

THE DEEP HUMANITY OF PRAYER

People often ask me whether or not Unitarian Universalists believe in prayer. My short answer is: “Well, some do and some don’t. That’s the nature of our non-creedal faith, but probably all of us agree on one thing—that prayer is an intensely personal matter, not an exercise to be turned on and off at the pressure of any tradition or minister!”

This morning I want to distinguish between prayer that seems abusive to humans as well as the divine and prayer which seems useful and healthy to both realms.

There are at least two narcissistic modes of prayer—one I call manipulation and the other, breast-beating. Over the years, I’ve used them both, especially during my younger years. Perhaps you’ll recognize them as well.

In its crudest form, prayer is an attempt to bribe or cajole a cosmic force into giving us what we want: be it rain from the sky or riches from the lotto, peace of mind or military victory. Our soul leans upon the universe so that it’ll tilt in our favor. Such prayer is basically an effort to manipulate reality without changing ourselves one iota. It reminds me of the kid who used to pray every night for a new bicycle. Then he realized that the Lord doesn’t work that way, so he went out and stole one and then quickly pled for forgiveness.

Well, that wasn’t the way I did it, but, clearly, in my youth, there were times when I tried to jockey the Almighty to produce desirable results: whether on a date, shooting free throws in a basketball game, or taking a crucial school test.

I've grown to find this form of prayer unacceptable on various grounds. First off, it often doesn't work. Pat Robertson, you may remember, once claimed that his prayers caused God to divert a hurricane that was approaching his Virginia headquarters. Now I ask you, where was Robertson when one of the recent Floridian or Honduran "acts of God", let alone Katrina, wrought devastation? Why didn't he fly down to New Orleans and pray like crazy? Or is it only his own property that deserves God's favor? Or doesn't God listen to Pat Robertson anymore? It's all rather puzzling, isn't it, this public praying for your own private needs?

At some juncture in my spiritual maturation, I began to realize that it wasn't God's necessity to mesh with my personal wishes so much as my job to align my life with the values of goodness, with the universe, if you will.

Furthermore, getting God to do something for us often permits us to shirk self-responsibility. In my theology, grace and effort are joined in holy union. Both the divine and human realms need to carry our own fair-share of life's moral load. For my liking, Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer offers about the right balance: "God grant me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I can't change, and the wisdom to know the difference."

So, prayer invariably demands our own human sweat and effort: in fact, sometimes prayer and action are synonymous. As we say every Sunday morning: "and service be our prayer." I think that's what the abolitionist Frederick Douglass meant when he said: "I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." I know that I never felt more prayerful than when I was marching for racial equality from Selma to Montgomery Alabama back in 1965.

And I resonate with the story about a Catholic Worker House in New York City, desperate for more funds to continue their work with the poor. The tradition was to pray to St. Joseph for assistance. They did so for several days with no response, whereupon Dorothy Day and her colleagues marched to St. Patrick's cathedral. There they picketed the statue of St. Joseph. After a short time, Cardinal Spellman felt compelled to come out and deliver the necessary money. My friends, never confuse prayer with passivity.

A second form of prayer I utilized, then outgrew, was what I would call breast-beating. A healthy confession is good for all of us, but no god worthy of the name ever benefits from our self-belittlement nor do we. Sadly, many people still get relief or even kicks from pelting themselves with phrases of "miserable offender" and "there's no health in me." But, instead of groveling, God would prefer that we join forces in evolving a more just and merciful universe.

That reminds me of the story of Ethan Allen, the American patriot, who, after the capture of Ticonderoga, hurried home to his family in Vermont and while there attended a Thanksgiving service. During the long prayer in which the Rev. Dewey was giving all the credit for the victory to the Lord, Allen interrupted: "Parson Dewey, Parson Dewey, Parson Dewey!" At the third call, the minister paused and opened his eyes. "Please, please," said Allen, "mention to the Lord about MY being there!"

Whether our praying is comprised of words or silence or song or action, we earthlings have a critical role to play. We aren't the center of the universe, but we aren't extraneous either. We're partners, full-fledged partners in the interdependent web of existence.

Okay, let's move on to some reflections on the positive force of prayer. In our liberal religion, each of us must make peace with our own evolving grasp of what prayer does and doesn't mean in our daily lives, so here cometh my working notes on the subject as a practicing Unitarian Universalist.

William Tyndale was right on target, I believe, when he said: "I have a solemn regard for the feelings that prompt prayer." That's probably the best place to start talking about healthy prayer. No one who lives deeply, that is religiously, is stranger to the wealth of feelings that prompt prayer: feeling such as grief, joy, hope, love, anger, and gratitude. Authentic prayer, you see, starts not in theory but in feelings, not in the head but in the heart.

Prayer can be heard in the lullaby of the parent nodding over their child, in the wailing of the bereaved, and in the exuberant expression of the singer. As St. Paul describes: prayers are "inarticulate sighs, groans too deep for words." Praying, you see, emerges from our human groans, be they groans of delight or anguish, groans simply too powerful for words.

I remember driving from San Diego to Los Angeles on Christmas eve, 1987, around 8 p.m., shortly after my father died, and, while driving, spilling forth in unchecked tears, memories, and song fragments, soaking in a wide sweep of emotions that my father's life and death evoked in my heart. I don't recall, I may have said some words outloud, but no formal prayer was made. I was simply swimming in an ocean of feelings that prompt prayer.

The choice of praying or not praying, then, in some profound sense, is often not ours to make. We simply "hunger and thirst after righteousness;" we simply dance before

the Ark; we simply gush with tears; we simply walk trembling yet confidently into the Red Sea believing in our desperation that somehow a path will open to us.

Prayer is “deep calling unto deep” as the Psalmist puts it. When we pray, we do something seemingly impossible: we talk to somebody who’s actually not somebody else, but as near to us as our heartbeat. We discover the eternal as a spirit deep within us—a nudge, a comfort, a co-conspirator of sorts. Praying enables us to be accompanied, to proceed unalone.

Again, I suggest that the humanity of prayer precedes the theology of prayer. Prayer isn’t created by thought any more than the wind is made by the weather bureau. We stumble upon exquisite beauty, and we’re driven to exclaim: “God, that’s beautiful!” We discover a startling breakthrough in our love relationship and we break forth into thanksgiving or tears of joy or are driven to our knees.

We feel deep sorrow or fury or frustration and we can only stammer. Sometimes we can’t even speak, we dare not speak, yet the praying still flourishes amid our silence. For, as someone sagely penned: “silence is the language God speaks, and everything else is a bad translation.” Whenever we experience, then exude, these indescribably strong feelings, we’re prompted to prayer of one sort or another, in some form or another...whether or not you even choose to call it prayer.

Let me share a live example of praying as an honest, arduous, soul-deep process. I was visiting a congregant in his twenties, a guy grappling heroically against the relentless erosion of cancer. I spent considerable time with Robert, and over a period of weeks, his humanity of prayer just poured forth roughly as follows:

*There are times I’m so weak that I lose all will and want to throw in the towel.
Other times I’m frozen with terror about my future. And yet underlying all my fear*

and pain and rage abides some hope. No one seems able to either give me hope or take it from me; I just feel it in my very bones. And living or dying, I simply refuse to compromise myself by destroying all shred of hope.

I still have so much to give. Why me? Why now? God damn it! I don't even know if there's a God or not. All I know is that these feelings I'm feeling are my prayers, and I share them outloud because I can't stuff them inside. I need to let them out. I want them to be heard. And I keep tossing them forth whether or not anyone on heaven or earth catches them!

Now there, my friends, is sincere, heartfelt prayer coming right from Robert's gut, the kind of praying we'll never find in the standard books of common prayer. But when we touch such depths, as my parishioner-friend, Robert, was able to touch, when our spirits truly resonate with the deepest wellsprings of joy and sorrow, wonder and gratitude, love and despair, then we're brimming with the feelings that prompt prayer. Indeed, we're praying, however clumsy our words might be, however unorthodox our manner, and whether they're spoken to a power beyond or within.

Naturally, there'll always be those planned prayers that we ministers are asked to deliver at community meetings, or blessings on the spot for family dinners and the like. My aspiration, at all times, is simply to offer fresh sentiments, flowing from the depths of my soul, sometimes full of surprises. Even risks. And why not? If anything, prayer's got to be real rather than rote.

In fact, the Latin root for the word prayer is *precarious*, which reminds us that prayer, the genuine article, remains an uncertain, even scary adventure. Does prayer work? Well, it depends. Sometimes, a person recovers from sickness, sometimes not. Yes, prayer is precarious, just like all living and dying.

Therefore, in times of dire tragedy, I don't pray for a result so much as for resolve, for strength, for hope even when healing is unlikely...and for sufficient love to

fill the room, our hearts, and our tomorrows. I invoke the creative spirit of Infinite Love within, among, and beyond us. And my best praying is mighty short and simple. Long prayers have always telegraphed my anxiety or arrogance. Furthermore, praying, whether alone or with others, isn't the time to get fussy about words. It's not the time to impress humans or overwhelm God with extraneous information. All that's important is that we be honest and heartfelt.

Yes, I also believe in consciously holding people in my thoughts and prayers. I light candles and offer chants on behalf of my sisters and brothers. I believe that our souls generate healing energy. I'm not talking about superstition or magic, but prayer as an act by which we place another's burden in the center of our consciousness.

Of course, prayer may or may not change reality, but it does change those who are praying and being prayed about. Of that I'm sure. Prayer keeps the gift of love flowing, and love keeps the human heart awake and human bonds alive, which is the best we earthlings can ever do anyway.

Taking a quiet moment to hold in conscious love the images and names of those we care about is an act of high religion...so may we do it right now...for a few moments.

One last point: it's my conviction that the spontaneous process of praying should be going on all the time in our lives...if we're going to stay vital, human, yes religious. As the Bible invites: "pray without ceasing." Pray from the soul, while walking and working, dreaming and dancing...yea, every moment of our daily journey.

Then our very breathing becomes one ongoing prayer.

Tom Owen-Towle
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