripture. It was there that I would encounter the insight in Romans 8:26: "The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." It was an 'Ah ha!' moment for me. I was introduced to the sigh as a metaphor for prayer. In time I realized that you cannot sigh without first taking a deep breath. Try it. Before we can even sigh we have to inhale. It's called inspiration! Only then can we let go, that is, sigh. It is a releasing, cleansing moment. Just breathe. That is a prayer life for the dry periods, no words needed.

In those dry seasons of life and faith, when the familiar words and rituals don't serve me in the way they once did, or don't seem to offer what I need to survive, I need to just sit and breathe. It untangles me. The sighs, in time, reconnect me to life and to people and to God whose Word of creation brings energy and hope and meaning.