

Preface

Prayer for the Idiot Author That He Doesn't Totally Punt in the Pages That Follow

Because, o Lord, he *has* punted, o my yes, more times than he can remember, and he is memorious by nature, and remembers many booming punts all too vividly, for example endless shades of lies and prevarications with young ladies, and the occasional mixing of fiction and fact in reportage, and flares and bursts of temper, and the selfish insistence on his way in various familial and marital disputes, and the lack of excellent listening skills sometimes, and sloth, and lust, although not gluttony or envy and not much pride, technically, although my good showing with these three might be more a function of age than a stalwart character or growth of spirit. Still, though, the lifetime punting . . . well, let's not go into it. Suffice it to say that I pray that in the pages that follow I will be able to catch and speak something true and honest and genuine and blunt about seeing and celebrating and savoring the slather of Your gifts upon me and us; and will be able to sing, even creakily

and croakingly, of the holiness everywhere evident and available; and will be able to remind readers that we are handed miracles beyond number, every blessed moment, if only we can train ourselves to open and see and hear and taste and feel and smell and absorb them, and so be blessed ever deeper by Your mercy and profligate generosity and wry subtle humor. This I pray most humbly, while trying not to think of—o God help me—a thousand tremendous soaring epic punts in the past. And so: amen.

Brian Doyle

Prayer for the Kindergarten Boy Who Asked Me, *How Do You Manage to Get So Many Words on a Single Page of Your Book, Mister?*

First of all I thought my head was going to fly off with joy, and then I had to resist the urge to bend down and hug this kid so hard his eyes would gog out, and then I had to explain to him and his classmates how I write books, which is that I write really big sentences and then a tiny lady inside my computer converts them to little lines that will fit on the pages of printed books, and then I had to explain that I was just kidding, and then my hour in their classroom drew to a close, and they signed autographs for me, and I signed one child's hand, to general merriment, and then we took a class picture and I got them to pretend to pick their noses just before the teacher took our photograph, which we all thought was funny but she didn't, and then I drove home. But on the way home I thought for the one-millionth time that I am the luckiest man ever because the Breath Who Dreamed Everything into Being gave me three children of my own, and many thousands of children of my own who came from people other than my lovely bride, and

not for the first time and not for the last I concluded that little kids are the coolest things in the whole world, even better than beer and sneakers and osprey. And so: amen.

Prayer for Cashiers and Checkout-Counter Folks

Who endure the cold swirls of winter from the sliding doors that are opening and closing every forty seconds; and who endure pomposity and buffoonery and minor madness in their customers; and who gently help the shuffling old lady in the ancient camel coat count out the right change for her loaf of bread and single sad can of cat food; and cheerfully also disburse stamps and cash along with bagging the groceries and even occasionally carting them out swiftly for the customers they know are frail and wobbly; and who must sometimes silently want to scream and shriek in weariness and wondering how it is that they are here for eight hours at a stretch; and who do their jobs with patience and diligence, knowing the price of every single blessed thing in the store; and who ask after children and the ill among the families of their customers with honest interest and concern; and who gently refuse to sell beer to teenagers but do not make a big deal out of it and ring the manager; and who seem to me generally paragons of grace in situations where it would be so easy to grow sad and exhausted and bored; so we ask Your blessing

upon them, in their millions around the world; and we ask that You choose a moment at Your discretion, and reach for all of them at once in Your unimaginable way, and jazz them with hope and laughter, and give them a dollop of Your starlight, so that they will, for an instant, feel a surge of joy, for reasons they do not know; but we do. And so: amen.

Prayer in Thanks for Decent Shoes

Do we take them for granted? Of course we take them for granted. We don them, slip them on, shuffle into them, doff them, toss them, kick them to the back of the closet, and never not once do we say, o Coherent Mercy, thank You for the skins and wood and cloth that keepeth our feet from the flinty earth, that swaddleth our flippers and protecteth our toes, that allow us to wander about briskly without (a) tearing the pads of our feet to shreds in thorny bristle and granite dagger and (b) losing various toes to steamrollers and arrogant bicyclists and testy rattlesnakes and spinning cricket bats and such.

Did we stop for a moment, this morning, in the silvery light of dawn, and stare at our silent battered footboats, and think of the poor bovine whose skin this is, of the quiet woman who cut and hammered and built them, of the man who carted them from the place of their shaping to the spot of their sale, of the lanky boy who bent from his great height to affix them to our ancient feet, and measure the comfort of that fit, and note cheerfully that they were actually on sale this week, sir, did you know?

No, we did not. But we should pause, here and there, for these small things, for they are not at all small, as we know. The cow was once alive, and so it was holy, alive with the Breath; the woman and the man and the boy alive, and so holy, children of the Breath; their sacrifice and their labor a gift and a prayer, songs of the Breath; their marshaling of skills and gifts to in good work a prayer also, a song to and with the Breath; for that is why we are here, is that not so? To discover what it is we do well, and then hone and shape and wield those gifts, in the making and doing of things cleanly and creatively, without ego and bluster and flutter and boast, in companionable service to our fellow beings? Is that not so? And is not the evidence of that effort everywhere, even and especially, this morning, perceptible at the tapered ends of our legs? And so: amen.

Prayer for Robert Louis Stevenson on His Birthday, November 13

Because he was a lonely only child who as he matured learned to use his incredible storytelling gifts to make stories read by millions of children around the world, to their immense delight; and many of those children were lonely too, and found a refuge and a pleasure and a respite and a joy in his books that seem holy to me. Because he thrashed around being selfish and reckless when he was young and then marshaled and channeled himself and became a man of legendary kindness and courtesy and generosity and empathy and humor, which is what we all want to grow up to be, don't we? Because he was, according to his stepdaughter and stepson, the greatest second dad ever, which must be a difficult and confusing and painful job, which he did well. Because when he matured as a writer he stopped commenting and lecturing and sermonizing and homilizing, which made his work ever so much more enlightening and edifying and moving and extraordinary. Because he punctured the fastuous and the pompous and the arrogant whenever and wherever he saw it, with rare skill and passion. Because he was by all accounts a

terrific husband to a wife who could be obstreperous and testy and selfish and unempathetic and hard of hearing to her husband's dreams, but never for a day, by her own account, was he less than tender and open to her. Because he saw long before other visitors to the South Seas that the incursion of money and bullets and liquor would destroy the cultures that had grown up there over a thousand years, and were in many ways wise and healthy. Because he invented a new prayer every night at dinner at his family's table in the jungled hills of Samoa, and they prayed together aloud for peace and joy and the strength to bring light against the darkness; which he did, as well as any man who ever set pen to paper, and so it is that this day every year we pause, and thank You for the gift of that lean amused Scotchman, and bow in gratitude for his wit and energy and huge heart, which blessed the world in ways we can never measure; but we can celebrate and appreciate them today and every day. And so: amen.

Prayer in Celebration of the Greatest Invention Ever, the Wicked Hot Shower

O God help me bless my soul is there any pleasure quite so artless and glorious and simple and unadorned and productive and restorative as a blazing hot shower when you really *really* want a hot shower? When you are not yet fully awake, when you are wiped from two hours of serious basketball, when you are weary and speechless after trip or trauma? Thank You, Inventiveness, for making a universe where there is water, and heat, and nozzles, and towels, and steam, and hairbrushes, and razors for cutting that line that distinguishes your beard from your chest, and toothbrushes. Thank You most of all, Generosity, for water. Deft invention, water. Who would have ever thought to mix hydrogen and oxygen so profligately? Not us. But it is everything we are. It falls freely from the sky. It carries us and our toys and joys. It is clouds and mist and fog and sleet and breath. There is no sweeter more crucial food. It ought to remind us of Your generosity every time we sip or swim or shower. It reminded me of You this morning. I bow gently in gratitude. And

now, forgive me, I must be going, as there is a small boy hammering on the door and wailing and gnashing his teeth, and there is a disgruntled line forming behind him. And so: amen.