

In The Spirit of Prayer  
Allison Claire June 24, 2018

When I first started attending Unitarian Universalist services, I noticed that the minister or worship leader would often say, “Please join me in the spirit of prayer and meditation.” Not, “Please join me in prayer or meditation” — but “*in the spirit of* prayer and meditation.” Which is like saying, please join me in something that’s NOT prayer or meditation, so don’t freak out, but “in the spirit” of prayer. It’s similar to the way we UUs say “the Sprit of Life and Love that some of us call God.” Because others of us are uncomfortable with God language, either on principle or because of connotations from other faith traditions. And many of us are ambivalent about prayer for the same reasons.

I actually think the phrase “in the spirit of prayer” is quite wonderful. It creates an opportunity for prayerful engagement for those who would otherwise resist the invitation to pray. And it invites all of us to consider, what *is* the “spirit of prayer,” its essence? Perhaps an opening of the deepest self, a lifting up of one’s heart to connection with the Universe, a willingness to be touched by whatever is holy. Whether that is a mystical experience involving a higher or deeper power outside the self, or

an entirely psychological process within the self, it can nourish and sustain us in ways we deeply and truly need, either way.

So we often come together as a congregation “in the spirit of prayer.” Which works for me. And yet. . . the first time I heard Rev. Lucy say, simply, “Will you pray with me?” — tears rushed to my eyes and my heart broke open. I hadn’t even realized that I was waiting for that exact invitation.

“Will you pray with me?” is a bold thing to say in a UU congregation. It risks alienating people who object to the idea of prayer that they brought in the door with them. But it goes right to the heart. It’s the most direct invitation possible. No grammatical roundabouts to distance ourselves from the experience. No pretense of plausible deniability that what we are doing is . . . actually. . . praying. Doesn’t praying just mean: Opening the Self to Mystery. Lifting up the heart to the Spirit of Life. Connecting what is deepest within us to what is greatest outside of us. Letting ourselves experience — or at least opening to possibility of experiencing — ourselves as part of the interdependent Web of Being.

\*\*\*

I grew up in a liberal Christian family, and I was taught to pray as a child. There was grace before meals, bedtime prayers, the Lords Prayer, and lots of other prayers that were recited at church. Prayers of thanksgiving and of confession, prayers of petition. Many of them were just beautiful. (Some of them, though, were kind of weird.) And I was also taught — and I'm grateful that I was raised in a tradition that taught — that I could pray in any way that seemed natural to me, just talk to God and tell Him what was on my heart. And I did that. And I have to tell you, I felt connected to a Loving Divine Parent and IT WAS GOOD. A personal relationship with God, with an Almighty God who created everything and was in charge of everything and took a personal interest in every human and heard our individual prayers, that was the foundation for prayer. Prayer, by definition, was talking to Him.

Then I grew up, and I no longer believed in that God, so there was no reason to pray. In time I learned to meditate in the Buddhist tradition, and I explored earth-based spiritual practices. But I didn't pray. What was the point?

What happened next, long before I set foot in a church again or discovered Unitarian Universalism, is that I ended up in a recovery program to deal with substance abuse. That's a whole

other story. Let's just say that addiction kicked my butt at a young age, and I was lucky enough to find recovery over 3 decades ago. The problem at the very beginning of my sobriety was that my life literally depended on this recovery fellowship, but they wanted me to pray. Reliance on what they called a "Higher Power" is at the core of all 12-step recovery programs, and development of a prayer and meditation practice is central. I learned that this "Higher Power" they talked about could be anything I wanted. I didn't have to believe in the God of my childhood, I just needed to learn to rely on something outside my own ego and willpower. It could be Nature, or the Power of Love, or the truth of the Dharma. So far, so good. But it still seemed to me that the idea of prayer inherently required a specific kind of higher power — one I couldn't accept. All powerful. All knowing. All that.

At the very least, it seemed to me that prayer required a prior understanding of precisely what my higher power was. I had the idea — maybe because I'm the daughter of a theologian — that I needed to figure out the nature of my Higher Power *intellectually* before I could figure out how to pray. After all, if prayer is talking to God — or whatever you want to substitute for "God" — didn't I need to know who or what I was addressing, before I could know what to say and how to say it? And if my understanding of

the Ultimate didn't involve an entity that could hear me, hear and respond to my little individual voice, then what was the point?

Overthinking has often been my downfall. (I bet you're not shocked to hear that!) And in my experience, overthinking is not only frequently counterproductive, but can be dangerous when it comes to matters of the Heart and the Spirit. I am forever grateful to the wise, sober folk who told me gently, over and over, that I could choose to quit the debating society and just try prayer without figuring it out in advance. After all, I don't need to understand exactly how electricity works to turn on the lights, or understand the physics of buoyancy to learn to swim. I could learn to pray a whole new way, just by expressing what was in my heart and soul *whether or not* anything could hear my prayers.

Because I was desperate, I gave it a try. And it helped me stay sober. It helped me get out of the prison of my own ideas, the prison of my attachment to doing everything my own way, for myself and by myself, with Intellect leading. Prayer opened me, and when I opened, the Spirit of Life could come in.

So here's what it was like for me then, and what it's like now.

The recovery meetings I attended at the beginning all closed by holding hands in a circle and reciting the Lords Prayer. Hell no, I was not going to do that! But I needed the group. So I would stand there in the circle, and while they recited the Lord's Prayer I would imagine us as a grove of redwood trees, connected underground and reaching together toward the sky. That was a really good prayer.

There were other prayers I was taught in my recovery program that I didn't like for one reasons or another — sexist language or assumptions about God that I didn't agree with — so I started treating them like texts in a foreign language (which they were, basically.) I became a translator. I rewrote the prayers so that they could be mine. Like all translators, I really tried to capture whatever was most essential in the original, and express it in words and images that I could relate to. I still use this process of translation sometimes.

Increasingly, though, I don't feel the need to rewrite what others have written — even if it's not exactly how I would have put it. Honestly, the world is so full of fantastic prayers, from so many traditions, that I am willing to bet every single one of you could find some that don't push your buttons! When I come across a prayer that moves me, but uses religious language that's

problematic in some way, I try to approach it as I would a poem from another time or culture. That way I can just let the words open me.

Prayers can be poems, and poems can be prayers. My prayer practice is full of poetry that was not necessarily written with any religious intent, but that I use as prayer: Poems that express my soul's yearnings. Poems that make my heart rise up in my throat. They become prayer when I read them with prayerful intention. That's the key to all prayer, in my experience — It's all about intention. Reading poetry aloud is particularly good for praying, even if I am alone in a room. Something about experiencing the resonance of my own voice in my body, and simultaneously hearing the words given voice, takes the poem deeper, to my holy place.

Singing does that too. Our hymnals are full of great prayers. "Comfort Me," which we sang together this morning, is one of my favorites. I change up the words when I pray, according to my need or inspiration: Comfort me. Open Me. Move In Me. Move *Through* Me. Spirit of Life, Move through me!

Poems, songs, postures, dances — all can be ways to pray, when done with prayerful intent. But the prayers that are the

most heartfelt, for me, are always the ones that I just blurt out, to give voice to my need or gratitude or awe.

The writer Ann Lamott says that the three essential prayers are Help, Thanks, and Wow. I think that's right. Whenever I cry out in my pain or loneliness for help, that's a prayer. When evening comes and I say "Thank you Universe for the Delta breeze!" that's a prayer. When I stand gazing up at Half Dome in the moonlight and whisper "Woooooow," that's a prayer. These are prayers because they are direct expressions of my truest self, offered up. When I get too wrapped up in ideas about prayer, overthinking my way right out of genuine spiritual experience, I remind myself that all it takes is "Help." Or "Thanks." Or "Wow." Kids know how to do this instinctively, even if they've they've been raised by atheist wolves or UUs and have never been taught to pray. Help, Thanks, Wow is a great template for spiritual practice with children, which is a topic for another day. Stay tuned, RE families.

I wrestle with prayers of petition, with what to ask for in prayer. I don't pray for stuff, or for specific outcomes to situations. I may not know what "God" is, but I'm quite sure its not a Cosmic Santa Claus. So I don't pray for parking spaces, or for a miracle cure for the friend who is dying far too young. Instead I pray for



openness. For willingness. I pray for the courage to do the next right thing. I pray that I may see what I need to see, including about myself (which is not always pretty). And I pray for others, that they may be comforted, that they may be safe, that they may know peace. I pray for our Planet. I say these prayers not because I think they'll persuade God to swoop in and rescue anyone, but because the act of praying opens *me*, and prepares me to be a channel for love and justice.

I don't discount the possibility that the prayers themselves have some kind of power, contribute somehow to the healing energy of the Universe, but I can't know if that's true or how it works. My whole point is that I don't need to. Prayer isn't a performance for a Divine audience, and it's not a means to an end.

If any of you have a sense of a God or of some benevolent power that listens to you, literally or metaphorically, by all means speak to Her! But if you don't, even if you find that idea preposterous, that doesn't mean that prayer is irrelevant. I've shared my own experience with prayer not as any kind of model, but just as an illustration of how meaningful a prayer practice can be for non-theists as well as for theists.

I pray not so that God will hear me, but because I need to give voice to my Soul. I *need* to pray — not because God has ears, but because I have a voice. As the writer Mark Nepo has said, “it is the speaking of one’s heart that makes a human being human. For even if no one hears us, it is the act of speaking that that frees us by letting the spirit swim and fly through the world.”

I for one don’t believe in the kind of God that hears and answers prayers, but I do believe in a power of love and justice and healing that runs through the entire interdependent Web. Prayer helps me to connect to that source, and to align myself with it. It’s as if prayer were a kind of yoga, using words and voice rather than body and breath to connect energetically within myself and to the universe, and to align myself so that my own natural energy can flow unobstructed and in harmony with the rest of Creation. I pray not because a God is listening, but because my voice needs to speak, and my heart needs to open, and my Spirit needs to resonate with the Spirit of the Universe. I pray not to summon a power above and beyond myself, but to open myself ever more deeply, to summon from within myself the power to be a force for healing in the world.

As the painter Henri Matisse once said, “I don’t know whether I believe in God or not. I think, really, I’m some sort of Buddhist.

But the essential thing is to put oneself in a frame of mind which is close to that of prayer.”

The writer Annie Dillard put it this way:

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega, it is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blinding note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

Friends, will you pray with me?

Spirit of Life and Love, open us.

Open our eyes, that we may see what we need to see.

Open our minds, that we may know what we need to know.

Open our hearts, that we may feel what we need to feel.

Open us each to our own tenderest need, and to our deepest wisdom.

Open us to the needs of each other, of all our kindred, and of the Earth.

Open us to your power of healing, which expresses itself  
as Love, which manifests itself as Justice.

Spirit of Life, Help Us.

[Pause]

Thank you.

[Pause]

Wow.

Blessed Be and Amen.