

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V.1 Unit 4

Prayer

(ed. note: a member requested that we explore a topic unlikely to digress into a discussion of the current political situation. Here's hoping it helps.)

Suggested chalice lighting

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

~ Mary Oliver

I. Introduction

Our Unitarian Universalist roots are planted deeply in traditional theistic religion, with all of the rote and ritual that accompany it.

In following a path of liberal religion, a path that many believe is truly grounded in the scriptures and in the teachings of Jesus, we abandoned all that we identified with the corruption or superstition of old. That abandonment was so thorough that, by the 1980s, it was difficult to see a trace of religion in many UU churches.

In the last few decades, there has been a movement to reclaim and reframe religious language, to point to transcendent ideas without connotations of a paternalistic and autocratic tradition. "God" and "sacred" have returned to our discourse; we dabble in "communion" and "prophetic witness." In some spaces, even words like "salvation" and "sin" have new relevance.

Prayer, on the other hand, seems to be so laden with the notion of talking to a sentient, even anthropomorphic being, that we keep our distance. Clergy and students use the word, often unclear about what it means; few others even dare speak its name.

Yet it seems to be a common element of human existence, this longing to call out -- to beg, to curse, to ask why -- to some source beyond our comprehension. I don't claim that it is universal to all individual people, but it is demonstrably universal to all cultures

and peoples as a group. Prayer, in some form, is a practice that emerges even in the absence of doctrine or theology. We call out, and we listen.

Religious thinkers have, for many centuries, understood that prayer need not take the form of a personal address or formal entreaty. Calling out and listening, making mindful connection with something beyond ourselves, can take an infinite variety of form. The various Hindu yogas (paths) and Buddhist forms of meditation certainly qualify.

II. CONNECT: Readings

In a desperate moment, I cried out for help, and I was answered. Some years later I am still a humanist—I believe that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now. Yet I am a humanist who prays, who begins each morning with devotional readings and a time of silence and prayer. Why do I do this? I need a quiet time. I need to express my gratitude. I need humility. I pray because—alone—I am not enough and also I am too much. I express gratitude for the gift of aliveness. I assert my oneness with you and all humankind and all creation. When I pray, I acknowledge that God is not me. ~ Roger Cowan

During the moment of silence in our Sunday service I close my eyes and sing, silently, inside my head, "Guide my feet while I run this race for I don't want to run this race in vain." As I sing in silence, I imagine myself and the congregation enfolded in arms of love. At a hospital bedside I hold the hand of a dying woman. The words form in my mind—or perhaps in my heart—"Goddess, be with her, give her strength and courage and comfort for this journey." The full autumn moon rises, huge and orange and glowing, and I feel my spirit lifting along with it. "Thank you," I say. "Thank you." In the moment of beauty it doesn't matter whom I am thanking or even whether I am heard. It is enough to be grateful and to be a witness to wonder. ~ Lynn Ungar

The best advice on prayer I have yet found was given long ago by Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said that prayer was nothing to flaunt about or show off. Prayer begins in the heart, that secret place within us all. Other traditions have taught me that prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this Mystery to dwell. Prayer is a covenant we make to be of service, a way of living with the very questions that perplex us, an opening of the human heart. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said, "Pray like this," simply, from the heart. ~ Daniel Budd

Prayer for me is taking time to be present for that gracious spirit and aware of the gifts that come to me simply because I am alive. One word for this time of presence is gratitude. Another word is meditation, in which, by observing my breathing, I become ever more aware of creation in process. In addition, prayer is theological reflection and social strategy, alone and in groups... Service, especially the prophetic, artistic, dogged work of systematic change for economic justice, is my prayerful response to all I have been given. When I act for justice, when I act with compassion, the spirit in me is no longer trapped at my fingertips. It can move and shake and shape and sing. ~ Lucy Virginia Hitchcock

I've found through ordinary attention I can know enough to find authentic peace and joy. We can know ourselves and our place in the play of the cosmos through sustained attention to what is going on. I've found the beauty and mystery and grace of our existence are revealed in prayerful attention. Through attention we can come to know the connections. In my thirty years delving into the Zen practices of bare attention, this has been my experience. At the moments within our complete nakedness to what is we find our foolishness and glory are all revealed. Here our hearts and minds open. And, here, we come to an experience that is worthy of those wonderful words "meaning" and "purpose." Within this prayer, within this attention, we can find our connections as a deep intimacy. And out of this knowledge we find a moral perspective, a call to justice, and a peace that passes all understanding. ~ James Ishmael Ford

III. GROW

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. These readings, all statements from Unitarian Universalists, offer a variety of perspectives on prayer. Which one, if any, resonates most with you?
2. What do they seem to have in common? Is there something at the core of these approaches that might form the basis of an understanding of prayer in our tradition?
3. How do you respond, if someone asks you to pray for them? What if someone says they will pray for you?
4. Is there something in your personal religious practice that you might consider as prayer?
5. Is there some characteristic of prayer that makes it different from meditation, or are they basically the same thing?

IV. SERVE

Whether it has any other effect or not, prayer certainly has the ability to deepen our own compassion for ourselves and others. The 11th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous is, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as *we understood [God]*, praying only for knowledge of [God’s] will for us and the power to carry that out” (italics original, masculine pronoun redacted).

As you move through your day, consider applying this attitude of prayer toward those you encounter, whether you have warm feelings or strongly negative feelings about them. When you think of them, say silently, “May you truly understand what is best for you to do; may you find the power to do it.” Try the same prayer for yourself. Give yourself at least a few days of effort in this, even if it feels awkward.

At the end of several days of this practice, reflect on how it felt.

V. Conclusion

Did this conversation make you think or feel differently about the idea of prayer? What was it like to explore this topic, which is generally considered to be deeply personal, even private? Were you surprised by differences in the group? By similarities? What other feelings did you encounter? What got in the way, and what was missing? If people in the group would like, invite them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested words for extinguishing chalice:

May I be open to experience the holy all around me and within me. May I embrace the holy in others and know that I, too, am part of it all. Amen. ~ Marisol Caballero