

PRAYER?

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
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Call To Worship: "The Summer Day," by Mary Oliver

"Who made the world?

...

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?"

Readings: from *Unitarian Universalist Views of Prayer*

In a desperate moment, I cried out for help, and I was answered. Some years later I am still a humanist—I believe that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now. Yet I am a humanist who prays, who begins each morning with devotional readings and a time of silence and prayer. Why do I do this?

I need a quiet time.

I need to express my gratitude.

I need humility.

I pray because—alone—I am not enough and also I am too much.

I express gratitude for the gift of aliveness.

I assert my oneness with you and all humankind and all creation.

When I pray, I acknowledge that God is not me. (Roger Cowan)

The best advice on prayer I have yet found was given long ago by Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said that prayer was nothing to flaunt about or show off. It is a personal matter, an intimate aspect of our living, and not the public proof of our righteousness. Prayer begins in the heart, that secret place within us all.

Other living traditions have taught me that prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this Mystery to dwell. Prayer is a covenant we make to be of service. Prayer is a way of living with the very questions that perplex us.

Prayer is an opening of the human heart. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said, "Pray like this," simply, from the heart. (Daniel Budd)

Sermon

~~~ A little girl floats in an inner tube down the river that runs through her farm. She looks up, and suddenly thinks, "I'm me. And there's a circle of trees around me and around that is a circle of hills and around that a circle of the sky. If I float all the way down this river, I'll always stay right in the middle of the circle of trees and the circle of hills, and the circle of sky."

~~~ A woman with a cancer diagnosis lies on a living room floor, surrounded by seven friends, to each of whom she has given a gift she made herself. They sing; they weep; they speak deep words of faith and healing. The spirit builds and shines and swirls and fills them. As they finish, they "sweep" the energy through the woman's feet and the little dog who has been napping there lets out a very loud "yip!"

~~~ A family of four lives out in the boondocks way southwest of town, far from the lights and glare of the city. In 1997, Hale-Bopp Comet made its majestic appearance in the Western sky, on its way from who-knows-where, heading for who-knows-where. This secular humanist family, always with a full plate of chores, errands, church business and work-related projects, stopped a moment each evening, filled with awe at the hugeness, the mysteriousness of this flaming visitor.

~~~ A man and a woman, one straight and the other gay, meet each other through a cherished mutual friend at a social occasion. They blink at the connection when they shake hands and smile into each other's eyes. The relatedness is strengthened as they chat, reinforced in the farewell hug. They get in touch and go to a children's play, then have a "casual" dinner. The talking flows impossibly easily and they both feel completely themselves, inspired, centered, opened, laughing, filled with an unlikely affection.

Prayer is as matter-of-fact as family life, as everyday as meeting in someone's home. It happens in this world, in this time, in these bodies.

It is also as staggering as falling in love, for prayer connects us with the shimmering, boundless, unfathomable Mystery that is the heart of all. In prayer, we understand what infinitesimally small specks we are in the cosmos, and we are filled with humility, gratitude and joy for the miracle of existence. At the same time, it grounds us, bringing us closer to the strange truth that each of us is, at each moment, in the middle of a circle that is in the middle of a circle that is in the middle of a circle. Those circles overlap and are connected.

Prayer can be a discipline, consciously and regularly practiced: think of our Buddhist prayer song, "May we be filled with loving kindness...may we be whole." And it can spring upon us as surprise, surrounding us with awakening light. It can be found everywhere: according to one author, it can take the shape of questioning, wonder, silence, concentration, relatedness, perceptiveness, grace and wisdom. (Fittipaldi) I would add love and laughter.

It can be a part of almost any human activity. But it is always done with focus, intended by us or sprung upon us by surprise, and our ordinary egos are

somehow out of the way. Prayer is mindfulness, a knowing that rises above our usual worries about yesterday and anxiety about things to come. To be prayerful, we must be awake to the world. One of my favorite prayers of all times, one I have memorized and recited often to myself, is by the Quaker, Douglas Steere:

O God rouse my dispersed spirit from its stupefied torpor. Wake the sleeper in me and kindle such a fire in my heart that I shall never be content with anything short of Thee. Re-light in me the flame of a steady life of prayer. O God, keep open, keep open, my mind, my heart, my soul. (Steere, 4)

“Keep open, keep open, my mind, my heart, my soul.” How moving I find that, for I know that my openness is directly related to my prayerfulness, which is then directly related to my centeredness and ability to move constructively and creatively through the world. Openness leads me to the place the humanist in our reading reached when he says he prays because “Alone—I am not enough and also I am too much.” Prayer and ordinary life are part of the same reality, when we are at our non-ego-centered best.

Unitarian Universalists can have problems with the concept of prayer. One of the problems is exemplified by the Quaker prayer I like so much: its author addresses “something,” and he calls it God. Many of us in our liberal, skeptical religion understandably reject such praying, because it looks simplistic, falling back on old supernaturalisms. We reject talking to some extra-terrestrial being that can bestow upon us that which we are not strong or capable enough to find for ourselves.

What if we shifted our thinking about what words represent in prayer? When my prayer life and I are working well together—when I am awake—I, personally, have a passionate, mystical, extremely intense relationship to The Reality That Informs All. Sometimes, I use the nickname God, more often I talk to Mary, who represents the Divine Feminine to me. Other times, I use words and concepts found in my limited imagination, knowing that they, too, are utterly inadequate. BUUF member Jeanette Ross once wrote four versions of the Lord’s Prayer. The four beginnings are: “Our Father,” “Our Mother,” “Our Universal Chairperson,” and “Our—whoever. I don’t know who I’m addressing, isn’t this silly, who’s out there? What’s out there?” Those represent four perfectly human ways one could address The Great Mystery.

And what if we just shrugged at the occasional addressing of something outside ourselves, knowing that that’s what humans do, sometimes, when they are passionately trying to express themselves? Here’s what my friend Jim Wickman, a UU minister, has to say about this:

Remember the chase scenes in old movies? Wallace Beery [or someone] would be driving a beat-up car, running away from the bad guys. The

road is full of ruts and washouts. The bad guys are gaining. What does he say? He says "C'mon Betsy" or something like that. He doesn't stop for existential analysis of the logic content of what he's saying. He talks to the car as though it's able to hear and comprehend and respond. He doesn't think he's being silly. He needs all the help he can get right then. He says things aloud to make them real to him.

And when the bridge collapses just after he's crossed over, taking the bad guys and their car down into the gorge and dumping them into the raging river, he pats the dashboard and says, "Thanks, old friend." He needs to acknowledge that the car was part of his escape from disaster, and saying it is a way of making that acknowledgement real. (Wickman, 2)

It would have been silly and egocentric for the hero to have said, "Come on self, high example of human nobility, you can do it by your superior driving skill, you don't need anything else! Thank you, self." It is not a bad thing when we humans acknowledge that we are a part of some greater Reality. Perhaps we should forgive ourselves and others for using terms and phrases which only point at a tiny glimpse of that reality.

For the Reality, incomprehensible and staggeringly mysterious, is also a perfectly ordinary part of our lives. It is part of us, and we are part of it, however we may choose to imagine it or name it.

The Quakers have a particularly good grasp of the prayerfulness of the ordinary. Back in seminary, I had been reading Thomas Kelly, who says, "There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. ...we may be thinking, discussing, ...meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within... we may also be in prayer and adoration." (Kelly, 35) My longing to be one with the Unity of All made me ache to be like him. But I wasn't. So I conceived a plan, whereby I would check in with God on the hour. Silly and unspiritual as it sounds, it kind of works. There are bells and watch beeps and deadlines, often on the hour. I would just stop internally and speak a few words of humility and gratitude to myself. I still try to do it, although I am no Thomas Kelly.

But the practice holds in me the knowledge that driving down Chinden Boulevard to work; kneeling in grateful, passionate prayer to the Ultimate; communing with the fairies and the trees in the grove are all parts of the same whole. There is no supernatural, because all is One. Mindful awareness of any part brings us closer to the Whole, when I get my goal-oriented self out of the way.

The little girl on her familiar river figured that out, without analysis or logic. The family who enjoyed the mystical moment with the comet have little time or inclination for devotional practices of the traditional kind, but their wonder and feelings of awe were prayer. The woman and man pierced by a robust, unlikely sense of loving connection find prayer in their laughter and

their surprised moments. Mary Oliver tells us she doesn't know what prayer is, but we're pretty sure she knows a lot more than we do about it.

If we pay attention, breathing in and out in our intimately overlapping circles, we can feel the greater whole that prayer addresses. Prayer is comfortingly ordinary, like family dinner. And it is also staggering and immense—we can look at that sky, and try to imagine what is beyond it; we can open our hearts to the universal human experiences of love and poignancy, revealed to us by our joy and sadness.

Our forefather, Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in the middle of the 19th century, said this:

Let us, then, learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to our heart; this, namely; that the Highest dwells with us.... (294) ...within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. (281)

One of our 21st-century Unitarian Universalist reflectors on prayer speaks a little more accessibly:

Other living traditions have taught me that prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this Mystery to dwell. Prayer is a covenant we make to be of service. Prayer is a way of living with the very questions that perplex us. (Daniel Budd)

It is my cherished hope that we may all come to that place—where we know how fragile our life and loves are, and feel the humility of humanness; where we know, too, that the highest nobility dwells within and among us; where we feel the stupefying awe of being part of creation, with comets and rivers and Jesus and grasshoppers and love. May our dispersed spirits be roused from their torpors, and may we, in our journeys, become healed and whole.

Closing Words

Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart. *Mahatma Gandhi*

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