

Preface

Prayer. For multiple reasons, many Unitarian Universalists are conflicted about prayer.

For the atheist or the agnostic; or for the one whose ultimate truth resides in ever-unfolding rose petals of mystery that are still further enveloped in even deeper mystery – pray to whom? Pray to what?

For the theist who applies his or her faculties of reason to the apparent random nature of life's experience; leading to the understanding that, for example, bad things do, in fact, happen to good people – what would be the point of prayer? ... pray why? Is prayer anything more than a selfish request for specific actions to be done for one's behalf?possibly at the expense of others? Is prayer in this way even moral or ethical?

Writer and counselor Katherine Woodward Thomas writes -

The holiest moments of our lives are when we make the choice to turn towards life, rather than away, in the face of all of life's toppling and shocking losses. To say a prayer that aligns us with all that is good, loving, beautiful and true in the midst of the rubble and the despair, and rather than ask God to make this better for us, to declare instead who we will be in the face of it. (Katherine Woodward Thomas, *Parabola*, Fall 2014, p19)

We can pray in many different ways. Can meditation be prayer? Can our life's actions be prayer? Can our work for justice be prayer? Can mindfully tending to the garden be prayer?

Can traditional forms of prayer be altered to serve an expanded understanding and awareness of the practice?

One traditional framework for prayer involves four components: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Adoration – praise and worship (acknowledgement of worth) of the Holy and Sacred - God, the God of many names, Nature, Interconnectedness, the Goddess, Mother Earth.

Confession – acknowledgement of our imperfection as an organic aspect of our inherent nature

Thanksgiving – an expression of our gratitude often despite circumstances where it may be difficult for one to be grateful

Supplication – an expression of what we hope to be; an expression of our aspirations.

Adoration. Confession. Thanksgiving. Supplication

In various traditions, a common theme emerges with respect to prayer. the act of prayer isn't something one does as an individual, it's something one participates in as part of a larger whole.

Writer Laura Marjorie Miller alludes to this when she speaks about praying the rosary. She writes:

Whenever you pray a rosary, you drop into an ocean current of rosaries being said all around the world, one that has been said for many ages. The rosary in a sense is always going, and you pour your own voice into that river. (Laura Marjorie Miller, *Parabola*, Spring 2015, p67)

And Buddhist monk Shunryu Suzuki notes this same intention with zazen, sitting meditation. He says:

So when I sit, you sit; everything sits with me. That is our zazen. [That is our sitting meditation.] When you sit, everything sits with you. (Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, p95)

Prayer: Adoration

Marcus Aurelius writes:

Everything harmonizes with me, which is harmonious to you, O Universe. For me nothing is too early or too late if it is in due time for you. Everything is fruit to me that your seasons bring, O Nature: from you are all things, in you are all things, to you all things return. (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, p23)

“The Stars are Dancing” – Om Prakash

The stars are dancing tonight
While the moon sits in her golden hammock,
Swaying back and forth
To the rhythm of celestial voices.

The Beloved is full of rapture,
Dancing worlds and stars into being,
Drunk with the wine of passion
And filling the heavens with song.

Do not sit alone in the dark
While creation sings three-part harmony.
Dance, my friends.
Dance wildly,
Sing joyfully,
Fill your heart with the beauty of the Beloved

In The Spirit of Prayer
01/07/18 - UUMAN

Dave Dunn

As the Beloved turns your soul to light.

(Om Prakash, *UU World*, Fall 2012, p17)

Prayer: Confession

“A Confession” by Tatjana Odins

I hated going to church as a child. The Mass was dull and uninspiring, the building dark and ominous. I never sensed the presence of God there. I wanted to stay at home with my father and read the Sunday comics, and play outdoors, which was where I felt closest to God. My mother, however, was determined to give her children a proper [church] upbringing.

One Sunday morning when I was nine, after a particularly heated argument with my mother, I prayed to God to give me a sign that I could stay home from church from then on and build a relationship with Him on my own terms.

The next week when we went to Mass, we found a heap of smoldering rubble where the church had been. The only part of the building left standing was the bell tower.

Terrified by the power of my prayer, I shied away from God. Though I have since rekindled my relationship with Him, to this day I feel responsible for burning down the church. (Tatjana Odins, *The Sun*, October 2014, p33)

Taken from the Rumi poem “Childhood Friends”....

there is nothing worse
Than thinking you are well enough.
More than anything, self-complacency
blocks the workmanship.

Put your vileness up to a mirror and weep.
Get that self-satisfaction flowing out of you!

Satan thought, “I am better than Adam,”
and that “better than” is still strongly in us.

Your stream of water may look clean,
but there’s unstirred matter on the bottom.
Your sheikh can dig a side channel
that will drain that waste off.

Trust your wound to a teacher’s surgery.
Flies collect on a wound. They cover it,
those flies of your self-protecting feelings,
your love for what you think is yours.

Let a teacher wave away the flies
and put a plaster on the wound.
Don’t turn your head. Keep looking
At the bandaged place. That’s where the light enters you.

And don’t believe for a moment that you’re healing yourself.
(Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, p139)

Prayer: Thanksgiving

Early in his life, the legendary jazz saxophonist John Coltrane struggled with alcoholism and heroin addiction. It was a struggle to find purpose and meaning in his life. In the liner notes of his 1965 album “A Love Supreme” he wrote that:

During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means

and privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through His grace. ALL PRAISE TO GOD...HIS WAY IS IN LOVE, THOUGHT WHICH WE ALL ARE. IT IS TRULY A LOVE SUPREME. (John Coltrane, liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, Impulse Records)

While in the studio for the recording of the album's final song, he hand wrote a prayer that he entitled "Psalm." Yet rather than speak these words of this prayer on the recording itself, he plays the words with his saxophone.

As we take today's offering, we will hear his prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving along with his recording.

Psalm – A Love Supreme by John Coltrane

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kOu61AtFVk&list=RD8kOu61AtFVk>

"I am Grateful" by Richard Gilbert

For the chill of an autumnal morning,
Reminding me I am alive,
I give humble thanks.

For the warmth of community against the cold indifference of the world
I raise grateful hands.

For the grace of the sun setting quietly on a still lake and rolling hills
I say, thank you.

For a past that I have not yet forgotten though it recedes all too quickly,
I give glad thanks.

For the present that I can grasp, nettles and all,
I utter a prayer of praise.

For an unknown future that both tantalizes and threatens,
I am grateful.

Prayer: Supplication

“Love Dogs” – Rumi

One night a man was crying,
Allah! Allah!
His lips grew sweet with the praising, until a cynic said,
“So! I have heard you calling out, but have you ever gotten a response?”

The man had no answer to that. He quit praying and fell into a confused
sleep. He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls, in a thick green foliage.

“Why did you stop praising?”
“Because I’ve never heard anything back.”
“This longing you express is the return message. The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union. Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.
Give your life to be one of them.
(Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, p155)

“My Grandmother’s Flesh” by Lakota holy man John Fire Lame Deer

The medicine man had given me a gourd. In it were forty small squares of flesh which my grandmother had cut from her arm with a razor blade. I had seen her do it. Blood had been streaming down from her shoulder to her elbow as she carefully put down each piece of skin on a handkerchief, anxious not to lose a single one....Someone dear to me had undergone pain, given me something of herself, part of her body to help me pray and make me stronghearted. How could I be afraid with so many people - living and dead - helping me? (Lame Deer, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, p3)

Prayer Ritual - Dave

And now, we will take the time to help one another, and help ourselves, through prayer. As Rev. Lon Ray Call says, “Prayer doesn't change things. - prayer changes people; and people change things.” (Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship That Works*, p. 81)

Yes. Prayer focuses our intention in an effort to change ourselves for the better. If I pray to be more compassionate, I find that during my day, I look for ways to intentionally be more compassionate. If I pray to be more patient, I find that during my day, I remind myself to be more patient.

Yet many of us still feel selfish in asking for things that will benefit us personally through prayer; yet we are more than comfortable in extending a helping hand to others.

This morning, and as a part of a weeklong prayer ritual, we hope to address this dilemma.

In the seat in front of you, or nearby, you will find strips of paper and a pencil. On the paper, please anonymously write a supplication – an aspiration, a hope; something for which you need help.

You will not pray for this. Yet this coming week, someone else, someone else sitting in this very room, will pray for this on your behalf. And you will pray from someone else’s supplication on their behalf as well.

And in so doing, we will create “an ocean of current rosaries [and prayers] being said” amongst our community. A “rosary in a sense that will always be going” and we will be “pouring our own voices into that river.”

In a few moments, we will collect your supplications and as you leave today, you will pick a random, sacred supplication from those collected. This week, please pray for that supplication with the devotion as is if one’s very life depended upon that supplication.

Let us begin.

Benediction

“The Four Immeasurables Prayer”

Buddha

May all beings have true happiness;

May all beings be freed from suffering and its causes;

May all beings be one with the highest perfect joy;

May beings dwell in equanimity free from discrimination and attachment;