

When you try to craft an eloquent dinnertime prayer, are you often at a loss for words? That's the perfect place to start, says minister Kate Braestrup.

how to say grace

ILLUSTRATION BY Brian Cronin

OF THE SKILLS required of an ordained minister, blessing a meal was the one I had the least aptitude for. It felt like a predictable ritual, one that did not change my world or improve my work. I felt that it didn't apply to real life. But in recent years I have come to see that I was wrong. A prayer—any prayer, even the simple act of saying grace before dinner—doesn't happen outside life, but helps us more fully enter it.

In order to say grace, you have to stop doing other things. You have to stop talking, planning, going. As the Buddhist bumper sticker says, *DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING—SIT THERE!*

Saying grace invites you to just be present: See the color of the radish in your salad, smell the soap on your hands, notice the texture of the tablecloth, and hear your own, or your own child's, breathing. Even in as mundane a moment as this, the astonishing richness of human life is laid before you. If you are safe from danger, sheltered from the elements, and not alone, grace gives you a chance, crucial moment in which to know it.

"OK," you might be saying. "That sounds very nice, but what am I supposed to say?" Excellent question. You may not have to say anything. It might be enough just to be silent and breathe.

Here's a story I wish I had heard when I was figuring out how to pray. Franciscan friar and author Richard Rohr once told me about a rabbi who explained the Jewish prohibition against speaking or writing the name of God, lest it be taken in vain. "Many think it's actually impossible to speak or write the true name of God," the rabbi said. "Because the name of God is the sound of breathing. Breathing in...breathing out." Father Richard and the rabbi were quiet for a minute. They heard themselves breathing. They heard each other breathing. And they smiled.

The essence of grace is so uncomplicated: just your breath, moving into your body and flowing out again. It's the first thing every

human being does upon being born, and the last. There's no correct way to breathe, whether it's in the church, the synagogue, the mosque, or the coffee shop; down the street or across the ocean.

In our time, the moment of silence has become a common code for public prayers. But silence isn't a mere absence of words, not just the inoffensive ritual of last resort. The best thing about silent prayer is that it is never actually silent.

During a service, the moment of silence is when the sounds of life take over: Babies and digestive systems gurgle, sinuses tickle and noses sniffle, a faraway dog begins to bark, and an ambulance howls from the street outside the sanctuary. The moment stretches. The dog barks again. Our neighbors in the pews inhale and exhale, saying the true name of God the only way there is to say it. *Amen*.

Such moments remind me of when my children were little, and we'd pause during our occasional walks in the woods. We'd lie down beneath the trees and be still, listening to the leaves shifting and rustling overhead, to the imperious cry of a northern cardinal (*WHEE-err-err-WIT WIT WIT*). In the spaces between sounds, we could hear ourselves, and each other, breathing.

As you sit at your dinner table, your inhaled breath can pick up a few words and bring them forth as grace: *For the food before us and the friends beside us and the love that surrounds us. For these thy gifts we are about to enjoy, let us be truly grateful.*

A spoken prayer declares aloud what is implicit in the breath: the sacredness of ordinary life and the splendor of ordinary love. You can say grace before every meal, or only in times of special thanksgiving. You can use words, or you can sit there without saying anything.

And maybe it won't happen every single time, but it will happen: In some ordinary moment of ordinary prayer, you will experience the extraordinary form of gladness that is indistinguishable from gratitude. ■

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