

What I'd like to say to the young Flannery O'Connor

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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The *New Yorker* recently [published](#) excerpts from Flannery O'Connor's youthful prayer journal. This was a journal she kept, when, at 21 years of age, she was enrolled at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and had just published her first short story. The excerpts are behind a paywall, but here's an example:

I do not know you God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside. I want very much to succeed in the world with what I want to do. I have prayed to You about this with my mind and my nerves on it and strung my nerves into a tension over it and said, "oh God, please," and "I must," and "please, please." I have not asked You, I feel, in the right way.

These excerpts are raw revelations of a devout young person's struggle. They remind me a little too much of a prayer journal that I kept at the same age—one that I would cringe to have published.

[O'Connor](#) is both flamboyantly ambitious and excruciatingly self-deprecating. She writes that she wants God to make her into a mystic. But, she says, she is a "cheese": "But then God can do that—make a mystic out of cheeses. But why should He do it for an ingrate slothful & dirty creature like me?" You can hear the push and pull, the strain of her particular Christianity on a brilliant mind. She longs for discipline and for freedom.

The struggle these excerpts reveal is one I recognize, one that seems a natural byproduct of the combination of youth and devotion. Yet I find myself wanting to free the young O'Connor from it. Its bonds are too heavy and too tight. *Just write*, I want to say. *Just write, and forget religion and prayer and devotion. Forget all the forms that feel so rote to you. Write whatever stories you have.*

But like O'Connor, I struggled with ambition; I too struggled to fit myself into the religious forms handed to me. I too hated my desires and hungers and had my own form of O'Connor's "grocery store prayer": "I want a revolution now," she writes, "a mild revolution, something that will put an even 20th cen. asceticism into me at

least when I pass the grocery.”

So instead of being disturbed at this picture of my young self standing beside the young O’Connor, maybe I should be glad for the company. And grateful that age had a way of freeing her to write the stories; that as she grew older, she trusted her instinct for the story more and not less; that her prayers evolved along with her craft.