

# Rummaging for God:

## Praying Backward Through Your Day

*Dennis Hamm, S.J. America, May 14, 1994*

### A Method: Five Steps

1. **Pray for light.** Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding. That's a gift from God devoutly to be begged. "Lord, help me understand this blooming, buzzing confusion."
2. **Review the day in thanksgiving.** Note how different this is from looking immediately for your sins. Nobody likes to poke around in the memory bank to uncover smallness, weakness, lack of generosity. But everybody likes to fondle beautiful gifts, and that is precisely what the past 24 hours contain -- gifts of existence, work-relationships, food, challenges. Gratitude is the foundation of our whole relationship with God. So use whatever cues help you to walk through the day from the moment of awakening -- even the dreams you recall upon awakening. Walk through the past 24 hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.
3. **Review the feelings that surface in the replay of the day.** Our feelings, positive and negative, the painful and the pleasing, are clear signals of where the action was during the day. Simply pay attention to any and all of those feelings as they surface, the whole range: delight, boredom, fear, anticipation, resentment, anger, peace, contentment, impatience, desire, hope, regret, shame, uncertainty, compassion, disgust, gratitude, pride, rage, doubt, confidence, admiration, shyness -- whatever was there. Some of us may be hesitant to focus on feelings in this over-psychologized age, but I believe that these feelings are the liveliest index to what is happening in our lives. This leads us to the fourth moment:
4. **Choose one of those feelings (positive or negative) and pray from it.** That is, choose the remembered feeling that most caught your attention. The feeling is a sign that something important was going on. Now simply express spontaneously the prayer that surfaces as you attend to the source of the feeling -- praise, petition, contrition, cry for help or healing, whatever.
5. **Look toward tomorrow.** Using your appointment calendar if that helps, face your immediate future. What feelings surface as you look at the tasks, meetings and appointments that face you? Fear? Delighted anticipation? Self-doubt? Temptation to procrastination? Zestful planning? Regret? Weakness? Whatever it is, turn it into prayer -- for help, for healing, whatever comes spontaneously. To round off the examen, say the Lord's Prayer.

A mnemonic for recalling the five points: LT3F (light, thanks, feelings, focus, future).

## **Do it.**

Take a few minutes each day to pray through the past 24 hours, and toward the next 24 hours, with that five-point format.

## **Consequences.**

Here are some of the consequences flowing from this kind of prayer.

1. There is always something to pray about. For a person who does this kind of prayer at least once a day, there is never the question: What should I talk to God about? Until you die, you always have a past 24 hours, and you always have some feelings about what's next.
2. The gratitude moment is worthwhile in itself. "Dedicate yourselves to gratitude," Paul tells the Colossians. Even if we drift off into slumber after reviewing the gifts of the day, we have praised the Lord.
3. We learn to face the Lord where we are, as we are. There is no other way to be present to God, of course, but we often fool ourselves into thinking that we have to "put on our best face" before we address our God.
4. We learn to respect our feelings. Feelings count. They are morally neutral until we make some choice about acting upon or dealing with them. But if we don't attend to them, we miss what they have to tell us about the quality of our lives.
5. Praying from feelings, we are liberated from them. An unattended emotion can dominate and manipulate us. Attending to and praying from and about the persons and situations that give rise to the emotions help us to cease being unwitting slaves of our emotions.
6. We actually find something to bring to confession. That is, we stumble across our sins without making them the primary focus;.
7. We can experience an inner healing. People have found that praying about (as opposed to fretting about or denying) feelings leads to a healing of mental life. We probably get a head start on our dreamwork when we do this.
8. This kind of prayer helps us get over our Deism. Deism is belief in a sort of "clock-maker" God, a God who does indeed exist but does not have much, if anything, to do with his people's ongoing life. The God we have come to know through our Jewish and Christian experience is more present than we actually think.
9. Praying this way is an antidote to the spiritual disease of Pelagianism. Pelagianism was the heresy that approached life with God as a do-it-yourself project ("If at first you don't succeed..."), whereas a true theology of grace and freedom sees life as response to God's love ("If today you hear God's voice...").

A final thought. How can anyone dare to say that paying attention to felt experience is a listening to the voice of God? On the face of it, it does not sound like a dangerous presumption. But, notice, I am not equating memory with the voice of God. I am saying that, if we are to listen for the God who creates and sustains us, we need to take seriously and prayerfully the meeting between the creatures we are and all else that God holds lovingly in existence. That "interface" is the felt experience of my day. It deserves prayerful attention. It is a big part of how we know and respond to God.