A Book of Prayers

Inspired by Woodlawn

By Gwen Van Velsor

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In God We Trust,
Then Fly

A mobile prayer by Woodlawn groundskeeper Stephen Pitts
Preface

In the summer of 2018, I spent a week as a writing resident at the Woodlawn estate. Woodlawn and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Pope-Leighey House are sites of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, located on the same grounds in Alexandria, Virginia. The site is also home to the Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food & Agriculture, dedicated to creating a more equitable and sustainable local food system.

Maybe it’s because I’m from the city, where my life is full of marble stoops and angular skylines, that the natural world at Woodlawn seems more vibrant than your average historic home in a bucolic setting. The drizzling August rain keeps me inside somedays, writing by the window light upstairs, or imagining having tea with Nelly in the sitting room. One afternoon I hustle down to the Pope-Leighey house between downpours and sit under the carport scribbling. This surely fits in with Frank Lloyd Wright’s vision when he created this space to be seamless with the natural world.

Several non-human beings visit me throughout the week starting with a jumping spider who made his way to my keyboard. Urged by this little fella, I made many trips outside daily to clear my head and stretch my fingers. Out there, a hawk soars high above the trees cascading down the original front entryway. A plump turkey, followed by two doe, dash into the woods. On a sunny morning, the biggest butterfly I’ve ever seen nurses from the purple flowers outside the Pope-Leighey house, opening his orange and blue wings wide for my examination. A hummingbird flits along the outside strings of lights while
a walking stick finds a seat on a bench. From the heirloom
garden, a bald eagle swoops low, and then high, over the house
and across Arcadia’s demonstration farm. A clumsy groundhog
scurries in through the fairy door of a great white oak, most
perplexed by my presence.

This vibrant, old mansion and land it rests on inspires
me to create a selection of prayers influenced by various aspects
of the property. From the four poster beds, to the layered pre-civ-
il war history, to the modern “Makers in the Mansion” exhibit, I
felt this distinct pull to honor this place in a special way. Inside
this booklet you will find prayers written by myself and by or
about people who inhabited the estate at one time or another,
each leaving their own unique mark. It is my hope that these di-
verse spiritual practices can bring us together, not keep us apart.
Request to enter

When visitors pull into the winding driveway at Woodlawn, the trees seem to bend toward the center, enclosing the property in its own enclave. It feels very much like entering someone’s private property. This immediately reminded me of the practice of requesting to enter, common in ancient and modern Hawaii. When approaching a place not their own, inhabited by either humans or Gods, Hawaiians would sing a chant created for that place in order to ask permission to enter.

As I sit under the entryway to the mansion on my second day as a writer-in-residence, a hawk circles neatly above the trees to my left. A light rain falls, blessing every insistent blade of grass and every swaying tree branch. It is a gentle reminder that my own request to enter is due.

I offer this prayer on behalf of myself and those who have come to Woodlawn before and after.

I do not know this place
It does not know me

My footprints
Your footprints
Our footprints
Cover this place in millions of marks, each with its own name

May the power above, who gives life and takes it
Welcome us to enter this place, to take up space here, to leave our mark
May we accept knowledge as it is offered

May all those who have come before
All those here now,
And all those who will come after
Accept this place as it is
And may they be accepted as they are

I request to step forward with an open heart
opening my eyes to the unseen
my ears to the the unheard
My soul to the unknown

(Pause for reflection and an answer)
Home
Paul Kester

This poem was originally published in “The Idler”, an illustrated monthly magazine, in 1901. Kester may have written it while living at Woodlawn, as he owned the property from 1901-1905. Kester was a well known playwright and novelist.

I want to go home
To the dull old town
With the shaded streets
And the open square
And the hill
And the flats
And the house I love
And the paths I know -
I want to go home.
If I can’t go back
To the happy days,
Yet I can live
Where their shadows lie,
Under the trees
And over the grass -
I want to be there
Where the joy was once.
Oh, I want to go home,
I want to go home.
Oya

This prayer is inspired by the installation “Oya’s Chamber,” by Njena Surae Jarvis located in one of the upstairs bedrooms inside the Woodlawn mansion. I am a mother. And like Oya, a West African Orisha, I am a warrior.

Everything destroyed is made new
Out of the ashes a blade of grass, a tiny green seedling
She crushes and covers and destroys
She protects
Defends
With the strength of every mother

She is the threshold
Altering the world with each being born
Wrapping her soul around her children,
Transformed by new life
As is every mother

May we be guided in this transformation
As we foster new life
May we understand that not all destruction is tragic
May we become warriors
With the strength of every mother
Place Your Name

I offer this prayer for the people who lived at Woodlawn as slaves, and whose names were never recorded. I honor these ancestors by listing the names we do know and holding space for the names we do not know. On the first blank line I have entered my daughter’s name. I imagine her grandmother and great grandmother and great great grandmothers looking down on her and knowing she is better for what they endured. For those that suffered have survived, her family lives on in her living blood. If you feel compelled, add your name to the list. Inspired by Hadiya Williams’ installation, “Layers.”

Abba     Letty     Sally
Ben      Lucinda   Sam
Button   Lydia    Samuel
Calvert  Marcellus Stephen
Caroline Mariah   Sukey
Dandridge Marshall Susan
Demus    Martha    Thomas
Dennis   Marthalinda Thornton
Dolcey   Martha Ann Tom
Doll     Miles    William
Edward   Molly    Ella Thomas
Eliza     Murray     
Frances   Ned      
George    Nelly     
Godfrey   Nelly     
Hanson    Patty     
Jane      Peter     
Lawrence  Polly     

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A Mealtime Prayer

A common moment of shared prayer is before a meal. After reciting this prayer at a volunteer potluck at the Arcadia sustainable food farm, this blessing came alive among the toiling squash vines and freshly weeded soil. Inspired by the installation “Layers,” by Hadiya Williams in the dining room at Woodlawn, this prayer is meant to honor all of those at the table, including those who birthed, grew, prepared and served the meal.

Bless this bread
Touched first by the ground as it was born
Torn from its mother at harvest
Crushed into flour
Molded into dough with living yeast and living water
Baked with fire
Served by hands

Bless this wine
Touched first by the ground as it was born
Torn from its mother at harvest
Crushed into juice
Fermented with living water and never ending time
Bottled under pressure
Poured by hands

Bless this meal
Touched by many souls
Transformed into sustenance for our living bodies
Bringing together our hands in gratitude
Bedtime Prayer

*Inspired by “A Passion for Colors,” a quilt installation in one of the bedrooms at Woodlawn created by Sandy Barrett Hassan. Also incorporated into this prayer are the Episcopalian tenants for worship inspired by Nelly Lewis’ (the original owner of Woodlawn) faith.*

As I close my eyes to sleep,
in hopes that tomorrow will bring me another day to live,
I pray for forgiveness,
Passion,
Freedom,
Justice,
Discernment,
Wisdom,
Perseverance,
Renewal,
Love,
And trust.
I pray that the fabric of my life be sown to another’s in such a way
That a bold pattern of joy* will emerge
Praise be to God

*This phrase taken directly from the Barrett Hassan’s artist statement.*
For Mrs. Pope

*Inspired by the Pope-Leighey House*

It’s true that my daughter is the most beautiful creature,
Her smile,
Her laugh,
Her hair,
Her skin,
Her nose,
Teeth,
Toes,
Fingers,
The way she eats,
Her toddler walk,
The sound of her running,
Her birthmarks.
May I never know the pain of frozen time.
Silence

In 1846 Woodlawn was purchased by a group of Quakers from New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Traditional Quaker services, or meetings, do not have set songs, readings or sermons. Instead, friends are invited to share as inspired to do so by God. From the Alexandria Friends Meeting at Woodlawn, which still maintains an active congregation:

“We gather in silence in the presence of God. In the silence we may worship and listen to the voice of the Spirit. Out of the silence messages from God may also come to us in the spoken word or prayer.”

If inspired to do so, please speak, write or think your prayer after a moment of silence with your higher power.
Thurman was an influential Baptist minister, theologian, and civil rights activist, who worked for non-violence and started a multicultural church in 1944. He is also well-known to Quakers for having studied philosophy with Quaker Rufus Jones at Haverford College. This prayer blends Quaker and Baptist sentiments, just like the history at Woodlawn. John and Rachel Lincoln Mason bought Woodlawn in 1850 and founded the Woodlawn Baptist Church in 1868.

Lord, open unto me
Open unto me — light for my darkness.
Open unto me — courage for my fear.
Open unto me — hope for my despair.
Open unto me — peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me — joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me — strength for my weakness.
Open unto me — wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me — forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me — love for my hates.
Open unto me — thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me!
Amen.
Family Tree

In the family parlour at Woodlawn, a large and very detailed Lewis family tree dominates the visual space. Upstairs in one of the bedrooms, Morgan Davis reminds us, in her installation “Roots,” that, like nature, our history starts at the root. This prayer is for the ancient Americans who may have walked these grounds, at least 10,000 years ago, and probably more, whose family trees sway in the gentle breeze.

Thank you wind
Thank you air
Thank you solitary moon
Thank you sun
Thank you rich earth -
Holding the roots of all life starting with the nourishment of many lives before us,
Strengthened by their blood
Spreading wide from east to west, from north to south
Many trees bearing many leaves
When our footprints remain as memory in dust,
We hope a golden imprint sparkles with our name