

"Prayer: Engaging the Sacred"
Sermon for the Unitarian Fellowship of London
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"We would like you to come pray with her," said the soft, female voice on the other end of the phone. "She is probably close to dying now, and we have already called the family."

It was three o'clock in the morning. I remember this well, this winter of 2001, when we were living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The temperature outside was probably at least 20 below, celcius. My hospital pager had just gone off, and I had called the number indicated and had heard the voice of the night nurse at the hospital.

I quickly got dressed and drove all the way over there on the ring road around the city of Winnipeg, on that quiet, clear, star-lit, very cold winter night. When I arrived, the nurse directed me to the woman's private room. Now I should tell you that on-call hospital chaplains are often in a situation with patients they have never met before. This was the situation I found myself in that night. I was told that the patient's daughter, apparently her only relative, had been there earlier in the day.

So I simply sat with this woman. We both were strangers to each other, and she was breathing very, very slowly. To me it was obvious that she wanted simply to rest, so conversation was not needed. It seemed so inappropriate to say any words or to pray out loud. Instead, I prayed silently. I prayed that God, or whatever or whomever this dying woman named the holy, that this would *be present* in that room, to watch over her with me, as she breathed ever so slowly...in...and out...in...and out. I closed my eyes for a long time, held her hand, and listened to her breathing. As I was doing this, I felt something. Something very gentle, yet powerful.

I felt a sense of serenity and quietness come over her. It was very beautiful, as I sat there realizing that of course God is present wherever we are, we just have to *become aware* of that reality.

When I opened my eyes, the woman seemed to be no longer breathing. It wasn't very dramatic. She had just stopped breathing, as her inhales and exhales had gotten farther and farther apart. It then suddenly occurred to me that she had died, with me as the only -- and last -- human being in that hospital room with her. My silent prayer had ended, as her soul left her body. It must have been about 4 in the morning.

Another part of my brain then shifted into gear. I thought, "Now, what should I do?"

I then got up and went to find the nurse. She came quickly to the room, and confirmed that yes, the patient had no pulse, she was dead.

Then, the nurse began to cry. She cried softly, as she methodically removed the many intravenous tubes that hung from the woman's body, exclaiming out loud, "Well, if she were MY mother, I would have been by her side, with her, on this very night". And all I could think to say to her was, "Of course you would have been, of course you would." The nurse told me that the daughter had chosen earlier to go to her night job, rather than coming to the hospital when they called her. She had left her mother to die alone. Except that I was called in "to pray with her", in the middle of the night. I could tell that she was one of those exceptionally good nurses who just knew somehow that the end of this patient's life was quickly approaching.

That moment of sacredness alongside that woman came to be part of *my* life's experience, as I just so happened to be the chaplain assigned to carrying the pager that night. I never expected to be the only companion of someone I never knew, to be privileged to wait for that final moment, literally her last breath. That experience taught me that death can come very naturally, very peacefully. It is not such a fearful thing, but it is a natural part of life. It is indeed a sacred moment.

Perhaps most of the sacred moments we experience in our lives are *not* as dramatic as this one. Yet, they are the times when the ability to "simply pray", as my colleague Erik Wikstrom says, brings us into a special kind of awareness. Our spiritual lives can be enriched by understanding the idea of "prayer", perhaps in a completely new way.

Many of us had probably been taught things about prayer that now we can no longer believe. We probably have rejected long ago the idea of a God who intervenes in our lives. Many people wonder, why pray at all?

The thing is, words like "pray" or "prayer", are difficult ones for many Unitarian Universalists. In our religious tradition, there is no "one right way". What may work for me may not work at all for you, yet we remain in supportive community together. Exploring the meanings and implications of difficult words like "prayer" is my attempt to open up avenues for each of you. Spiritual growth happens when all of us can approach what we think is familiar territory with an open mind.

So today, let's look a bit at the word "prayer".

Do you pray? Are you feeling puzzled by this word?

In our individual freedom of belief, we have a wide range of beliefs about God, about the nature of the Ultimate, and about what prayer is. Some people say that they have never prayed. Others say they have a regular prayer life, and many are somewhere in between. Some will say that because we are non-creedal and diverse in our beliefs, that we *cannot* pray together. Others will say that we pray, but each in his or her own way. And still others will see no need to even discuss the question of prayer.

So for this morning, how about if we first look at the idea of individual prayer, and then at prayer in a group setting.

First, individual prayer:

Many of you are very familiar with the beautiful wording found in the first of our Unitarian Universalist Sources. We draw our inspiration from "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

Prayer is *not* about "saying prayers". There are no prescribed words, certain proper ways to sit or stand or kneel, or times of the day when it is "right" to pray. The words can be completely your own, or you can choose to engage in a silent form of prayer; your body can be in any posture whatsoever, and it could be any time of day or night.

What I hear Erik Wikstrom alluding to in our reading today is precisely that "direct experience" of the holy. It isn't something that is handed down to us, or something that can ever be fully *described* to us, but rather the sacred is that which we come to

know for ourselves in our own time, and in our own unique way. The holy is perhaps something we can intuit more easily than prove the existence of.

Yet, throughout our history, we Unitarian Universalists have always chosen *authenticity* in religious thought. We want to embrace what we find to be true and what makes sense to us. So perhaps our first big question today is "To whom or to what are we praying?" We are not of one opinion about the nature of the universe. We certainly do not all believe in a concept of God, or in the *same* concept of God, or perhaps in any god at all.

When it comes to prayer, whether we believe in God or not, does *not* really matter. I think this is the key. You do not need to "believe in" God in order to pray. We can *all* stand in awe before the grandeur and wonder of Life and the mystery of our existence. Just standing there looking at it all is a kind of prayer!

Still, what if nothing or no one is listening to our prayer? There is no one answer to this question. Here are some possible answers which may be helpful to you:

UU minister Barbara Pescan wrote a very interesting short poem called "The Atheist Prays". Let's hear how an atheist might actually pray:

I am praying again
and how does one pray when unsure if anything hears?

In the world I know as reliable and finite
when time and matter cycle back and forth
and I understand the answer to so many puzzles, still
There are moments when knowing is nothing.

This accumulation of systems, histories --
repetitions falls from me --
how does one who is sure there is nothing, pray?

Dark gathered around my eyes,
I sit in this room with my certainties
asking
my one unanswered question
holding myself perfectly still to listen
fixing my gaze
just here

wondering.

And this is my prayer.¹

There is no doubt of the humanity and honesty in that poetic expression. Just sitting wondering can be a form of prayer.

Another minister in our tradition, Elizabeth Lerner, has a different answer to the question of "what if no one is listening". She says, "If nothing and no one is listening, then my prayer has a different function but the same form. It does me good, it keeps me humble, it keeps me honest, to express my yearnings and to address them to God even if that is my saddest and most foolish act because no one is listening. It does not hurt me; it helps me." Lerner goes on to state that "If God does not hear me, or is not even there to hear me, it still does me good to get my yearning, my fear, my question, my grief, my anger out, to acknowledge it and express it and release it to the world." She concludes that what is truly important to her is that, "My prayers are honest, and they are mine."

Even with just these two examples so far, I think you might agree that there is no one right way to pray! An in-depth study of prayer can be complex and fascinating. In fact, in doing my research for this sermon, I realized that there is a whole lot I can't even begin to cover just now. Perhaps a series on "prayer" is in order! For example, there are different *kinds* of prayer. We could another time deal specifically with "prayers of petition", or "prayers of confession", or "prayers of compassion". I think we're all okay with the "prayer of thanksgiving" that was our responsive reading this morning. Perhaps the most basic prayer of all is that of thankfulness for our very existence.

Someone once said that the two basic prayers of life are "Help, help, help" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you"! And although this sounds humorous, there is truth to it.

Eric Wikstrom describes even larger, more general categories of prayer. These are *Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving*.

I've already mentioned one aspect of "naming", when I spoke about our many ways to name our Life Source. "Knowing" is connecting and repairing our human relationships through prayer, and "Listening" is developing an attitude of watchfulness or awareness. In the West, this had been called "contemplative prayer", that which Thomas Keating calls the "silent, effortless emptying of one's self so that you can become aware of yourself as filled with... 'the Ultimate Mystery.'"ⁱⁱⁱ This type of silent, contemplative prayer is contrasted with "meditation", which is the focusing of devotional attention towards, and reflection about, a particular topic. In Buddhism and other Eastern religious traditions, the term "meditation" is really synonymous with the West's idea of "contemplation" -- that is, going beyond words, into that realm where we connect with the Source of Life, or the great

Nothingness. As Erik Wikstrom puts it, we "gently and easily move from all forms of *doing* to a simple state of *being*."ⁱⁱⁱ

Naming, Knowing, Listening and finally *Loving* as a type of prayer. Some may call this "intercessory prayer", where "an attitude of loving concern" allows us to call up the names and faces of people we want to pray for.^{iv} A non-theist way of engaging in this form of deep listening is to observe how "your subconscious...bring[s] to your attention that about which you care most." In God-language, it is that "you move yourself out of the way so that God can tell you who is in need of your prayer."^v

In addition, there is an interesting African proverb which goes, "When you pray, move your feet"! This Loving aspect of prayer requires us to not only name our hopes for people we know and our hopes for the world, but also acknowledges our interconnectedness among all beings, and propels us to *do* something about bringing our prayer into being.^{vi} This kind of prayer results in *action*, that is, moving our feet.

Our Universalist forebears believed that *we* are the earthly vehicle for God's unconditional and unending love; that ours are the faces, the voices, the hands, and the feet of the Holy. If all beings are saved, and therefore bound for the welcoming arms of a joyful afterlife, then our work on earth is not to "save souls", but rather to create heaven here on earth through a new social and economic order, driven by "the help of the strong for the weak until the weak grow strong."^{vii} These words were written back in 1917 by Universalist Clarence Skinner.

Even today, almost 100 years later, the liberal Christian communities that absorbed the precepts of universal salvation still are driven by the radical ethics of social responsibility. I think that

we Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have much in common with this form of prayer.

Greta Vosper, the United Church minister who wrote *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*, says this about prayer: It has shifted from “building up credits that ensure an eternally blissful afterlife to developing impassioned communities and individuals who define life as broadly as possible and recognize that it is living in radically ethical ways – [that is] in right relationship with ourselves, others and the planet – that best hallows life. Prayer is one of the many spiritual tools that can draw people into that state of reverence out of which flows such radically ethical living.” (from the *United Church Observer*, October 2008)

Perhaps this can speak to our search for a viable way to pray together as such a diverse community of faith as we are. In my experience, prayer can be particularly powerful if they are done with others. But before we look a bit at prayer in community, I’d like to conclude with these two comments about individual prayer:

First,

- Even though the old joke goes that Unitarians begin a prayer with "to whom it may concern", it may be helpful in addressing prayers using the pronoun "you", as if there were a listener, even if you are struggling with trying to figure out who or what God is. Try to call it the Mystery, and speak to a higher power in order to be in *relationship* with all of life. I don't think it's possible to have a relationship with a value, and perhaps if one does not address a prayer to "you", a sense of isolation remains. Using the pronoun "you" encourages us to full a kinship with all of life. It helps us feel connected.^{viii}

Secondly,

- In putting our deepest hopes and aspirations into words, we are *changed* in the process. We need **not** hold on to a childlike, magical view of prayer. When we pray a "material" form of prayer, that is, asking for what we want and hoping our prayers are "answered", then we are trapped into trying to determine what we must have done to deserve something. We need not think in terms of cause and effect, because life is not so predictable. Rather, pray an "emotional" form of prayer -- one which is for the courage, strength, love and insight to cope with whatever happens in our lives. Prayer is about opening ourselves to life, not about getting what we want in a material sense. Especially as we cultivate the attitude of thankfulness for all of life, we are in a sense building up inner strength to cope with the hard times.

So *how* is it that we can even attempt to pray together, as Unitarian Universalists?

I remember once a violinist friend of mine, when I played in the Thunder Bay Symphony, commenting on our lack of prayer on a Sunday morning when she visited the Unitarian Fellowship there. She said, "There just wasn't *any* kind of prayer!" I felt genuinely sad. I looked at our order of service, and indeed, there was no indication of a formal time for prayer, either spoken or silent. But then again, we had our Candles of Joy and Concern, exactly like they are here in London. People come up and will often share very deep joys and sorrows. This, believe it or not, *is* a form of prayer! It is sharing with one another what matters most to us, and voicing our feelings about them. Dare I say that in more traditional churches they are called "Prayers of the People"?

But what about when someone says a prayer on behalf of a large group? What about the minister or a service leader doing this in front of the congregation, on a regular basis? Is this putting words into your mouth, or thoughts into your head? Well, yes and no. It is not telling everyone how to pray, but it is an invitation to hear prayerful words, let them wash over you, and to fill in the blanks with your own. Please don't think you have to have the exact same theological or ideological viewpoint as the pray-er in order to join in a prayer! I know that when I visit more conservative places of worship, I actually *can* prayer right along with whomever is leading the prayer, speaking to God simultaneously in my own way. What is powerful in that experience is the acknowledgement of our common humanity. So we might have a different viewpoint. I can still connect with the *feelings* underlying that person's words.

It is true that from the 1960's all the up through the early 1990's, Unitarian Universalist services did not have a time for prayer at all, except in our more traditional churches in the eastern U.S. But times are rapidly changing. In the past, most of those joining our congregations came out of more orthodox or conventional religious backgrounds. They were people who did not believe in an interventionist God who answered prayers or saved, or did not save, people. Now, we are finding that more and more people who join our congregations come *without* a lot of religious baggage, perhaps because they were raised in a secular environment. These people are very much yearning to develop a spiritual and religious life. How do you think we can help them to do so?

So let's work on this together. Let's stay in conversation. Prayer is something that has been, and still is, integrally important to what it

is to being human, and in coping with "the dual reality of being alive and having to die", as Forester Church would say.

For me, I'll always remember that compassionate nurse's request in those wee hours of the morning, to come and "pray with" that dying woman. The deep sense of mystery that is *beyond* words, somehow encapsulated in that word "pray", simply defies description.

Let's conclude -- at least for now -- by hearing these words by David O. Rankin, called *Singing in the Night*:

I love to pray, to go deep down into the silence:

To strip myself of all pride, selfishness, and coldness of heart;

To peel off though after thought, passion after passion, till I reach the genuine depths of all;

To remember how short a time ago I was nothing, and in how short a time again I will not be here;

To dwell on all joys, all ecstasies, all tender relations that give my life zest and meaning;

To peek through a mystic window and look upon the fabric of life --
how still it breathes, how solemn its march, how profound its perspective;

And to think how little I know, how very little,

except the calm, calm of the silence, and the
singing, singing in the night.

Prayer is the soul's intimacy with God, the ultimate kiss.

ⁱ From *Morning Watch*, p. 36.

ⁱⁱ Erik Walker Wikstrom, partially quoting Fr. Thomas Keating, *Simply Pray*, p. 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wikstrom, p. 27.

^{iv} Wikstrom, p. 59.

^v Wikstrom, p. 40.

^{vi} From a sermon by Rev. Erika Hewett, Oct. 22, 2006, "The Loving Aspect of Prayer".

^{vii} In Rev. Clarence Skinner's "A Declaration of Social Principles," 1917, written for the Commission on Social Service. Cited in *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* by Charles A. Howe, p. 94.

^{viii} From a sermon by Alida DeCoster, "Prayer Changes People".