

Help, Thanks, Wow Study Guide

Help, Thanks, Wow by Anne Lamott

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Summary

NOTE: This study guide is based on the Kindle version of *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, published November 13, 2012.

Three basic themes in prayer — “help,” “thanks,” and “wow” — are discussed by Anne Lamott in her nonfiction essay collection and spiritual guidebook *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Lamott tells her readers that prayer should be kept simple. In fact, she encourages the reader to not even concern himself too much with the force to which he prays. In the scope of simple prayers, Lamott believes that seeking help, giving thanks, and expressing awe are the basic three purposes of prayer.

Lamott relates the story of her own damaging childhood in which she and her siblings were encouraged not to pray. In the book, which is not only a memoir of Lamott’s spiritual life but is also a guide to teach others the benefits of prayer, Lamott discusses how simple and heartfelt prayer can be.

Lamott begins the book by giving her own definition of prayer. She indicates that prayer is a word or words of truth spoken to a greater force that is willing to deal with humans even though they may not yet have their lives completely together. In order to keep the reader from getting distracted from her lessons about prayer, Lamott indicates it does not matter to whom or to what a person chooses to pray. For convenience she tells the reader she will refer to the recipient of prayers as “God.”

The bulk of the book is dedicated to help, thanks, and wow, the three basic prayer themes identified by Lamott. She examines each of these three themes individually and describes the circumstances under which they would be appropriate. Examples of these prayers given to everyday events are also included. Lamott closes her book with a discussion of the meaning of the word “Amen” and ways the supplicant can make this traditional closing word for a prayer more meaningful.

Prelude: “Prayer 101”

Summary

In the prelude to the Penguin edition of the guidebook and memoir, author Anne Lamott introduces her idea that prayer should be kept simple. Three main types of prayers, she writes, are simply “help,” “thanks,” and “wow.” Lamott spends the rest of this prelude discussing what she believes prayer is. She says that prayer is private communication from the heart to a higher force. While she refers to this higher power as God, she argues the supplicant should not get caught up in what they call this higher power or what they think this higher power is. She describes how many were taught to pray by their parents at bedtime by reciting the traditional “Now I lay me down to sleep.” She remembers being scared when she first heard this prayer because of the reference to taking her soul.

People can pray for things, for people, and even for things that are not good for us. Prayer can take place during stillness or in the middle of motion. Lamott writes that prayer is the idea that we believe there is an unseen, greater power who wants to have union with us even if we are not yet perfect. Lamott says that prayer is real with our real selves communicating to God honestly. She refers to God as “light,” (7) an agent that allows us to see ourselves for what we really are. She indicates that even mushrooms respond to the light. Lamott closes her prelude by telling the reader that variations on the prayers of “help,” “thanks,” and “wow” are all that she thinks are needed for a successful prayer life although it does take pain, silence, and a time of pausing to cause a person to turn to prayer.

Analysis

Lamott’s intention in this prelude is to introduce the reader to what she believes prayer is. She writes from the first-person point of view as she shares her own opinions about prayer and writes about what life has taught her about prayer. The book is also written in the present tense as if Lamott is speaking directly to her reader. This narrative perspective directly engages the reader and draws him into Lamott’s conversational and very human style of writing.

Lamott tries not to alienate any readers by assigning the power to which they pray a specific identity. “Nothing could matter less than what we call this force,” (2) Lamott writes. Using humor, she includes examples of the names various people have used for this force: Howard, Phil, the Grandmothers, Not Me or “Not Preachers on Stage with a Choir of 800” (3).

Lamott also employs humor in her writing to illustrate that even though prayer is serious, it is not deadly serious. For instance, when Lamott writes that the first time that she heard the traditional children’s bedtime prayer she was scared. As she listened to the



child at whose house she was spending the night recite the prayer, Lamott was terrified when she heard the reference to dying in one's sleep. She tells us, "That so, so did not work for me, especially in the dark in a strange home. Don't be taking my soul. You leave my soul right here, in my fifty-pound body" (3). Of course, it is amusing to imagine the then fifty-pound, seven-year-old, Lamott giving orders to God rather than taking them. Lamott shows the irony of misinterpreting a prayer intended to bring comfort and peace.

In her writing Lamott often uses examples that are polar opposites in order to make her points, and to make sure these points relate to the largest number of people. For instance, when she writes about God being the light she indicates that even mushrooms — fungi that like wet, dark places — will respond to light. The mushrooms are contrasted with sunflowers — bright yellow flowers that track the path of the sun's light across the sky during the day. In one place Lamott lists a few things for which one can pray: "Thank you for my sobriety, my grandson, my flowering pear tree" (4). While it is obvious one's sobriety and even one's relatives are important, this example shows that one can even thank God for simple things like the beauty of nature.

Vocabulary

ludicrous, supplication, scrim, degraded, skeptical, recoil



“Help”

Summary

In the chapter titled “Help,” Lamott points out that our world is full of troubles. Even though she feels that she has had all she can handle and does not believe she can face one more death, Jeanie, her pet cat of thirteen years, is near death because of lymphoma. The cat’s death will be the first death that Lamott’s grandson, Jax, will encounter. Because his grandmother has explained that angels will take Jeanie away, he is angry with the angels and angry with death.

Lamott writes that she too is angry with death, loss, and pain. The only thing Lamott believes that can be done for people living on such a hard planet is for them to cry out for help. She says that God is big enough that we can ask Him for help with serious problems like death, finances, divorce, and sickness, but that He still has enough care left over for us to ask for help for what some consider trivial things, like a sick cat.

Even when we do not get help the way we want it, Lamott says it is okay to be angry with God. He waits until we have hit rock bottom and have recognized the reality of our situation because it is at that point that God can help us. Lamott says it is at this point a person prays the “first great prayer” (15) and asks for help.

Lamott describes prayer as “suffering bathed in light” (16). After growing up as a child in a household that had little figurative air or light, Lamott was terrified of death. By the time she was school aged, she was so frightened by her own thoughts and so sensitive that people often told her she needed to get a thicker skin. She did not feel like she could ask anyone to help her with her fear. Her family had taught her it was bad to ask for help. They also discouraged prayer as if it were some sort of black magic.

Lamott believes it was because her grandfather, who was a Christian missionary during his life, prayed for her that she was saved at the age of five. Her brother, John, told her that one night when they were being cared for by a babysitter she had told him a secret, that she wanted to let the baby Jesus into her heart. She made him pray with her before their parents got home.

Lamott tells the reader that she has been praying to God since that time. She believes that God gives humans their imagination and they can either imagine things that bring out the best in them or they can imagine things that cause them to close themselves off to others. Lamott argues it is this spiritual imagination of God that can change a person’s behavior over time.

Lamott tells the story of a family friend whose daughter had aggressive lung cancer. The mother asked Lamott to pray for her family. She knew all that she could do was to offer prayer and friendship but wished she could ask God why he had chosen Angie, who had young children, for this sickness. Lamott writes that even though she knows Angie’s



family will get a miracle in response to their cry for help, she also knows it may not be the one they want. She summarizes that the family will learn to find joy through helping others facing similar situations.

Next, Lamott points out that life is hard and often does not make sense. She writes that even if we called on God to tell us the meaning of life, he would probably tell us that we would not understand the explanation. She says some meaning in life can come when a person learns to start where he is, searching for God and helping the suffering. Lamott tells the reader that she believes God assigns certain people to us to help during the course of our lives even if we think being with this person is awful or inconvenient.

To people who cannot give themselves over to the idea that there is a higher power because of their desperate fear or the way they were raised, Lamott offers to lend them her higher power. She continues this idea by telling a story of a man who was “famously atheistic,” (27); Lamott had suggested to him that he act as if he had a higher power as an experiment. She says that man got great happiness out of talking to this power, which he called HP, for about six weeks before he began drinking again, returned to his atheist beliefs, and ran off all of his friends. She tells of other friends who praise unusual objects or see God in unique ways. One friend praises a mountain while another sees God as an armchair.

At one point in our lives, Lamott tells the reader, everyone comes to the end of his rope and simply asks for help. Lamott reached this point when she realized her cat, which she had for thirteen years, was on the brink of death. Even though she had asked for help and had given her cat what she thought must have been an overdose of morphine, she still had to call the vet to put the cat to sleep. She had not wanted her pet to die miserable and afraid, but she tells the reader that was what ultimately happened. The cat got scared when the vet came. After her death, Lamott realized she had gotten what she prayed for. The cat was no longer suffering.

Lamott moves on to address the Serenity Prayer which she calls “a Greatest Hits prayer” (31). She says she hates it when a sober friend from Texas reminds her that there are three things that she cannot change. Those are “the past, the truth, and you” (31). Even though she hates this reality she uses the prayer as a reset button or a reminder that she needs to rein herself in. She remembers praying that God would allow her mother, who suffered with Alzheimer’s, to die before Lamott and her brothers had to make the decision that she would have to go to a nursing home. She wanted her mother’s cat, whom Lamott thought was awful, to die soon after her mother. When she saw her prayer was not going to be answered, she begged God not to put her in the position where she would have to take her mother’s cat away from her. She prayed for help and in the end had to lie to her mother about what was happening.

Even though Lamott’s prayer for help was not answered as she hoped it would be, she knows her prayer was answered. Her mother was put in a place where she got good care. Lamott does not believe that the fact she had to lie to her mother minimized the impact of the prayer and its answer.



Lamott says that while she prays pre-assembled prayers like The Lord's Prayer a small percent of the time, she depends the most on honest prayers where she is just asking for help. She also describes the "God box," a technique she uses to help herself let things go in prayer. She writes a note detailing what is bothering her and then physically puts it into a container of some sort. This ability to physically see herself let go of the piece of paper helps her to remember she has spiritually let go of the troubles it is causing her. She agrees to try to leave the problem alone until God fixes it.

The answers will not be obvious when they come, but Lamott assures the reader that when he does hear back from God he will know it is Him speaking. She also says that when people put their problems down on paper and put them in their God box they sometimes feel limp with relief because they have let go of that problem. At this point Lamott says the person will often begin to breathe again and will get some rest from the exhaustion of wrestling with a problem they cannot fix. A prayer for help, according to Lamott, gets the supplicant "off the hook" and puts God "on the hook." Although asking for help may seem like surrender, it is actually at this point that the supplicant has won.

Analysis

The purpose of prayer, as discussed in this chapter, is for one to realize that he cannot solve the problems in which he has found himself and to call out to a higher power for help. This longest chapter of the book is dedicated to prayers based on the theme of help. Perhaps this is because most of the time when people pray they are seeking assistance.

Lamott describes a variety of ways to express needs to a higher power, from the poetic and flowery to heartfelt, guttural prayers. There are some prayers that she calls the "good china of prayers" (35). These are prayers like The Lord's Prayer or The Twenty-Third Psalms that have been written years ago and are offered as examples to new Christians wanting to learn how to pray. There are also what she calls institutionalized prayers. One of these is the Serenity Prayer which she says she uses when she realizes she needs to rein herself in. Lamott describes a time when she was dealing with her mother's Alzheimer's and she begged God, "Please don't make me have to take the cat out of her arms. . . . If You could just do this one thing and not make me take the cat out of her arms" (32) upon realizing that her mother needed to go to a long term care facility but could not take her cat with her. According to Lamott, the simplest of these prayers comes when we realize we are at the ends of our ropes as humans and just cry out for help.

Also in this chapter Lamott expands on the identity of God by suggesting that perhaps this power is not male as most people have been taught that He is. Lamott's first reference to God's gender comes when she is discussing the idea that some people are assigned to another for care. "God looks through Her Rolodex when She has a certain kind of desperate person in Her care," (25) Lamott says of God. The reference can seem jarring to those of us who are accustomed to hearing God referred to as a male because He is called a male in the Bible. Of course God is big enough and all-



encompassing enough that He could be both male and female. Lamott points out that God is big enough to help us with even our most petty requests. For instance, Lamott tells her reader in the midst of her story about her dying cat that she knows God cares about her pet even though to some it is just a cat. “Is God going to say, ‘Sorry, we don’t have enough for the cat’? I don’t think so” (13).

It is Lamott’s tone that truly makes her book not just enjoyable but relatable. She does not portray herself as a person who has achieved a position of high spirituality. Her struggles are just like the struggles of any other person. She deals with a sick cat, an ailing mother and an obsessive personality. Lamott writes that one of her prayers has gone “Help, I hate her so much, and one of my parents is dying — or will never die” (29). She addresses the reality of humanity. Even though we try to be spiritual and call upon God, we still may hate and we still may wish that an ailing friend or relative would die just so that person and those who love him will be done with suffering.

Along with being real, Lamott has a tendency to be a little irreverent at times. She describes the religion her parents practiced in this way: “My parents worshipped at the church of “The New York Times,” and we bowed down before our antique hi-fi cabinet, which held the Ark of the Covenant — Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk albums” (18). The news and musicians whom Lamott later refers to as “mentally ill junkies” are the furthest one could get from religion. As she pokes fun at her parents’ “religious” beliefs she compares their worship of their Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk albums to the way the Israelites worshipped the Ark of the Covenant, the container believed to hold the tablets onto which God carved the Ten Commandments.

Lamott also uses a good deal of simile in her writing to help bring her descriptions to life. For instance, in one section of this chapter Lamott explains how she has seen grace manifest itself “as spiritual WD-40, as water wings, as ribbons of fresh air in tight, scary rooms” (22). She believes people see “The New York Times and your bank account as the golden calves of your life” (26). The golden calves being a symbolic allusion to the Bible representing idol worship.

Vocabulary

impending, existentially, catastrophes, physiology, finagle, permeate, lucidly, jovially, indelibly, agnostic, stamina, barbarity, renounce, guise, suffice, toxically, burlesque, umbrage, paradox



“Thanks”

Summary

In the chapter entitled “Thanks,” Lamott admits that most of her prayers of thanks come after she has avoided some disaster. Sometimes her feeling of thanks is so heartfelt that she pronounces it with an exhaled breath. She explains that we say thank you when we realize how thin the line is between life and death. Lamott thanks God when she can get through prescribed amounts of time without thinking in obsessive loops. Thanks should also be given when people who have always been hurtful to us become friendlier and begin to reach out to us. Another reason for gratitude is that God allows us to be released from addictions and abuse.

Lamott moves on to share with the reader that a life of giving thanks for the small things can lead to a mindset of gratitude. She says that the world of hate and hurt can begin to tear down a life of gratitude. It is when we come through our problems that we realize there are still things in life for which to be grateful.

She recounts the story of a trip that she and two friends, one of whom had Lou Gehrig’s disease, took to see the Pacific Ocean from above Moraga steps in San Francisco. When they arrived fog obscured the view. Lamott prayed for God to help and in response realized they needed to get back in the car and explore the surrounding neighborhoods. They became happy as they observed nature. Barbara, the friend who had Lou Gehrig’s disease, told Lamott she found joy in nature. Lamott calls her praise of nature even in her condition “radical gratitude” (56).

After gratitude takes root in our hearts, gratitude will be evident in our actions. Lamott is thankful to her friends who have supported her and loved her through the years and is surprised to realize they feel the same way about her. It is because we have such good support systems that people are willing be kind and helpful. She believes that God’s “idea of a good time” (59) is to see people working for and helping other people.

Lamott describes the attitude of thanks as being a mind-shift from a self-centered idea of God and to one of humility and quiet gratitude. She believes that saying thanks can lead a person to wonder what more they can do to help others. She points out that sin is a lack of generosity and hate. As much as we would like God to take our sins away, Lamott argues that God tells his believers that they must surrender their sins to him.

Lamott concludes this section by including a story in which she woke one morning asking God for help because she felt so low. She went about her daily routine, including taking her dogs for a walk. Even though she was frustrated by the wind she realized the wind had cleared the particulates from the air making it clearer than usual. As they walked in the foothills of Mount Tamalpais, Lamott shouted out “Thank you” to the mountain.



Analysis

There is a dual purpose to prayers of thanksgiving. Perhaps it is more proper to say there are hidden benefits of giving thanks. Lamott defines the first purpose of this prayer as giving thanks to our higher power for disasters avoided as well as grace and mercy given to us. As we learn to give thanks for the things that happen in our lives, no matter how small they may be, Lamott says this giving of thanks will lead to a life filled with gratitude. In turn, a feeling of gratitude can influence people to help others. She calls this God's idea of a good time when people work for and help others. This begins a cycle where more people are helped, more people are grateful, and more people begin to live lives of gratitude and help others.

God allows bad things to happen but also takes care of his people in these times of need. Lamott indicates it is these bad times that give us the opportunity to feel gratitude and to thank God. She agrees with common thought that when people do suffer so many painful things in a row it is not fair, but she believes God not only has a reason for these bad things but that he also intends blessings in the face of those painful things. She writes of these bad times: "if you are patient and are paying attention, you will see that God will restore what the locusts have taken away" (50).

Lamott continues to enliven her book with a variety of different literary devices. There are several allusions made in the course of this section. She rates a series of problems she can thank God for having avoided on the defense readiness scale by calling these problems — like the death of a son or the return to drinking — as DEFCON 1 (the defense readiness condition 1). DEFCON 1 refers to maximum situations of global security like nuclear war. She warns her reader against thinking they are on their way to a better place in their lives. "Actually, under no circumstances should you ever say or even think that the worst is over. You will bring the evil eye down on yourself so fast it will leave you keening" (46).

The allusion to the Arthur Miller play *Death of a Salesman* indicates that life would be as hopeless as this play presents it if it weren't for friends. She describes a modern form of the play in the allusion "It would be *Death of a Salesman*, though with e-mail and texting" (57). Finally, notice that Lamott writes that gratitude can make people do things they do not want to do. For instance when she refers to keeping in touch with her cousin who is on drugs, she describes how she has to "pick up the two-hundred-pound phone, dial his number" (59). The reference to the weight of the phone indicates how difficult it is for her to make the call but she does it anyway because she knows how blessed she is.

Vocabulary

proliferation, averted, conspire, alleviated, poignancy, stasis, stagnation, vichyssoise, exuberant, euphoric, solidarity, fronds, detractors, behooves, quantum



“Wow”

Summary

In the chapter entitled “Wow,” Lamott says that this gasp of amazement can be brought forth by things particularly beautiful or devastating or by a sudden insight of receiving of grace. She gives several opinions of where the word “wow” came from. Some believe its origin is Scottish, while others think it is a contraction of the words “I vow.” Wows can come in all sizes. Small wows come from fresh sheets. She says that uppercase wows include watching fireworks and seeing puppies being born. Lamott says that in her opinion, spring is the main reason for “Wow” although autumn is not bad. She likes spring best because it represents the resurrection. Art also inspires wows from Lamott.

Lamott tells the reader that the word “wow” has a reverberation that seems to soften the spirit. She wishes she could understand the power of that word. Lamott also wishes she could understand the nature of a God who gives us these “wow” moments even when we do not deserve them. She adds it is amazing to her that God puts up with humans even when they keep messing up. From her own changes, however, she knows that change is slow and needs constant work. Without change, we might as well be dead.

She closes this section by describing a “wow” moment when she stopped herself from getting a chocolate bar and instead bought a basket of blackberries. She knew she was hungry for something of comfort and she remembered loving these berries as a child. As she ate them she thought to herself “wow.”

Analysis

“Wow” is an expression of how great God is. It is a way that humans can voice awe for what God can do when those things are beyond words. Lamott indicates there are lowercase “wows” and uppercase “Wows.” Lamott speaks of the greatness and generosity of God when she tells the reader that God “gives” (85) us these things and circumstances that give us an opportunity to say wow.

Lamott’s concept of “wow” is inter-related to her concept of “thanks.” “Wow” is a moment of recognition of the beauty of life and of the world around us. The concept of “wow” also connects with Lamott’s prayer for “help,” in that this moment of recognition often comes at the end of a hard road or at the end of a difficult personal struggle.

There are two symbols of significance in this section of Lamott’s book. The first of these is a set of clean sheets. Lamott uses these sheets to illustrate how a small thing, like clean sheets, can give a person a feeling of wow. She compares the sheets to the hug of another person, a comforting, clean embrace after a long day.

The second symbol of significance is the basket of blackberries that Lamott buys instead of the chocolate bar she had thought she wanted. She finds the blackberries



satisfying because they remind her of the happiness and comfort of her childhood. Lamott realized that even though she thought she was hungry, she was really looking for a memory and the feelings of security that memory would bring.

Vocabulary

fjord, etymologists, tableau, perfidy, languorous, alchemically, tyrants, elusive, semaphores, communal, subversive

“Amen”

Summary

In the chapter titled “Amen,” Lamott writes that the word “Amen” the traditional ending of many prayers end is a word that means “and so it is.” She says this is an acknowledgement of the way life is. Just when we get relief from one painful situation or are awed by God’s power, we often find ourselves in a place where we need help again.

No matter what Amen means, Lamott says that this word, as well as the prayer itself, is only as good as the attitude in which it is said. While some Christians argue that the perfect prayer is included in the Bible and was presented by Jesus Christ Himself, Lamott does not believe that this surety of a prefabricated prayer is necessarily a good thing. She agrees with Matisse who says that it is most important to get “in a frame of mind which is close to that of prayer.”

Lamott describes a variety of positions people take to pray. These include bowing our heads, falling to our knees, or even bowing and scraping, as Lamott’s friend Shelley does when greeting Mount Tamalpais. Lamott points out that one of her favorite places to pray is at the beach. The ocean, like life, can hurt and destroy, but the shore is also one of the most beautiful places in the world in Lamott’s mind.

A change in perception is an improvement in herself for which Lamott prays. She shares the story of her friend Matt who has brain cancer. He’d had a massive brain bleed and doctors believed he was brain damaged. One day Mason’s mother email a video entitled “Mason singing.” In the video Mason was making noises at the end of each line of the song that sounded like “world.” Lamott had imagined something more miraculous. She later prayed for wisdom and realized how huge Mason’s small progress really was. Lamott shares that Mason has improved to the point he has been able to return to school.

Analysis

Mount Tamalpais and Stinson Beach are settings that are important in this closing section of Lamott’s book. As she explores the meaning of the word “Amen” Lamott shares with her reader that it is not so much the words that matter as Mount Tamalpais and Stinson Beach are two settings that are important in this closing section of Lamott’s book. As she explores the meaning of the word “Amen,” Lamott shares with her reader that it is not so much the words that matter as the attitude in which they are said. She describes her friend who bows and scrapes to Mount Tamalpais when they run or walk together in the morning. Although her friend’s actions are not necessarily a “prayer,” they evoke the attitude needed for successful prayer. Similarly, Lamott writes that her favorite place to pray is on the beach. The ocean reminds her of the way that life can be



both beautiful and destructive, putting her in the mindset she needs to be in when she prays.

Notice Lamott's continued irreverence toward traditional Christianity even in this last chapter of the book. In this chapter, she points to the way many Christians use the Lord's Prayer as the perfect prayer. She describes these people as ones who "will happily tell you they have a monopoly on truth" (93). These Christians tell others that God gave them perfect instructions on how to pray in the Lord's Prayer. Lamott responds to these Christians in her satirical tone in this way: "Isn't that nice? Thank you, Christians. Love that certainty. It must be great to be so sure of yourselves all the time" (93).

Vocabulary

stagnation, rogue, admonished, monopoly, expulsion, perception, vistas, treacherous



Important People

Anne Lamott

Anne Lamott is the author and first-person narrator of the spiritual guide and memoir, *Help, Thanks, Wow*. She is an American novelist, memoirist, progressive political activist, public speaker, and teacher of writing.

In *Help, Thanks, Wow*, as in the majority of Lamott's nonfiction works, she relates personal anecdotes and stories as a way of illustrating her perspectives on the meaning of prayer. Lamott was born in San Francisco to Kenneth Lamott, also a writer, and Nikki Lamott, in 1954. She describes her childhood as a struggle and her family as dysfunctional and alcoholic.

Common themes in Lamott's works, both fiction and nonfiction, include alcoholism, motherhood, spirituality, Christianity, faith, the importance of community, and storytelling as a means of healing and progress. Her principle focus in the narrative of *Help, Thanks, Wow* is on an individual's connection with a higher power, and the peace that one reaches upon attaining that connection.

God

God is the most important entity in this novel as it is to God that Lamott tells her readers they should pray. Lamott tells her readers not to stress over what they call "God" because that is of little importance, so long as one has a higher power to which he can pray. She includes a variety of labels by which this higher power has been referred to: the Good, the Really Real, Life, Love, Howard, Phil, or even the Grandmothers. For convenience sake, Lamott says she will refer to the power as God.

According to Lamott's description, God is an entity of higher and unlimited power that is able to converse with and commiserate with people even if they aren't perfect and whole. She describes God as being light and having no darkness. She believes God's light can help heal.

It is interesting that Lamott refers to God as being female in several instances. Typically God is seen as being male. The Bible, for instance, calls God a He. Lamott includes other friends' interpretations of God. One friend visualizes God as a mountain, Tamalpais, and prays to the mountain as she would to God. Another imagines God as an armchair who holds her up.

Jeanie

Jeanie was Lamott's thirteen-year-old cat that died from lymphoma. Lamott writes that the cat helped raise her three-year-old grandson, Jax, and that the loss of the cat would



be his first experience with death. Even though Lamott had prayed that Jeanie would die peacefully in her sleep, even giving the cat what she thought was an overdose of morphine, her death did not come that easily. The ten minutes after the vet came to put Jeanie down was heartbreaking for Lamott because the cat was afraid and miserable, feelings that Lamott did not want her friend to have as she died. Even though Lamott writes that she did not get her prayer for her cat to die peacefully, she did get her prayer for her pet to be out of her misery.

Mason

Mason is a friend of Lamott who is suffering with brain cancer. He is mentioned in the chapter entitled "Amen." A brain bleed caused Mason's doctors to think that he was brain damaged. Mason's mother believed her son would recover and sent Lamott a video of one of Mason's steps to recovery. Lamott was disappointed because she had hoped for more drastic signs of improvement. After praying, she realized what a huge step the video showed Mason had taken. Lamott shares that Mason eventually recovers to the point he is able to return to school.

John

John is Lamott's older brother. He told her one day when she was five and he was seven that she had told him a secret, that she wanted to take Jesus into her heart. She had asked him to pray with her before their parents came home.

Lamott's Grandfather

Lamott's grandfather on her father's side of the family was a Christian missionary. Lamott believes it is because her grandfather prayed for her that she made the decision when she was five that she needed to be saved even though no one had ever talked to her about salvation.

Jesus

Many Christians believe that Jesus offered an example of the perfect prayer, known as the Lord's Prayer, in the Bible. Despite this example of prayer, even Jesus, as the Son of God, prayed one of the prayers of which Lamott speaks in this book. In that prayer, He prayed for help from God when he was on the cross.

Father Gregory Boyle

Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit who argues that God's idea of showing gratitude is not necessarily waving their hands in praise but instead people doing things, even small things, to help out other people and the world in which we live.



Shelley

Shelley is a friend of Lamott. The two often run and walk together in the mornings in the foothills of Mount Tamalpais. Lamott believes that Shelley is praying a prayer of awe when she bows and scrapes to the mountain after greeting it with the words “Hello, Mother.”

Jax

Jax is the grandson of author Anne Lamott. He was three-years-old when Lamott describes her cat dying in the chapter titled “Help.” Lamott was concerned about her cat’s death because it would be the first time that Jax would face mortality.



Objects/Places

Mushrooms

Lamott uses mushrooms to symbolize a lifestyle that is unhealthy for humans. She mentions these fungi twice in the novel. The first reference is found in the prelude section of the book where Lamott points out that even mushrooms react to the light. In the chapter titled “Wow,” Lamott mentions mushrooms again. She compares a person who has grown comfortable in life to a mushroom, living in poop in the dark.

Air and Light

Air and light are symbols of the aspects of God that help heal hurting humans. Lamott writes that physical air and light are both elements that help heal physical wounds while the kind of light and air that God provides bring spiritual healing. This air and light is mentioned in the chapter entitled “Help.”

A God Box

A God box is a symbolic way of giving things up to God’s control. Lamott writes about the God box in the chapter titled “Help.” The idea is to imagine one’s self physically putting a troublesome aspect of their life into a box so that they can see themselves letting go of that aspect and giving it to God.

Clean Sheets

Clean sheets are symbolic of a small thing that can bring about a feeling of awe. Lamott compares getting between clean sheets to being saved after a hard day. This object is included in the chapter titled “Wow.”

Blackberries

To Lamott, blackberries are a symbol of comfort. She writes in the chapter entitled “Wow” that she had once gone to the store for a chocolate bar that she thought would bring her comfort. Instead she remembered she was not hungry for physical food but instead for a comforting memory. The blackberries she got instead reminded her of a happy time in her childhood.



Stinson Beach

Stinson Beach is a place that is mentioned in the chapter entitled “Amen.” Lamott tells the reader that the beach is one of her favorite places to pray. Stinson Beach, Lamott believes, is one of the prettiest places in the world.

Mount Tamalpais

During morning runs and walks with her friend Shelley they shout out “Hello, Mother,” when they first spot the top of Mount Tamalpais. This setting is included in the chapter “Amen” and also in the chapter “Thanks.” In the chapter “Thanks,” Lamott yells out her appreciation for the mountain’s beauty, not caring that someone might hear her.

San Francisco

San Francisco, California, is the location where Anne Lamott was born and raised.



Themes

Defining God's Identity

Lamott does not assign a specific identity to God, choosing instead to let her reader come to his own conclusions about God. She does, however, give the reader some information on what she believes about the nature of God. She believes that God, whom she allows the reader to see openly as a higher power, is the one who helps people in response to their cries for assistance. He is the one to whom people should give thanks and He is the one who creates the moments and things that leave us in awe.

One of the important roles of God is that he is the one who responds to cries for help. Lamott says that often God lets us get to the lowest points in our lives so we will have no choice but to turn to him. When we cry out to God for help, he does not necessarily give us what we ask for in the way that we ask for it but he does answer our prayers for help. For instance, Lamott tells a story about the time she came to the decision she had to put her mother, who had Alzheimer's, in a nursing home. Lamott prayed to God that she would not have to take her mother's beloved cat out of her arms in order to put her in the home. Lamott wound up having to lie to her mother about what was happening in order to get the cat away from her without upsetting her. In the end, even though Lamott had to lie, she felt God had answered her prayers because He had allowed her mother to be put in a place where she would get good care.

After God helps us through our trials, Lamott points out that it follows that God should be the one to whom we give thanks. This act of thanking God for the good things that happen in our lives can change our lives as well as those around us. Lamott writes that learning to say thank you even for small things can lead to a lifestyle of gratitude. This lifestyle of gratitude can further lead to a person who looks for a way to bless others the way that they have been blessed.

A final clue that Lamott gives her readers about the nature of God is that God is the one who gives us moments by which we can be awed and amazed. Lamott stresses that God is a giving God. He blesses us with moments that take our breath away and also moments that make us cry to him for help.

The Purpose of Prayer

Prayer has a variety of purposes including giving people a chance to ask for help, to give thanks, and to express awe. Lamott breaks down each of these three major themes of prayer in her short book. She explains not only why people need to pray these types of prayers, but also what the result of these prayers can be in our lives.

The prayer for help seems to be the prayer that God hears most. Lamott spends the most time in her book discussing this type of prayer. Important to note about this type of



prayer is that God does not always answer our prayers for help in the way we might want him to do. Lamott points out that even though she prays for healing for a friend with cancer, there is still a chance that friend might die. Even in the devastation that is left after a loved one dies, Lamott knows that God will send friends, love, and support to the family of a deceased person. In this way, God is taking care of the family even though He was not able to answer prayers with a miraculous healing.

Prayers of thanks are important because they can be life changing. Lamott stresses that it follows that after a person has been blessed after praying for help they should give thanks for the help they received. Offering prayers of thanks are important in our lives because they give us a chance to show our gratitude, which can lead to a lifestyle of gratitude. Lamott explains that this lifestyle of gratitude can make a person want to find things to do for others so they can be blessed as well.

Even prayers of awe are important because they express our wonderment in God's power. These prayers can be simply one word or they can be a whole dialogue. They acknowledge God's presence in the world and His power.

The Meaning of Amen

Lamott argues that a prayer is only as good as its ending. As the "end cap" of the prayer, Lamott discusses in the final paragraph of her book why Amen is said and what that word means. She also shares with her reader that the attitude in which a person delivers his prayer is as important as the words he says. Finally she says that a petitioner's job does not end with the prayer, but that he must be willing to follow through with the instructions his higher power gives him in order for a prayer to completely fulfill its purpose.

The tone of a prayer can be interpreted by the way Amen is said. Lamott indicates that after the Amen is said, a few quiet moments of reflection can help a person feel closer to God. "If you are trying to finish up quickly so you can check your cell phone messages, you are missing the chance to spend quiet moments with the giver of life" (92-93). Lamott also indicates the "Amen" at the end of a prayer is the human's way of acknowledging that they have no control over life.

Even if we do not know for what we should pray, Lamott says that a good attitude is sometimes all one needs to bring to prayer. Alluding to a saying by Henri Matisse, Lamott infers that the best way to pray is to start by adopting a position that helps us to feel prayerful. On page 94, Lamott says that this position can be one with a bowed head, one with hands raised to heaven, or any other pose that makes us feel closest to God.

After one has prayed, Lamott urges her readers that they must be willing to follow through with God's instructions. If a person is not willing to follow through with whatever instructions they receive from their prayer, the petitioner can find himself in a position where he needs even more help than before. Finally, after one has prayed and said



Amen, he must be willing to trust God. Lamott says God will always give an answer to our prayers.

Ways to Express Needs

Just as there are an unlimited number of needs, there are also unlimited ways to express one's needs. Lamott defines three major themes of prayers through the course of her novel. She trims each of these prayers down to a single word: "help," "thanks," and "wow." When expressing one's needs through one of these types of prayers, Lamott says there are a variety of ways one can format these prayers.

One of the types of prayers that Lamott specifically notes in her book are the "good china" (35) prayers. She refers to these prayers as beautiful but also as pre-fabricated prayers. One of the prayers she lists specifically is the Lord's Prayer. While she tags this prayer, which is listed in the Bible as being the prayer that Jesus used to teach His disciples to pray, as a "good china" prayer, she also comments negatively on it later in the book. She points out that she believes that Christians who are certain of themselves in praying the Lord's Prayer in all circumstances are deluded in their certainty.

Another point that Lamott makes about these pre-fabricated prayers is that they are sometimes taken over by non-religious institutions. One of the prayers she indicates specifically is the Serenity Prayer. This prayer is so well known that Lamott refers to it as a "Greatest Hits" (31) prayer.

While pretty and poetical prayers are beautiful, Lamott argues that God is just as happy with heartfelt pleas for help and expressions of thanks or awe. These heartfelt pleas can be just the single words: "help," "thanks," or "wow." Even cries out to God admitting how lost we feel are acceptable prayers. Finally, Lamott states that even a statement to God that He is hated is considered a prayer as long as that thought is truthful.

Humor and Self-Deprecation

Although not overt, the themes of humor and self-deprecation can be felt throughout Help, Thanks, Wow, and in many of the autobiographical works of Anne Lamott. Unlike many writers in the spirituality/self-help genre, Lamott presents herself as flawed, often struggling, and not completely sure about God or the hereafter. In this book, she maintains an open and candid perspective of herself and her own setbacks on the track to faith.

Lamott's approach to prayer, therefore, is not one that relies on "standards" that are set by Christianity or any organized religion. She walks her own path, and she acknowledges her mistakes in life and her inner struggles, even today. This aspect of Lamott's writing is what makes her relatable to the reader: upon laughing at Lamott's struggles between chocolate and blackberries, he can see the humor in his own trivial daily conflicts.



Lamott's irreverence that appears throughout the book in regard to structured religion or prayer is humorous because it is also very clear that the author has a firm faith in God. She tells the reader that he may be as imperfect as she is and still find communion with God.

Styles

Structure

This short book is divided into four chapters plus a preface. The longest chapter the one entitled “Help” which is twenty-nine pages while the shortest one is the preface at ten pages. No timeline is established in the book. Lamott tells several stories but there are no time references given to any of these stories. The book is, however, told in the present tense. Each chapter focuses on a certain topic. For instance, in the preface Lamott defines prayer. In the second chapter she writes about prayers in which the supplicant seeks help. The third chapter deals with prayers offered to thank God, while the fourth deals with those spoken in amazement of what He has done.

Perspective

This book is narrated in the first-person perspective from the point of view of the author, Anne Lamott. This perspective is appropriate and works well because through the course of the story, Lamott tells how she developed from a child whose parents discouraged prayer to an adult who finds comfort and meaning in prayer.

Lamott’s perspective is very subjective. She tells her own story of growing up in a home where religion was not taught. She also tells of struggles she has faced as an adult; including dealing with a sick mother and facing the loss of a treasured pet. The emotion that Lamott puts into these stories shows how deeply they affected her.

Tone

Lamott’s tone when dealing with the subject of prayer is serious and full of awe, but it can also be sarcastic and satirical in places. It is as if she recognizes how hard life can be but also has learned sometimes the best one can do is make fun of it. In places in her story, Lamott takes on almost an irreverent tone. An example of this can be found in the chapter “Help,” when she refers to the cabinet that held her parents’ record albums and was treated by them as if it were the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred of religious items.



Quotes

Nothing could matter less than what we call this force.”

-- Narrator (Prelude: Prayer 101)

Importance: Lamott writes of prayer as being a way of speaking to a greater force. In order to keep from alienating any of her readers Lamott indicates it does not matter what the force is called.

Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up.”

-- Narrator (Prelude: Prayer 101)

Importance: As Lamott defines prayer she indicates that the supplicant does not have to be perfect in order to pray. The premise of prayer is that the person praying is loved and accepted as they are.

Believe me, if I could, I would, and in the meantime I feel like stabbing you in the forehead.”

-- Narrator (Help)

Importance: In this quote, Lamott, who is often consumed by anxiety, expresses her feelings for people who advise her just to let go of her problems and give them to God. She is unable to just let go of her problems and is frustrated with people who believe it should be easy for her.

I was raised to believe that people who prayed were ignorant.”

-- Narrator (Help)

Importance: Lamott’s parents did not believe in God. Not only did they not teach her about God and religion, but they did teach her that people who pray were lacking in intelligence.

And of course, gratitude can be for everything in between, from the daily break of good luck and found money, to the magical, mystical magnetic force of quiet or exuberant relief, when you know that something — God, fate, luck, kismet, the law, Powerball — has smiled on you big-time.”

-- Narrator (Thanks)

Importance: Lamott explains that there are a variety of things that can be a cause for gratitude. She sums up an introductory session with this idea that gratitude can, and should, be expressed for the small blessings in life as well as the big ones.

And while that may be annoying to the people around us, it’s important because if we are lucky, gratitude becomes a habit.”

-- Narrator (Thanks)



Importance: Lamott argues that it is important to be grateful, even for the small things because it can help one to develop a habit of being grateful.

This is called radical gratitude in the face of whatever life throws at you.”
-- Narrator (Thanks)

Importance: When Lamott’s friend Barbara, who is in the last stages of multiple sclerosis and is no longer able to talk or eat, tells Lamott that she is grateful for the beauty of nature Lamott calls Barbara’s thankfulness radical gratitude.

Having done the right thing lifts us out of the glop, the dregs of our own delusional thinking, and puts us a bit closer to being on the right track.”
-- Narrator (Thanks)

Importance: Lamott tells her reader that doing something, particularly doing something to help others, can help the doer feel better about themselves.

Most of us are more like the townspeople of Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ than we are like the Dalai Lama. I know I am. And this is what hell is like.”
-- Narrator (Thanks)

Importance: The townspeople in the short story ‘The Lottery’ throw stones at the innocent person who happened to draw a piece of paper with a dot on it. Lamott indicates it is this thoughtless continuance of hate and cruelty that is like hell.

The third great prayer, Wow, is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can’t think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight.”
-- Narrator (Wow)

Importance: Lamott describes the third type of prayer as that being the kind that comes from a situation in which a person feels the need to say “wow” in response to a great beauty or devastation.

The Amen is only as good as the attitude.”
-- Narrator (Amen)

Importance: As she explains what the word “amen” generally used to end a prayer means, she adds that the attitude in which this word is spoken is as important as the word itself.

If you’re like me, you ask your higher power for help, and then cause further need for help by procrastinating, or refusing to cooperate with simple instructions that follow sincere petition.”
-- Narrator (Amen)

Importance: Lamott shares with her reader that God cannot do everything on His own. Once a prayer has been said asking for help, the petitioner must do his part.



Topics for Discussion

How does Lamott define God?

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Discuss a time in your life that you have come to a moment when you called on a higher power for help.

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Why does Lamott say that God doesn't always answer our pleas for help the way in which we want them answered?

Why does Lamott say that God doesn't always answer our pleas for help the way in which we want them answered?

Why does Lamott indicate that the Amen at the end of the prayer and the way it is said is as important as the prayer itself?

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How does being thankful change a person's life? How does it change the lives of others?

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In what way are prayers for help and prayers of thanks connected?

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What do the blackberries that Lamott got instead of chocolate represent? Why were the berries better suited to fit her needs than the chocolate?

What do the blackberries that Lamott got instead of chocolate represent? Why were the berries better suited to fit her needs than the chocolate?

Why do you think Lamott refers to God as a female?

Why do you think Lamott refers to God as a female?

What is God's job in relation to prayer? What is our job? Why do we sometimes make it hard for God to do his job?

What is God's job in relation to prayer? What is our job? Why do we sometimes make it hard for God to do his job?

Of the three types of prayers that Lamott discusses do you think that any one of these prayers is more important than the others? Why or why not?

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