

THE LOQUACIOUS MAN

I have been a Catholic since 1956, when I was baptized wearing a white dress. My forebears, family, friends, schools, and employers were Catholic. Catholicism was my language, my coat, my house. I learned to pray in two American Catholic tongues, Latin and English, and to relish the smoky poetry of the mass, an ancient ritual prayer. I chanted the Rosary with my brothers and sister, I prayed to St. Francis when I found the huddles corpses of sparrow, I prayed to St. Blase when my throat burned. When I was 12 my grandmother shriveled and died and I prayed desperately for her soul during her funeral Mass, a sad waltz which taught me the enormous power of ritual, the skeleton that sustains us when we are weak.

Then I stopped praying. It seemed pointless, a speech delivered to an empty room, a plea without ears. Many years passed. I grew up. Slowly I began to hear and see and taste prayers: a fox against snow, my wife's hand, my mother's corduroy voice. One morning on an island I went to get my mail and two purple finches flew out of the mailbox and I knew that they were prayers. One day, years later, a cold doctor said to me You will never have children, and that night I opened my mouth and prayed to the wood and skies and birds, to the shambling God I could not find but sensed everywhere, and since that day I have prayed silently and aloud, with my hands and feet, with my heart.

It seems to me now that all things are prayers. Curiosity and memory and silence and water are prayers. People are prayers. I have a daughter now, two years old, and exuberant prayer. We talk about God, whom she calls Gott. When she is asleep my wife and I cover her with one blanket and two prayers.

As a boy I learned the names of the boxes that prayers were mailed in: Our Father, Hail Mary, the Mass of the Dead. I came to hate the boxes because they seemed empty. I did not see that they were a means to an end, and that the end was a piercing conversation with Gott, the man who is nowhere and everywhere, who is not a man, who was a man, who never stops talking.

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Brian Doyle, Editor

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