

Embracing the Possibility of Prayer

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Sunday, September 19, 2021

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento, in person and online

Hymns: #1000, Morning Has Come; #123, Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; #298, Wake Now, My Senses.

Special Music: Ave Maria (a prayer to the Virgin Mary), by Vladimir Vavilov, often attributed to Giulio Caccina; Rev. Cynthia Davis, cello; Dr. Irina Tchantceva, piano. Piano: Abide with Me, John Gardner; Amazing Grace, arr. Mark Hays.

Chalice Lighting

We kindle this flame, the symbol of our shared search for truth and understanding.

In times of celebration, may its brightness reflect our gratitude.

In times of need, let its warmth renew our connections to one another and the Spirit of Life.

In times of confusion or uncertainty, may its fire bring us courage and commitment.

In times of change, let its light illuminate our values.

May our values call us forward into better days, together.

Sermon

Last month in her sermon for us about the importance of Spiritual Practices in Traumatic Times, our guest minister Sharon Wylie urged us to take at least 20 minutes every day during which our minds can settle down through some practice of our choosing. It's not about finding happiness or even relieving anxiety, she said. The purpose of the practice is to build resilience in our bodies and our minds. Building resilience is a way to help ourselves and our families come through the ongoing traumas of our times. Rev. Sharon recommended some practices to us. Her examples included sitting in silence and noticing your breath; walking, riding, or rolling in your neighborhood; reading sacred texts or poetry; keeping a journal. And she included prayer—whether spoken aloud, contemplated silently, or written in a journal. All of these are, by nature, not efficient or productive activities. They are not a means to an end. Yet all of them can build resilience.

In this month of September, our Soul Matters theme is embracing possibility. Today let's consider—let's embrace—the possibility of prayer.

The word “prayer” means many things to different people. You don't have to hold a traditional God idea or use any particular words to express the longing and hopes of your heart. Along these lines, there's an old joke that says: “Unitarian Universalists are the people who pray to whom it may concern.”

Of course, too many people think a prayer is a formula that you can use to get what you want. Every now and then, a book rises to the top of the best seller list that prescribes a simple sentence of prayer, or a simplistic attitude about prayer, in order to bring prosperity, a new job, a nice house, or other good results in your life. In this approach, God or the Universe is like an Automated Teller Machine, and the book for sale will show you the secret PIN code. Books by these peddlers of prosperity have been around for generations, and I expect they are now selling their gospel on YouTube as well. I really don't like them. I much prefer the spiritual teachers who can show humility about what prayer can do, and what it cannot do. For example, Nanette Sawyer is a pastor at a Presbyterian church in Chicago.

She writes: “I regularly pray for things that are unlikely to come about quickly, if at all. I pray for world peace. I pray for just resolutions to major geo-political situations. I pray for reduced gun violence and for equity and fairness between all people. I pray for an end to fake news, and for increased understanding/ between me and my extended family about social issues. I pray that my loved ones will not die.”¹ To all that Nanette Sawyer prays for, I say, amen!

Unitarian Universalism is a religious tradition which has been understood as non-dogmatic, liberal, and open. So, we dare not be dogmatic about what prayer must be or cannot be. Our tradition explores many ways of engaging with the mystery of life, the power of nature, and the challenge of being human. And prayer helps many of us do that.

Since I have been a minister, I have had people ask me to *pray for* them or their loved ones, to say a prayer *with* them, or to hold their hands while *they* said a prayer. Whether in our congregation or in some other part of my life, when a person says: “Will you pray for me?” I don’t refuse. I don’t see it as an unrealistic request. When someone says *please pray for me*, this is what it means to me. It means: “Please remember me, think of me, send me strength.” When I say, “Yes, I will,” it doesn’t mean that I am agreeing with all of their theological beliefs, or their opinions about anything. I am saying, “Yes, I hear you. I care about you. I *will* remember you. I will be thinking about you and sending my hopes for you. I wish you the best and yes, I am praying for you.”

Prayer is a way to bear witness to what is going on. Not to fix it, but to bear witness. Lately I’ve been praying for the people of Afghanistan—for the Afghani Americans I know here in Sacramento and for those who are at risk over there—women and girls, journalists, teachers, artists and activists. I’m asking for safety and courage for them. I’m praying to know how I can stretch myself to help them. Then I cast my mind’s eye to other places of danger and oppression in the world and pray for the people who are there. I can’t say what it might change to pray like this, but at least it means that people are not forgotten. Perhaps the only way to hold so much of the heartbreak of our world... is to hold it in the gentleness of prayer.

The late A. Powell Davies served as minister to All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC, from 1944 to 1957. Davies wrote and spoke of prayer as “the language of the heart.” Prayer is a way to connect the mystery of the world beyond us to the mystery that exists inside us. He said our prayers should be realistic, meaning that they should stay *close to life*. He wrote: “Under the strain of difficult conditions, or in severe loss or bereavement, or when [we are moved or] deeply stirred” by something of beauty or goodness, “there is something within us that *cries out for expression*.” Make our prayers in the language of the heart. Keep our prayers close to life.

Whenever I am co-leading a service where children will be present, I make sure to include a prayer which I will name as a prayer. As any UU child grows up, if they find themselves in any other kind of religious community or setting, and if there is prayer in that setting, I would not want it to be a foreign thing to them. I wouldn’t want them to feel we have denied them our own forms of prayer as Unitarian Universalists. I want a child who grows up here to know that they can make their own claim to prayer if they wish. In our faith tradition, we can have our own perspectives, our own words, our own practices.

The joke says we are the people who pray to whom it may concern. Well, why not? I don’t want an obsession with certainty to hold me back from speaking the language of the heart. If I were certain that everything would come out all right, I wouldn’t feel the need to express my

longings, fears and hopes in prayer. I wouldn't need to give thanks for the gifts of my life if I thought the good things in my life are guaranteed for me and always at my command. But they're not, so I give thanks.

When I pray *to whom it may concern*, I remember that I don't have everything under control. I don't have it all figured out. And when I pray, I find it comforting to imagine that the language of *my* heart is of interest and concern to the Spirit of Life and the Source of Love. It helps me to imagine that my expressions of care and hope are being received by some power greater than myself. I'm not sure my prayers can change anything. But I trust that they can change me.

The California writer Anne Lamott is both irreverent and soulful in her essays about spirituality and about prayer in particular. For example, she writes: "We can pray, 'Hello? Is there anyone there?'" We can pray any expression that comes from the heart. We can do this *out loud* or quietly in our thoughts. Prayer is not a showy thing, she says, but a private one, an intimate one. Lamott says that even if we are praying with other people, it is an intimate moment. One of her books offers a basic structure to prayer, only three categories to remember, which are contained in the title of her book. It is *Help, Thanks, Wow*. My own practice follows this, more or less, but I go in the other direction: Wow, Thanks, and Help. When I pray, I settle into a chair and start with naming some things that could fall under the *Wow* category. And usually for any *Wow* kind of thing I could list, I also speak my *Thanks*.

For example... I am alive on this/ new day. Thank you. I made it through the night. I can see blue sky when I look up. Wow. Yesterday I had a home-cooked meal. And last night I was moved and entertained by a play. After 18 months of lockdown, I was finally able to see a play live on a real stage. Wow. And for the past 18 months I've been able to stay connected with my community by something called Zoom. Wow. And thank you.

Many of my prayers fall in the category of Help. For myself, I ask for help to be useful for the day, to be true to my values, to have courage when I need it. I pray to not cause harm. I may think about a challenge coming up, or a challenging person, and I breathe deeply into the situation, giving space for myself and the other person. The best part of this category is when my Help is blended with my Thanks, and that happens when I think about the people I care about. For example, I call to mind people from this congregation to whom I can send love, healing, or strength. I call to mind close friends of mine and their children. Bless them, I say, and I mean it. Bless them. I call to mind my family members, especially the ones I like a lot. But sometimes I think of those relatives about whom I feel some pain or just don't like very much. Maybe once or twice a month, they pop into my mind. I add them to the list and pray for them quickly enough so that my resentments about them don't rise up and intrude on my prayer time. I send blessings to them and wish them well. It may not change them, but it can't hurt. And it might change *me*. It might begin to open my heart and give me freedom. Help, Thanks, Wow.

I would like to invite you into a brief exercise with me right now. I will mention one of those three categories of prayer and then pause while you think of one or two things that you would put in that category. I'll pause for three deep breaths after I mention each category to give you a moment to reflect. Help, Thanks, Wow.

First, Help: Bring to mind one or two things where you would ask for help, guidance, peace, or courage. [PAUSE.] So may it be.

Next, Thanks. Consider one or two things for which you are thankful. [PAUSE.] So may it be.

And finally, Wow. Consider one or two things that you can celebrate or behold with wonder. [PAUSE.] So may it be.

Thank you for doing this with me. Thank you for being here as we do this together.

I hope you will consider the possibility of setting aside some time for prayer in your life. If you prefer, call it a time of reflection. If it would be helpful, think about structuring the practice by the outline of Help, Thanks and Wow. (Or: Wow, Thanks, and Help.) Of course, the language of your heart is *your* language. It should resemble and reflect life as it really is.

You are invited to welcome into your time of reflection any laments and fears; with needs, longings and hopes—yours and those of others. Also be sure to take time to include your gratitude, celebration, and wonder, and that of others. And fill your soul with loving thoughts for all those you care about and those who care about you. Send them wishes, blessings, loving thoughts. Send your blessings to them. Bless them, bless your life, and bless this world we share. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

ⁱ Nanette Sawyer, “Living the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary: September 26,” *Christian Century*, September 8, 2021, p. 21