



Anne Lamott

Biography Timeline: **April 10 1954**, born Anne Patricia Lamott in San Francisco; grows up in Tiburon, California, in the Bay Area, one of three children of Kenneth Lamott, a writer, and Dorothy Lamott, a journalist and lawyer, both of whom are antipathetic toward religion; participates in competitive tennis while a youth; **1972**, graduates from Drew College Preparatory School, a private high school; attends Goucher College in Maryland on a tennis scholarship, intending to study English and philosophy; writes for school paper; **1973**, drops out of college and moves back to Bay Area; begins writing for magazines, including *Mademoiselle*, *Woman Sports*, and *California*; **1977**, father's brain cancer is discovered; **1979**, her father dies; publishes first novel, *Hard Laughter*; **April 1984**, abortion; **1984**, begins hanging around St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, near flea market at Marin City, California; has a vision of Jesus and conversion experience; **1985**, receives Guggenheim Fellowship; **July 1986**, sobriety begins; **1987**, baptized at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marin City, California; **August 1989**, son Sam is born; **1990**, best friend Pammy dies; **1990's**, teaches University of California -Davis and at writing conference across the United States; **1993**, first nonfiction book *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, becomes best-seller; **1996**, begins writing regular column for *Salon*; **1999**, *"Bird by Bird with Annie: A Film Portrait of Writer Anne Lamott"* documentary by Freida Lee Mock is released; **2008**, works as Democrat precinct captain; **July 20, 2009**, Sam's son, Jax, is born; **2010**, inducted into the California Hall of Fame.

In Anne Lamott's four nonfiction works dealing with faith, readers are offered full-blown explorations of her encounters with God, sometimes mystical, frequently mundane, always chock full of intrigue. She is disarmingly simple in her faith but not simplistic about how she lives it.

A long-time feminist and liberal political activist, Lamott finds her place in the mainstream of Protestant traditions and Catholic spiritual practice, but she is also curious enough to dabble with non-Christian mystic legacies. In most of her nonfiction works, she acknowledges and pays tribute to the saving graces of her home congregation, the people of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marin City, California.

Lamott's thinking ranges far and wide: the agonies of bulimia and eventually learning how to eat right; her nearly deathly drinking and drugging; the signal challenges of being a single mother; the glories of dreadlocks; the vexing developments when a parent ages; the ongoing grief work we do after a parent dies; the daunting (and hilarious) drooping of our bodies over time; the paranoid hypochondria that can ensue when faced with an incessant body mole; and so much, much more.

Her metaphors for religious experience are rich with descriptive powers, as she experiences Jesus as "*the alleycat of heaven*,"(1) as she suggests the placing of prayer supplications in "*God's In Box*,"(2) as she warns all about the attractiveness and dangers of "*grace lite*,"(3) as she portrays death as "*the big eraser*."(4)

Anne Lamott grapples with the abiding dilemmas of faith with great verve, grace, and bluntness. The influences on her writing include Virginia Woolf, John Updike, Anne Beattie, J.D. Salinger, Alice Munro, Kurt Vonnegut and her father Kenneth Lamott.

She is full of hard-edged, self-effacing humor: "*My mind is a bad neighborhood you don't want to visit alone*." And she is noted for her unforgettable metaphors: "*I am the Saddam Hussein of jealousy*."(5)

In the 21st century her best-selling books have given her a prominent place among those who are redefining what it is to be faithful in the face of the grittiness and grime of the world and the baffling wonder and unavoidable brutality of human existence. Her style tends toward comic hyperbole, wry understatement, vernacular language, insistent confession, and humility.

Regarding her bedrock Christian faith, she always leans toward the local rather than the general, simple faithfulness rather than dogmatic certainty, stories rather than theories, grace rather than judgment, God's immanence rather than God's transcendence, sentiment rather than cynicism, community rather than individualism, inclusion rather than condescension, providence rather than randomness, the mystical rather than the rational, and forgiveness rather than perfectionism. She regards her own life as prime evidence that God works miracles, and she believes that the incarnation of God's love is to be found everywhere, every day.

One of Lamott's spiritual practices is called "*God's In-Box*." (6) It's a simple matter of writing a prayer note to God about an unsolvable dilemma, a pesky theological question, a continuously messy relationship, a seemingly incurable disease, a cantankerous family conflict, etc. Then place the note in a small box ("*God's In Box*") as an act of release from worry, relinquishment from anxiety, and trust in God's provision.

Lamott is enthusiastically involved in St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church and takes great comfort and inspiration from weekly Sunday worship, teaching Sunday School, and trusting that God will show up on a regular basis. (7)

Taking a cue from a preacher she once heard, she once thought the two best prayers ever were "*Help me, help me, help me, 'and Thank you, thank you, thank you.*" (8) Subsequently, she enlarged her list of the essential prayers of "Help" and "Thanks" to include a third, "Wow!" (9) Wow is always appropriate "when we can't think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight or an unexpected flash of grace." (10)

Praying with Anne Lamott – Suggestions for Use

Day 1 Infuse your prayers today with thoughts and meditations about the local, faithfulness, stories, grace, God's immanence, sentiment, community, inclusion, providence, the mystical, and forgiveness.

Day 2 Pray a prayer of thanks today for the miracles that have unfolded in your life during the last 5 years, the last five months, the last five days, the last five minutes.

Day 3 Ponder today where you will find the incarnation of God's love.

Day 4 Pray today by focusing on key relationships that may be in need of forgiveness.

Day 5 Allow your prayers to center on the ways in which your faith community is an indisputable means of grace for you. Say thanks. Say thanks again. Say thanks again.

Day 6 Consider: For which portions of your life is the prayer of petition – “Help” – appropriate? For which portions of your life is the prayer of gratitude – “Thanks” – appropriate? For which portions of your life is the prayer of awe – “Wow!” – appropriate?

Day 7 Recall the title of Lamott's third faith-oriented book, *Grace (Eventually)*.⁽¹¹⁾ Now write down how you have experienced that reality, how you have received grace, eventually. Pray for insights about someone, perhaps several people, with whom you can share such grace today.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www.salon.com/feb97/columnists/lamott970213.html>
- 2 Anne Lamott, "Gods In Box: Sometimes we need a little help from Upper Management," *Salon*, December 2, 1996, <http://www.salon.com/life/col/lamo/1996/12/02/lamott961202/index.html>.
- 3 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 163.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 5 Quotes by Anne Lamott are from her speaking engagement at Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri, 2000; see also Anne Lamott, "My mind is a bad neighborhood I try not to go into alone," *Salon*, March 13, 1997, <http://www.salon.com/life/col/lamo/1997/03/13/lamott970313/index.html>.
- 6 See Anne Lamott, "Gods In Box: Sometimes we need a little help from Upper Management"; See also Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 131.

- 7 Witness this consistent theme in Anne Lamot's four faith-related nonfiction books, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), *Plan B: Some Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), and *Help-Thanks-Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).
- 8 Anne Lamott, at Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri, 2000.
- 9 Anne Lamott, *Help-Thanks-Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books. 2012)
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books. 2007)

FOR FURTHER READING

Fiction

- Anne Lamott, *All New People* (New York: North Point Press, 1989)
 Anne Lamott, *Crooked Little Heart* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997)
 Anne Lamott, *Hard Laughter* (New York: North Point Press, 1979)
 Anne Lamott, *Imperfect Birds* (New York: Riverhead Books. 2010)

Nonfiction

- Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird : Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994)
 Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books. 2007)
 Anne Lamott, *Help-Thanks-Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012)
 Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal Of My Son's First Year* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993)
 Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Some Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005)
 Anne Lamott (with Sam Lamott), *Some Assembly Required: A Journal of My Son's First Son*(New York: Riverhead Books, 2012)
 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999)