

“Prayer: Praying Out Loud”

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**All Souls
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The Atheist Prays

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.

Rev. Barbara Pescan

We Unitarian Universalists have a wide range of beliefs about God, about the nature of the Ultimate, and about prayer. Some of us have never prayed, some have a regular prayer life and most are somewhere in between.

When it comes to belief, this simple prayer begins to describe my beliefs.

*Where shall I look when I praise you?
Upward or downward, inward or outward? For
You are the place in which all things are
contained: There is no other place beside You:
All Things are in You.*

To You, Oh Eternal and Holy One, I pray.

It can be put another way. Joseph Campbell described the human quest for a religious life this way; "We are all sitting on the back of a whale, fishing for minnows." The size of our answers is always so much smaller than the majesty of existence.

The Persian poet Hafiz says it this way: "I say God is inside you. You say, 'That sounds preposterous – I don't really believe God is in there.' I say, 'Well, Why not try the Himalayas.'"

Whether we believe in God or not does not matter. We can all stand in awe before the grandeur and wonder of Life and the mystery of our existence.

Unitarian Universalists do not always have prayers in worship services. It is hard to pray, when we do not agree to whom or what we might be praying. We are not of one opinion about the nature of the universe. We do not all believe in God. For those of us who do believe in God, we do not all name or understand this to be the

same God or the same beliefs. This tends to make having prayer an issue.

In recent times, we have solved this problem by generally not offering prayers in our services, but times are changing. In the past, most of those who joined our UU congregations came out of more orthodox or conventional religious backgrounds. Our movement in the later part of the Twentieth Century was populated with people who had rejected an Interventionist Big Daddy in the Sky. They did not believe in a God who answered prayers or who saved, or did not save, people.

As we move into the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, more and more of those who join our churches come to our movement without a lot of religious baggage. They come wanting to know more about religion and to develop a spiritual and religious life. They may not believe in a Big Daddy in the Sky, but that is not where they stop, but where they begin.

Irrespective of our beliefs, we can still pray together and privately.

Is it possible to have Humanist prayers? Can atheists, as well as believers, pray? I remember the first "humanist prayer" I have heard from a UU ministerial colleague, David Maynard, a well-known humanist minister. He was asked to pray before a banquet for UU ministers. It may have been an attempt to embarrass him, but he did not hesitate for a moment. He began his prayer, "Oh, wonderful life, we are thankful." He proceeded to give thanks for every part of what had contributed to our being able to eat together. He

thanked the chickens and the vegetables. He thanked the cooks and the cars. He thanked the postal service and the planning team for the meeting. He gave thanks for that moment, and ended with "this is our prayer, Amen."

I know that Paul Beattie, another highly respected UU humanist minister prayed. He did not pray to something or someone. He simply opened his heart and mind, sitting quietly; he often found renewal and even inspiration. He did not attribute the source of his comfort or inspiration; he simply was appreciative for what came to him. He was the editor of the Religious Humanist magazine for many years.

We do not need to have our prayers answered for them to be helpful and uplifting. The answering of prayers may not be the point of praying.

So, often when we think of prayer, we think of prayers of petition. What one UU minister calls the "gimme" prayers. This first kind of prayer is the pleading prayer, to which we are all somewhat susceptible. It is said about prayers in public school, that we need not worry about banning them, for as long as there are still tests, mid-terms and final examinations, there will always be prayers in school. There are all kinds of tests in our lives, and who does not, at times, long for a moment of wish fulfillment, but who really expects them to be answered? This image of God makes of God a kind of cosmic vending machine or super Santa Claus.

Lily Tomlin said, "*Why is it when we talk to God, we are said to be praying. But when God talks to us, we're said to be schizophrenic.*"

And Oscar Wilde put it differently and more profoundly when he said, *Prayer must never be answered. If it is, it ceases to be prayer and becomes correspondence.*

Sometimes the best prayers are the ones that God doesn't answer, but the longing can be its own kind of answer. The longing is the prayer. Being better in touch with that longing allows us to become more aware or to move through our distress or our desire. The clarity is its own reward.

Prayer can be understood in a second somewhat traditional manner. They are called prayers of intercession. This is where we pray for the well being and blessing of another. These are the prayers of compassion and the wishing for the welfare of others, family members, people sick in the hospital, world leaders, or those who might be suffering.

UU minister, Arvid Straube, serving our UU church in San Diego, prays for each member of his congregation. He takes time each week to pull out the church directory, and review the membership. He thinks about a number of members and prays for each one's welfare. During the church year, he prays for the entire membership. He starts with the A's in September and ends with the Z's in June, having prayed for each of the over one thousand members by the end of the year.

I have not done this for you, although I do a similar process in relation to my extended family. I have pictures from past family reunions. Once a week, I take pictures out and spend time thinking about my relationship with each member and time thinking about their lives, their hopes, and their struggles. I don't get down on my knees. I don't say any "Our Fathers," but it feels a lot like prayer. In part this is the Buddhist form of prayer. It is a prayer of compassion.

These kinds of prayer do not begin with an invocation. Nothing is being addressed. For the Buddha whether God existed or not was not important. Whether there is a God or not the hope is that we will do our best to live good lives. This is not changed by having a God, many Gods or no god. The longing is for a more compassionate and good life.

The Buddha says,

May I be a protector to those without protection, a leader for those who journey, a boat, a bridge, a passage for those desiring the further shore.

All prayer is longing, a breath, a reprieve, a celebration, a thanksgiving and the deepest kind of yes to Life. Prayers come in many forms. They are please, thank you, and damn. They are gimme, oops, ouch, wow and thanks. Prayer is simple, it is ritual and recitation, and it is the center of a spiritual life.

When the mind knows, we call it knowledge.

When the heart knows, we call it love.

When the Being knows, we call it prayer.

This summer I have been away traveling in Turkey. It has been at the invitation of the Institute of Interfaith Dialogue. This is a network of progressive, moderate, and liberal Islamic leaders and students primarily in Turkey. They all are practicing Muslims. Their religion calls them to pray five times a day, but there is some leniency for illness or for when you are traveling. But, if our guides, hosts or translators had not had a chance to pray, they might say, “We need to pray now... Will you wait or will you come back and meet us here” Some times it was for fifteen minutes or in five, depending. There were times, when I went with them. I tried the full process of cleansing and bowing. It was okay. It was their way, but not mine. I tried sitting at the back and meditating or praying. It was deeply restful and renewing. I didn’t always go. Probably more time than not, I just waited and watched the very different world that was and is Turkey. But, the stopping, slowing down, shifting gears, was good. It meant that the rhythm of our travel was not just about sight seeing or meetings, but was framed by praying, by thanking God, or simply appreciating Life, if you prefer.

Of all the forms of prayer, giving thanks is the easiest. It is the simply saying Yes to all that is, for all that is. We can give thanks. It orients us. It reminds us that we are dependent upon this world, this universe, this life, upon forces greater than ourselves. This life is not of our making, but we are free to choose, to love it

or not, to use it well or not, to appreciate it not. Each of these can be our form of prayer.

Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi said,

*Today, like every day, we wake up empty
And frightened. Don't open the door to the study
And beginning reading. Take down a musical
instrument.*

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

*There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the
ground.*

Our spirits, our longings, our needs are not always in the place of thanksgiving and appreciation. We have times of lament and despair, and we also have times when beauty is its own reward. All of us know joy, pleasure, and delight. We can all simply appreciate Life. This too is a prayer.

Within all traditions and types of prayer there appears to be two primary ways of prayer. One empties out and one focuses in. Meditation is a form of prayer. It is the emptying out form. I use the Buddhist style of breath counting. The point is to empty the mind of all distraction and to become fully present to just the breath and to being alive. I also really like other forms of awareness meditation. I also use a walking mediation, where the mind is called to focus on what we hear, then what we see, then on breath, on walking and then back to hearing and on and on for ten, twenty or even thirty minutes. Each moment you become more aware, more

present, more appreciative of life. This is a way of saying
Yes, to ourselves and to Life.

There is joy

In all;

In the hair I brush each morning,

In the eggs I cook

Each morning,

In the outcry from the kettle

That heats my coffee each morning.

In the spoon and the chair

That cry "hello there."

Each morning,

In the God of the table

That I set my silver, plate cup upon

Each morning.

All this is God,

Right here in my house

Each morning

And I mean

Though I often forget

Give thanks,

To faint down by the kitchen table

In prayer and rejoicing.

So, while I think of it,

Let me paint a thank you on my palm

For this God, this laughter of the morning,

Lest it go unspoken.

*The joy that isn't shared, I've heard
Dies young.*

-Ann Sexton

Prayer is the contemplation of Life from the highest and deepest point of view. Prayer works because it changes the person who prays. It changes the person who prays, and they then change the world. Prayer is an openness to the otherness of Life and the companion that is our existence, of which we are a part. Prayers may be answered but the answering is more about aligning ourselves with the further shore than ever believing it aligns itself to our will.

This is my prayer.