

Dear Prudence

Readings: 'Incantation' by Czeslaw Milosz
'Genius' by Billy Collins
'Enough Music' by Dorianne Laux

'Maybe it's what we don't say that saves us,' the poet reminds us. If you're like me, you know this all too well. If you're like me in this way, you know it's what you haven't said that has saved you. If you're like me in this way, you sometimes get in arguments with someone you love. Romantic partners, family members, dear friends. For me, and maybe for you, if the argument is heated enough, if I start to feel hurt and angry, the most hurtful words can come to mind, the ones that I know will cut the other person to the quick, wound them deeply. The words that appear in my mind are wounding precisely because I know the person I'm arguing with so well. The words weaponize our closeness, the strength of our relationship. It's an awful feeling. Maybe this doesn't happen to you. I hope it doesn't happen to you.

Most of the time, when I feel those hurtful words start to form, I can bite my tongue, clench my jaw, and not speak, though they word sit heavy in my mouth. My wisdom and my reason know that to speak them would escalate the argument and the cruelty in ways that I don't want. But the wounded animal in me wants to lash out. Most of the time, I am able to swallow the vitriol back down, save someone pain, prevent the damage to the relationship. 'Maybe it's what we don't say that saves us.' In these moments, it is definitely what we don't say that saves us. This silence, this clenched jaw that keeps the hurt from multiplying, this knowing how to proceed is a moment of prudence.

Then, when the moment has passed, when the argument is over and calm is restored, a funny thing happens. There is a part of me that wants credit for not saying those hurtful words – and there is simply no way to get credit for it. We can't show off our restraint and still be restrained. There is no way to say to someone, "I thought of this terrible thing I could have said, but didn't say it, so congratulate me," without being completely ridiculous. We can't eat our cake and have it too. Believe me, I've tried. The congratulations on offer are the ones we give ourselves for quietly doing a hard thing. The congratulations on offer are the ones we give ourselves for staying in right relationship, for seeing that self-destruct button and not pushing it, for being prudent. For some of us, the holy as we understand it is alongside us to witness the struggle for self-restraint, the struggle to be prudent and offers encouragement. And maybe swallowing back hurtful words isn't your struggle, maybe it's what you don't do in some other way that saves you, that saves your relationships. Perhaps there is some other form of not doing that you quietly struggle with and don't often get credit for. Maybe you practice some other form of prudence. Prudence is about restraint, about the not doing that saves us, about letting our reason and wisdom triumph over the less reasonable and less wise parts of ourselves, but it is also much more than that.

Prudence is one of the seven heavenly virtues named by the early Christians who adopted and expanded a list from the ancient Greeks. Prudence is not a glamorous virtue – it's not hope or love or justice. We don't talk about it much. Sometimes, 'prude' is hurled about as an insult, as if this virtue is actually a vice.

This silence about prudence is in part because prudence is harder to understand than those other virtues. It's restraint, but more than that. It's good judgment, but more than that. Some call it 'practical wisdom.' It's the ability to recognize a whole situation and know how to proceed. And it takes a lot of well-developed skills and faculties to be able to be a prudent person. Thomas Aquinas was an Italian priest, philosopher and theologian who lived in the 13th century. His writing and teaching shaped the development of the

Western Christian tradition. He wrote about many things, including prudence. He considered it a virtue of the highest order. To be prudent, to practice prudence he writes that you have to develop all of the component parts of prudence, which he lists as memory, foresight, intelligence, shrewdness, reasoning, circumspection, caution, and teachableness – the ability to learn from one's experiences and do better next time.¹ That is a lot. Aquinas believed that prudence was a linchpin of the virtuous life – it was through prudence, by seeing things clearly and knowing how to proceed, that one knew which virtue to rely on in any situation.

So what does it mean to be prudent? It means seeing things as they are. It means having good judgement. It means knowing the path forward. It means restraining our impulses that do not serve us or our relationships. It also means being an integrated person, knowing that there are parts of oneself in conflict – like reason, wisdom and woundedness in the experience I shared earlier—and weighing our options. One scholar of prudence describes it this way, 'Prudence is an integrative virtue, integrating intellect and will, theory and context, action and agent, reason and emotion, past and future, the individual and his or her community, and the proximate and ultimate ends of human life.'² To practice prudence, we need to be whole, well-integrated people.

What does this look like in practice? Here's one idea. The following is a description of a prudent person that I came across in my research this week. I've slightly edited it for inclusivity:

'[T]he prudent person is one who is open to the world as it is, who regards reality with "clear-sighted objectivity" who possess "the perfected ability to make decisions in accordance with reality." Thus, he, she [or they] is the sort of person who sizes up situations well, who can step into complex situations and know what needs to be done, and who is about to bring out the best in other people and in himself, herself [or themselves] in a way that leaves everyone better off. He, she [or they] is able to be fully present in the moment, not distracted, confused, disengaged, or excessively anxious. He, she, [or they] is trustworthy, fair, and honest about his, her, [or their] own abilities, and combines thoughtfulness with an ability to act rapidly and decisively when needed. A prudent person is self-aware and quick on his, her [or their] feet, yet firmly grounded in... conviction... A prudent person is respectful of rules and laws, but is not rule-bound; his, her, [or their] judgement is so trustworthy that he, she, [or they] does not always have to be referring to rules and laws, and is able to flexibly adapt to changing circumstances in which no rules suffice.'³

That is quite a list. It sounds like a description of some sort of spiritual super hero, someone who has integrated all of their ways of being and ways of knowing and can then act from that integrity. I don't know if any of us can ever fit that description all the time, but we can all get closer to that ideal. And there are ways to help us do that.

Warren Kinghorn teaches at Duke University. He is a medical doctor who teaches psychiatry at Duke Medical School. He also holds a doctorate in theology and teaches pastoral and moral theology at Duke Divinity School. He thinks and writes and teaches about the intersections between religious communities and mental health. He has a suggestion for those of us seeking to live a more prudent life, to unleash the spiritual superpower that is prudence. He recommends a mindfulness practice as a path toward prudence.

¹ Kinghorn, Warren. 'Presence of Mind: Thomistic Prudence and Contemporary Mindfulness Practices.' *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*. Vol. 35, No. 1 (2015): 83-105. Pages 89-90

² Kinghorn, 83

³ Kinghorn, 91-92

There are a variety of mindfulness practices, a variety of practices that help us to slow our thoughts, pay attention to our bodies and our breaths, strengthen our heart, our soul, and our will. Nearly every wisdom tradition has its mindfulness practices. There is yoga and meditation rooted in the Hindu tradition. There are other meditation practices rooted in Buddhism. There are contemplative prayer practices in all of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And there are, increasingly mindfulness practices that are secular, that take practices from wisdom traditions and remove them from their religious and cultural contexts for therapeutic and self-care purposes. One of these is called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. All of these wisdom traditions have a mindfulness practice because they know they are vital to living a well-integrated life. In the midst of all our tasks and obligations, we all need to pause, pay attention to our bodies and our breath, process the emotions and worries that get in our way if we do not attend to them, and remember what is most important. We need to slow the spinning hamster wheel of thoughts that keep us from being present. We need to listen to all of the different pieces of ourselves, all of our sometimes warring impulses, our reason and our wisdom, and choose which ones we act on. Mindfulness helps us to strengthen our hearts, our souls, and our wills so we can respond with prudence in all aspects of our lives.

The psychiatrists have found what the mystics always knew. Intentionally slowing down, paying attention to breath and the sensations in one's body, focusing on a mantra or a repeated prayer is good for us. Mindfulness practices are increasingly being used to treat depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, and other mental illness through programs like Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.⁴ And we know that mindfulness benefits all of us, whether or not we live with mental illness.

On Friday, I, along with several People's people attended Friday prayers at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center. Imam Hafiz, told his community, a community experiencing a lot of fear and uncertainty right now, to pray more. He offered them a specific prayer rooted in their tradition. This is a mindfulness practice. Imam Hafez knows that repeating a familiar prayer is a way to calm the fear and anxiety, stitch ourselves back together, see the world as it really is, and act with prudence.

I encourage you all to have a mindfulness practice. If you need help cultivating one, I can help and connect you with resources. And in this world that seems to be constantly shifting around us, this world that is calling us to be prophetic in new and different ways, we need to be acting from our integrity as much as we can. We need to be responsive, but not reactive as much as we can. We need to be prudent.

And as I encourage you to give time to a mindfulness practice, I am aware of the contradiction of doing that after Bryan has just so beautifully played The Beatles' 'Dear Prudence' for us. We knew we had to have that song today – is there really any other choice when the service is about prudence? And gives us a counter-example of the prudent life. 'Dear Prudence' is inspired by a woman who was imprudent in her commitment to a mindfulness practice.

In early 1968, 20 year old Prudence Farrow, travelled with her sister, actress Mia Farrow, from the United States to India to study Transcendental Meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Not long after they arrived, all four Beatles came there to study meditation as well. Farrow had been eagerly awaiting this trip for a long time and was excited to soak up as much mindfulness and wisdom as she could. She devoted herself to meditation to the exclusion of everything else. She said later, "I had been [meditating] five days

⁴ Kinghorn, 85-87

straight. I hadn't gone to the bathroom, I hadn't slept, and I hadn't eaten. After that, Maharishi realized what he was dealing with. The older people on the course, they were sleeping; they were sunbathing on top of the roof; they would go for walks. I was... more extreme."⁵

John Lennon, one of The Beatles, noticed Prudence Farrow's extremism. He reflected later, "[Farrow] would not come out the little hut we were living in... We got her out of the house – she's been locked in for three weeks and wouldn't come out. She was trying to find God quicker than anyone else. That was the competition in Maharishi's camp: who is going to get cosmic first."⁶

In addition to getting Farrow to leave the house, Lennon wrote the song that Bryan played. 'Dear Prudence, open up your eyes, Dear Prudence, see the sunny skies. The wind is low the birds will sing that you are part of everything. Dear Prudence, won't you open up your eyes?'

The song and the story behind it reminds us to be prudent in all things, even our quests for wisdom, enlightenment, or prudence. A spiritual practice that cuts us off from the world, that leads us to ignore the birds, the sky and the reality that we are all connected, is not much of a spiritual practice. If we decided that becoming more prudent is the goal, we have to be prudent in how we achieve that goal. We make small adjustments. We find that practicing the aspects of prudence that Aquinas lists—memory, foresight, intelligence, shrewdness, reasoning, circumspection, caution, and teachableness—gets easier with every time we do it. It's almost like building muscle, but we're building spiritual, moral, virtuous muscles. To build muscle, we have to do things over and over and over again. Becoming more prudent is no different. Every time we hold back a hurtful word, our restraint and our jaws grow stronger. Every time we are able to assess a situation clearly, our vision and assessments become better and more trustworthy. Every time we make a mistake and learn from it, we get better at learning from mistakes; we become more teachable.

So... in the days and weeks and months ahead, may we strengthen our hearts, our souls, our wills, and all of the muscles necessary for prudence.

May we be mindful and attend to the practices that keep us mindful.

May we assess the situations around us with thought and care and choose the best path forward.

May we be prudent.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

⁵ quoted in Chiu, David. 'The Real "Dear Prudence" on Meeting Beatles in India.' *Rolling Stone*. September 4, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-real-dear-prudence-on-meeting-beatles-in-india-20150904#ixzz3rEqH51OX>

⁶ quoted in Chiu