

Prayers of an Agnostic

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Unitarian Universalist Society

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Hymns: #123: "Spirit of Life / Fuente de Amor," #201 "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah,"
#126 "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

Shared Offering Recipient: [My Sister's House](http://www.my-sisters-house.org) (since 1993, the first Central Valley agency to serve women and children affected by domestic violence in the Asian & Pacific Islander communities). October is domestic violence awareness month. www.my-sisters-house.org

Sermon

Many Unitarian Universalist ministers of my generation and younger did not leave another denomination or faith to become UU. They grew up in this faith. Many of them employ language about God in their sermons, prayers and reflections. Some grew up at a time or in a family or in a church where people repressed or even forbade references to the Divine. Now, these newer ministers feel a longing for the resonance and reverence ...of prayer. I have not made a survey, but that is my impression.

Once I told this to an adult UU church member who had not grown up in our movement. I said that some of our ministers who are lifelong UUs now have a longing to speak about God. This person reacted with condescension, as if such a longing is something one must outgrow. The person said: "Oh, they want somebody to tell them how to think." I was disheartened at this remark.

A better way to look at this issue is that children who grow up in UU churches learn that it's okay for your beliefs to change over time. It's okay to change your mind, adopt new perspectives, and use new language for spiritual concerns.

I wonder, though, how many non-theistic people think that the only people who use God language are those who need others to tell them how to think? Maybe I don't want to know.

A woman in her fifties wrote these words years ago about her painful and scary childhood and read them to her fellow church members in another UU congregation. She gave me permission to quote her:

I remember being very small... 3,4, and 5 years old...gathering up all my stuffed animals and crawling under the covers, so as not to be seen committing this great crime: praying to God. "God doesn't exist!" said my mother in a tone that made it clear it wasn't okay to talk about. Later, she would say that belief in God is a superstition only the foolish, the stupid and the uneducated hold onto; and how silly it is to think that prayers to a non-existent God could be answered! Rational, thinking people knew better

But I knew, deep in my heart that my mother was lying. She had to be! So I prayed. At first I prayed for my eldest brother to stop touching me and making me touch him; then I prayed that [another brother] would stop throwing knives, raging and threatening to kill my mother and me. I prayed that my parents might

have happiness and peace, and finally I prayed for all those stuffed animals in the bed with me....that they would be safe and well cared for.

In my elementary school years I learned about the very needy children in the world and the Atom Bomb. My prayers reflected the ‘wishful thinking’ of a child. I prayed for God to stop any more atom bombs from dropping. I bargained with God, I would give up my ‘advantages’ . . . I’d share my bedroom with lots of children, give up those third and fourth helpings of roast beef . . . if only God would stop all the poverty, hunger and war in the world.

For my friend as a child, prayer was a way to cope. She expressed her feelings to God when others didn’t care how she felt. She made into prayers her need and her yearning and for safety, justice, peace and hope—for herself and others. Now she’s a middle-aged mother and a minister. She has devoted her adult life to those values: nonviolence, justice and hope. And prayer keeps her grounded.

For me prayer is not about *belief* in some narrow sense of the term—it’s about seeking, feeling and affirming the truth of one’s experience. For centuries in Western history prayer has been a practice *not* of asserting dogma, but of opening to experience, opening to mystery.

In the 1800s the English poet William Wordsworth wrote these words. See if you think Wordsworth is talking about God.

And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts;
A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

If this is God, it’s not the kind of God you can prove in an argument or an essay. “A motion and a spirit that . . . rolls through all things,” Wordsworth says. Poets use words, metaphors, and images to express the truth of their experience. The writers of sacred scripture were writers of poetry, though they may not have thought of themselves as poets. Or maybe they *were* poets who did not think of themselves as writers of scripture. One famous passage tells of Elijah’s spiritual experience in a mountain. After his dramatic experience of storm, fire and a trembling of the earth, it says that for Elijah God was not in the wind, God was not in the earth quake, God was not in the fire. “But after the fire, a still small voice, the sound of sheer silence.” (I Kings 19) Whatever else they were up to, the Biblical writers wanted to affirm their experience and they used metaphors to do so.

Ancient scriptures evoke a sense of dependence on forces beyond our control. They express the experience of a power beyond our knowing, a power that *includes* us and embraces us, but is much greater than any of us.

The Reverend Laurel Hallman has written that prayer and the language of prayer are matters of religious imagination. Imagination is about opening up to what is possible, and going deeply to what is real in life. The philosopher Bernard Meland said: “We live more deeply than we think.”¹

Affirming God or holding a theistic belief is not necessary to be healthy, happy, or to have good fortune. I don't think of belief as a requirement to be blessed or saved or to be a good person.

However, I do speak of the Divine. I use metaphors to describe it, just as many of the songs in our hymnal do. When I'm at home alone I direct my prayers to God. But I am not sure what I mean by that word. I may not ever be sure, and I don't think I need to be. Let's say you and I were talking over a beer some time, and you were inclined to talk me out of believing in the possibility of God, except as a human word for a human invention. You could probably get me to agree, especially if you were buying the beer.

Many people like to substitute the word *Love* for God. Love with a capital *L*. Love is at the heart of the universe, love lives in our hearts, love holds us up and keeps us going. If you were not to believe in love, would that matter? If you were not to believe that love is real, would that have an effect on how you live?

I am an agnostic. I cannot be sure if my life has a divine meaning or purpose, can't know for sure if we are part of a grand plan, part of a larger search for "some finer vision of life" (in the words of Norman Mailer). I think we do have to create our own meaning and craft our own purpose. And if we do this with sincerity, courage and good will, perhaps we will live out some Divine purpose without knowing it. That's a worthy way to live.

It is an old joke that Unitarians are the religious people who pray "to whom it may concern." Maybe that's what I do when I pray. I put a spoken message of prayer in an imaginary bottle and cast it into the cosmos, to the attention of whom it may concern. I pray, agnostic though I am. I pray, because it makes me less lonely—and life has its lonely moments.

Maybe you'd say that I'm just as alone after praying as before. Maybe more alone than is necessary. Instead of praying I could have gone out and been with others. But prayer can help me feel less *lonely*—less separate. The time spent in prayer makes me less alienated from myself, and my feelings. Pausing to pray can help me to stop covering up my feelings with doing-doing-doing, and finding yet more stuff to be doing.

Sometimes when I feel deep sadness, or just feel deeply sorry for myself, I pray: "Have mercy on me." I sit down and quiet down and just say, "God, have mercy." I can't say that there's a listener—can't say there is any Divine Attention—but it helps me to speak as if there is one.

Prayer can be just a process of naming your feelings or speaking the truth of what's going on. Pausing to pray, or opening up in prayer, can be a way of not hiding from God. And even if there's no God, it serves me to stop hiding from myself.

I pray to become familiar with what I'm feeling, and to express it. I pray when I am angry. When death takes a person I love, too soon and without notice, I get furious. I cry out. Against God. Many years ago, when my widowed cousin's only child hit a telephone pole while racing others on his motorcycle and lost his life at age 25, I sobbed in disbelief and hurled my shock toward God. When I found out a relative was HIV-positive and when he died two months later at age 38, I swore at God. When a dear friend passed away unexpectedly at age 61—one of the kindest people I know—I went through waves of disbelief and waves of disgust—disgust with God: "How could you let this happen?" Christian friends of mine have told me that it's good to get angry with God. God can take it. Rabbi Harold Kushner and other liberal religious writers say that God grieves with us. God embraces us--and the world--with compassion. God embraces but does not control.

Another reason I pray is to cultivate a sense of gratitude. I offer a word of thanks, I recognize the gifts of my life. It reminds me that I am not in control of my existence. Most of the blessings of life came to me from sources outside myself. One way to say a prayer is to take time to notice the gifts of your life-- big ones and small ones. At meal times, I do this by noticing what's in front of me, on the plate—a little silent inventory of the blessing of nourishment.

Gratitude can be spoken or thought at any time—like going to bed or waking up or finishing a ride home after a journey. But the ritual of meal time is one of the most common openings for words of gratitude.

Some families I know sit down at the table to eat and then join hands for a moment of silence, eyes closed, breathing. It is a centering time, a silent prayer of thanks. As I've been told, in the Jewish tradition prayers of thanks for a meal take place at the end of the meal.

When I'm with others for a meal, sometimes they ask me to say grace; sometimes I ask them to do so. My grace may not sound like the old fashioned kind, especially if we are in public. If so, I conduct a stealth grace. I sneak it in. With plates before us, I say, "Well, I am thankful for..." and will list a few things. "I am thankful to be alive, and for this day. I'm thankful to be on dry land, to have a place to live, and to be safe. I'm thankful for this food. And I'm thankful to be with you." Some friends will just say, "Yes." Sometimes they'll say what they are thankful for . . . but I don't insist on it. A few answer me with a simple "Amen." That's a Hebrew word. It's Bible talk for *Yes*.

I don't always say a prayer out loud. I don't mention my gratitude in front of others; I merely try to call to mind a private sense of thanksgiving. But when I do that, I cheat others out of an invitation to be reflective, to notice, to be grateful. Why would I not offer an opening for gratitude?

Sometimes I say, "Are we not blessed to alive, be here together, and have this food?" "Are we not blessed?" Who but a crank is going to say *no*! *Yes* is a much better answer. It's a good word in general—*yes*. It's a word of celebration and thanks. Maybe it can be a prayer too, if you put an exclamation mark after it--Yes!

Prayer is a practice of pausing, noticing, and reflecting. It is an invitation to feel, to be authentic, to be open. It's not the only practice that invites such an attitude, but it's one of the ancient favorites, and it helps me. It can be a source of healing and hope—a way of saying yes to life.

In the midst of pain or sadness, in view of tragedy or even in its grip, one can say yes to the gifts of life and to the very fact of existence—to the surprise that life just is. What matters is whether we can feel it, think about it, and speak it.

In the end, the important question is not to whom do you pray, or even *do you pray*? The important question is:

Can we open ourselves to the embrace of compassion and hope? Can we extend that embrace to others, to the world? Can we extend the embrace of compassion and hope to life, to all that is? Whatever happens, can we embrace our yes? Over and over, yes! Amen.

ⁱ Laurel Hallman, "Images for Our Lives," Berry Street Essay, delivered June 26, 2003, in Boston, and printed in *Unitarian Universalism Selected Essays* 2003, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 2003, p. 28.