

Ellen Bass

Pray for Peace

Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
Jesus nailed to his wooden or marble or plastic cross,
his suffering face bent to kiss you,
Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
Adonai, Allah, raise your arms to Mary
that she may lay her palm on our brows,
to Shekhina, Queen of Heaven and Earth,
to Inanna in her stripped descent.

Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, Record Keeper
of time before, time now, time ahead, pray. Bow down
to terriers and shepherds and siamese cats.
Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries.

Pray to the bus driver who takes you to work,
pray on the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus
and for everyone riding buses all over the world.
If you haven't been on a bus in a long time,
climb the few steps, drop some silver, and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,
each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

Make the brushing of your hair
a prayer, every strand its own voice,
singing in the choir on your head.
As you wash your face, the water slipping
through your fingers, a prayer: Water,
softest thing on earth, gentleness
that wears away rock.

Making love, of course, is already a prayer.
Skin and open mouths worshipping that skin,
the fragile case we are poured into,

each caress a season of peace.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.
 Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
 Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.
 Pray to the angels and the ghost of your grandfather.

When you walk to your car, to the mailbox,
 to the video store, let each step
 be a prayer that we all keep our legs,
 that we do not blow off anyone else's legs.
 Or crush their skulls.
 And if you are riding on a bicycle
 or a skateboard, in a wheel chair, each revolution
 of the wheels a prayer that as the earth revolves
 we will do *less harm, less harm, less harm.*

And as you work, typing with a new manicure,
 a tiny palm tree painted on one pearlescent nail
 or delivering soda or drawing good blood
 into rubber-capped vials, writing on a blackboard
 with yellow chalk, twirling pizzas, pray for peace.

With each breath in, take in the faith of those
 who have believed when belief seemed foolish,
 who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace,
 feed the birds for peace, each shiny seed
 that spills onto the earth, another second of peace.
 Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
 Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
 around your VISA card. Gnaw your crust
 of prayer, scoop your prayer water from the gutter.
 Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
 your prayer through the streets.

Ellen Bass' most recent book of poetry, *Mules of Love*, was published by BOA Editions and is the winner of the 2002 Lambda Literary Award for Poetry. Ellen co-edited the ground-breaking book, *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women* and has published four previous volumes of poetry, *I'm Not Your Laughing Daughter*, *Of Separateness and Merging*, *For Earthly Survival*, and *Our Stunning Harvest*. "Pray for Peace" first appeared in *The Sun*.

Author's Note

I wrote “Pray for Peace” on February 16, 2003. Intellectually, I knew war was unavoidable—I understood that our government had decided this war was necessary to secure political control in the Middle East and corporate profits—but I felt that it was immoral for me to succumb to this inevitability. I felt I must, even irrationally, hold onto the power of the heart and the imagination to create peace. So I went to peace marches, and I continued to hope, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that we might avert a war. It's difficult for me to write poems about huge issues like peace without deteriorating into rhetoric, so I'd tried for months before I was able to find an entrance to this poem.

On February 15, I was at a peace rally in Santa Cruz, Ca where I live. A local blues and gospel singer, Sista Monica, performed. Monica was battling a life-threatening cancer and seeing her up on the stage, willing to share her limited energy with us, moved me deeply. When she sang, it went all the way into my bones. At the end, she entreated the audience to “Pray for peace.” The next day, rather than go to the march in San Francisco, I stayed home and wrote this poem.

Since the start of this war, the search for weapons of mass destruction has become a tragic joke, our precious freedoms granted to us under the U.S. Constitution have been drastically slashed under the Patriot Act, our soldiers continue to die, the Iraqis continue to suffer, and we may be less, not more, safe from terrorism. I wish I knew how to write poems about all these things, as Pablo Neruda was able to do in Chile. But I am grateful that I could write at least this one poem.

Santa Cruz, 2003