



TOUCHSTONES

a monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

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Prayer & Meditation

Wisdom Story



Introduction to the Theme

As children, many learned that prayer was petition, asking God for something for ourselves. God becomes the old man in the sky with a long white beard, a cosmic Santa Claus, who can, on a whim, grant or deny our petition.

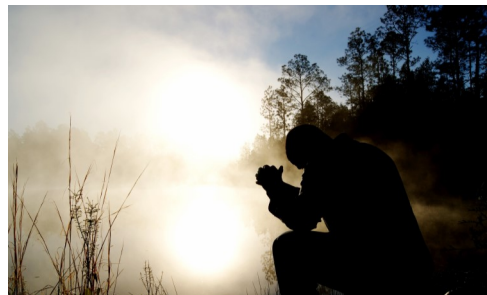
For those who are atheists or agonistics, the idea of prayer may have little value. For others, this narrow idea of prayer as petition seems less than satisfying. Prayer, at its core, is not petitionary. It is relational. Prayer involves cultivating a connection with our deepest selves, with those around us, and with that which transcends us and commands our awareness whether that is humanity, God, nature, life, or whatever else for us is holy.

Often when someone is ill I say, "I will hold you in my thoughts and my prayers." To call someone to mind and hold them in our thoughts is, I think, rather special. Perhaps that is enough, and yet, to hold that same person in prayer takes that relationship to a deeper level. We then are expressing the deepest yearnings of our heart in regard to that person.

What is prayer for you? One way of describing different prayers is "gimmie," "oops," "ouch," "wow," and "thanks" (or prayers of petition, confession, intercession, praise, and gratitude.)

What is prayer for you? Unitarian Universalist minister Jack Mendelsohn writes, "Suppose we think of prayer not as a means of commandeering God's attention for our personal wants, but as an approach to the deepest truths about ourselves. Suppose we think of it as a way of shedding new light on our relations with others or with God. Suppose we think of it as an essential religious striving to touch truth and tap resources

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Songwriting as a Prayer

(based on a *UU World* article by Kimberly French, 2007)

She was born in 1935 and raised in Louisiana to a Southern Baptist family rooted in a rural America of farming communities and small towns. Her mother was a teacher and a homemaker. Her father worked with farmers through the Department of Agriculture. It meant that they moved around a lot. She lived in a series of small rural towns, which was hard because she was shy. It made it hard to make friends, but her sister was an important source of support and companionship.

One day something remarkable happened. It was the day that a piano was delivered to her home. She did not come from a singing family, so the piano's arrival was something of a mystery. She didn't ask why, she just began playing with the piano. The sounds and songs that she made up were a source of quiet joy. Her parents didn't force her to play or practice, nor did they complain about her playing. Time at the piano became precious, a gateway to another world, a space to explore both music and herself.

She loved to play the piano and to sing. There was a freedom in doing this that she didn't experience in church. It was as if she was creating her own reli-

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Prayer, Meditation & Letting Your Life Speak

Prayer and meditation are spiritual practices that are well suited to help us listen to our life. Both slow us down, help us center, and push the ego to the side so it does not dominate our contemplation. Done well, both practices take us deeper into our own life. Distractions disappear, assumptions are uncovered, and fear is diminished, as we move from willfulness to willingness. Of course both practices involve some sacrifice of which time is the most obvious, but any sacrifice is more than compensated with an increase in our well-being. This is to say that both prayer and meditation are profound forms of self-care. They shift the equation from human doing to human being. The fruits of both are subtle, sweet, and luminous.

Touchstones is committed to exploring liberal theology. This journal is supported by subscriptions from Unitarian Universalist congregations. For daily meditations, photos, and more visit/like Touchstones at <https://www.facebook.com/Touchpossibility/>

Let Your Life Speak

Spirit of Life

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**
gion.

When she finished high school and began attending a small state college to become a teacher, she stopped singing and playing the piano. For some reason she thought that they were childish things that she had to put away in order to become an adult.

Her life was affected growing up during World War II, which the United States entered when she was six. Seeing the horror of war in newsreels and war movies, she became a peace activist. Her views were further shaped by the racism and economic injustice that she witnessed growing up in the South.

She and her husband discovered Unitarian Universalism when they began attending the UU church in Austin, Texas. When they moved to Boston in the mid-1960s, they began attending the Arlington Street Unitarian Universalist church, where she also worked for a time as the secretary. A student minister there was planning a worship service for women and invited her to help select the music for the service. Frustrated that she couldn't find many songs written by women, she stayed up late one night and sang what she wanted to say to her three daughters who were asleep upstairs. That experience became the song, "Come, Daughter."

Years later, in the 1980s she became involved in opposing U.S. policies in Central America. One evening after attending a meeting on Central American solidarity at a college, she finally arrived at home exhausted and discouraged. Walking through her house in the dark, she arrived at her piano, and started playing. Slowly a tune and words to a song emerged. Looking back, she realized it wasn't composed, it was prayed into being. She doesn't even call it a song, she calls it a prayer. Each week, countless Unitarian Universalist churches sing that prayer during their worship service. We know it as *Spirit of Life*, which was written by Carolyn McDade.

Source: <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/35893.shtml?p>

Act Justly, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly

The Serenity Prayer

Rev. John Gibbons

Reinhold Niebuhr, born in 1892 in Missouri, ... served a pastorate for 14 years in Detroit, then in 1928 became a professor of Christian Ethics at New York's Union Seminary where he taught for nearly 30 years. He was a prolific author and some of his books, such as *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, are classics in theological circles.

...[Niebuhr wrote,] "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

This was not the prayer of someone wrestling with purely individual problems.... This ...was the prayer of a man engaged and struggling with the great social issues of his day.

...Prayer for Niebuhr was not a begging for favors, but much more akin to listening, to being aware, to discerning, to being fully present, to being in awe of the present reality—the wonder, terror, and perplexity of life.

...God for Niebuhr is our awareness that we will never know the end of the story; there is always something around the next corner; and the act of prayer is our humble attempt to acknowledge and attempt to discern that which we don't yet know or which ultimately to us may be unknowable.

..."To accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed." ...Serenity and anger can coexist. Serenity for Niebuhr does not mean some tranquil quietude: It is the serenity of a Nelson Mandela who from the solitude of his jail cell said..., "I abound in hope. Our cause is just and the people will be free." Serenity is a rock-solid understanding of faith, hope and charity even in the darkest time of despair.

"The things that cannot be changed." For Niebuhr, I think, this is a recognition that we human beings must live within our limitations. Prior to Niebuhr, there were liberal theologians—probably some Unitarians and Universalists among them—who fancied the essential

goodness of human nature, the perfectibility of society, "the progress of humankind onward and upward forever." ... To those optimists who think that progress is inevitable or that "the universe bends toward love or justice," Niebuhr said, "Nonsense." The harsh reality in our individual lives as well as in our



social and political lives is that power, greed, fear and despair constantly contend with higher virtues of love, justice, compassion, pity and hope. Not progress, not love, not justice are unfailingly assured without

our action.

..."The courage to change the things that should be changed." ...

Consider ...1943: Today we are only somewhat justified in being proud of "our greatest generation" because, until Pearl Harbor, that same generation was isolationist, uninterested in international affairs,

placid bystanders to fascism, mass murder, and the destruction of democracy. We were self-satisfied, removed, and highly resistant to intervention in Europe. We wavered and shrank for more than seven years after Hitler had destroyed democracy in Germany; we did nothing for five years after Jews were robbed of German citizenship; we dithered for two years after the fall of Austria, Poland, Norway, Denmark and the Low Countries; we proclaimed our neutrality long after England was at war.

...And finally, "the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." It isn't easy. ...I don't know how better to summarize this—and to conclude—than by the injunction of the prophet Micah.

"What is required of you? To act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Active verbs, mind you: act, love, walk. Niebuhr counseled humility; he also counseled action. ...

Source: no longer online



Readings from the Common Bowl



Day 1: “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.”

Mohandas Gandhi

Day 2: “If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough.”

Meister Eckhart

Day 3: “The thing about meditation is: You become more and more you.”

David Lynch

Day 4: “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day.”

Abraham Lincoln

Day 5: “Prayer in action is love, love in action is service.”

Mother Teresa

Day 6: “Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I’ll tell you what I’d do. I’d go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods and I’d look up into the sky—up—up—up—into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I’d just feel a prayer.”

L.M. Montgomery

Day 7: “Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can’t imagine.”

Kathleen Norris

Day 8: “Meditation is not to escape from society, but to come back to ourselves and see what is going on. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. With mindfulness we know what to do and what not to do to help.”

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Day 9: “To give pleasure to a single heart by a single act is better than a thousand heads bowing in prayer.”

Mohandas Gandhi

Day 10: “For Pueblo people, pottery is a prayer realized in physical form. Pottery holds life because pottery is the vessel created from the sacred earth.”

Marie Battiste

Day 11: “You pray in your distress and in your need; would that you might pray

also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.”

Khalil Gibran

Day 12: “Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees.”

Victor Hugo

Day 13: “The goal of meditation isn’t to control your thoughts, it’s to stop letting them control you.”

Anonymous

Day 14: “I’m still agnostic. But in the words of Elton Richards, I’m now a reverent agnostic. Which isn’t an oxymoron, I swear. I now believe that whether or not there’s a God, there is such a thing as sacredness. Life is sacred. The Sabbath can be a sacred day. Prayer can be a sacred ritual. There is something transcendent, beyond the everyday. It’s possible that humans created this sacredness ourselves, but that doesn’t take away from its power or importance.”

A.J. Jacobs

Day 15: “Agnostic’s Prayer: Oh God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul.”

Ernest Renan

Day 16: “Meditation is an essential travel partner on your journey of personal transformation. Meditation connects you with your soul, and this connection gives you access to your intuition, your heartfelt desires, your integrity, and the inspiration to create a life you love.”

Sarah McLean

Day 17: “Why is it that when we talk to God we’re said to be praying, but when God talks to us we’re schizophrenic?”

Lily Tomlin

Day 18: “He prayed as he breathed, forming no words and making no specific requests, only holding in his heart, like broken birds in cupped hands, all those people who were in stress or grief.”

Ellis Peters

Day 19: “Meditation needs no results. Meditation can have itself as an end. I meditate without words and on nothingness.”

Hélène Cixous

Day 20: “All his prayers of the past had been simple concrete requests: God, give

me a bicycle, a knife with seven blades, a box of oil paints. Only how, how, could you say something so indefinite, so meaningless as this: God, let me be loved.”

Truman Capote

Day 21: “The world is holy. We are holy. All life is holy. Daily prayers are delivered on the lips of breaking waves, the whisperings of grasses, the shimmering of leaves.”

Terry Tempest Williams

Day 22: “I have lived with several Zen masters—all of them cats.”

Eckhart Tolle

Day 23: “Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things.”

Lon Ray Call

Day 24: “Pray not for crutches but for wings.”

Phillips Brooks

Day 25: “Meditation is not a way of making your mind quiet. It’s a way of entering into the quiet that’s already there.”

Deepak Chopra

Day 26: “Purring is not so different from praying. To a tree, a cat’s purr is one of the purest of all prayers, for in it lies a whole mixture of gratitude and longing, the twin ingredients of every prayer.”

Kathi Appelt

Day 27: “Prayer is not sending in an order and expecting it to be fulfilled. Prayer is attuning yourself to the life of the world, to love, the force that moves the sun and the moon and the stars.”

David Steindl-Rast

Day 28: “Laughter is also a form of prayer.”

Søren Kierkegaard

Day 29: “The prayers we weave into the matching of socks, the stirring of oatmeal, the reading of stories, they survive fire.”

Ann Voskamp

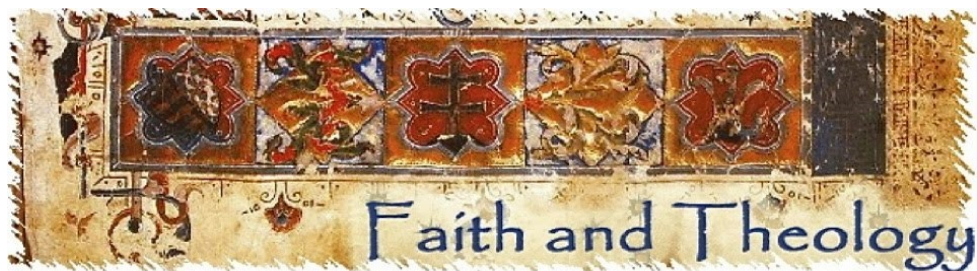
Day 30: “We must remember that the test of our religious principles lies not just in what we say, not only in our prayers, not even in living blameless lives—but in what we do for others.”

Harry S. Truman

Day 31: “I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found. By reading the writings of the most interesting minds in history, we meditate with our own minds and theirs as well. This to me is a miracle.”

Kurt Vonnegut





Meditation & Prayer

The Perennial Philosophy

Rev. Dr. Harry Meserve

Meditation is ...one of the great ... activities of all of the world's religions, from the most primitive ...to the most complex.... Meditation is directed attention. The object of attention will vary: a god, an ideal form, a principle of action, a way of life, a spiritual ground of being, or in some cases silence, the peace beyond all thought, all or nothingness, an end to contradictions and verbal symbols.



The perennial philosophy is the name given by Aldous Huxley to the basic theory behind all meditative processes. The essence of the perennial philosophy is that there exists in all cultures and religions an awareness of the ground of all being, together with the experiences of some who have realized by way of meditation ...their identity with the ground of being and have developed an on-going relationship to it that permeated their lives. Sometimes ...the ground has been experienced as [a] transcendent spiritual reality. ...Sometimes ...the ground is seen to be an extension of the consciousness of the individual mind, an increase in awareness, a realization that one is part of a larger natural and human consciousness.

...In meditation one is taking a practical path of growth. ...One follows the path that seems most natural....

...Meditation does something to

our conception of the limits and possibilities of this life. Paradoxically it seems to intensify both the sense of immortality and our awareness of mortality. The incessant difficulties of meditation are not always profound and intellectual. They are sensual and bodily, too. The mind is constantly attacked by all sorts of sights, sounds, images, feelings, tastes, smells, memories. ...The body is no help either. It itches, cramps, feels inexplicable little pains, twitches involuntarily, wants to get up and move around and in general refuses to be quiet. ...These are all reminders of our mortality and ... the human heart.... At the same time, meditation suggests and introduces the awareness of something eternal. We are in the process of entering into a universal human search of dimensions of life and experience that do not pass away with the death of any individual, or indeed of any culture or religion.

...Our little life is very short.... Longer than the life of a leaf or an apple, but shorter than the life of many trees. But in the midst of that short life we can ... participate in a much larger life that belongs to all the generations of humanity and contains all their deepest insights and experiences. These realities to which we turn daily, as constantly as we wish and are able, can greatly enrich and deepen any human life, giving meaning and beauty to its brief years. ...Good meditation is a method of repeating the natural miracle of returning life within the human mind and spirit. It is a difficult road, but surely it is one well worth traveling. The views are splendid, the company good, and glimpses of the goal, alluring.

Source: *The Practical Meditator* by Harry Meserve, New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981.

Prayer 101

Rev. Dr. Forrest Church

To move from distraction to attention, there is no better gambit than prayer.

In prayer we sing by listening first. Prayer shapes and colors our melody, helping us keep in tune with ourselves. It also brings us into harmony with others. Finally, prayer tunes us to the cosmos, to the overarching and all-sustaining hymn of life. It recalls us to the symphony.

Prayer is the art of listening. Reverent attention to something unites us with it. Distraction divides, fragmenting us. Salvation and sin are much the same. Salvation: wholeness, health, healing — all words stemming from the same root — occurs in this lifetime when we are at peace with ourselves, united with one another, and at one with God. Sin is a state of brokenness. It exists when we are consumed by preoccupations and distractions, inattentive to the needs of others, at war with ourselves and the world.

The divisions within us spring from negative self-attitude based upon experience. We have done things we wish we had not done and left undone things that begged our doing. We have hurt others, letting them down and ourselves as well. All of us have a weight on our shoulders that needs unburdening.

This leads us to the first of three kinds of prayer: confession. Jesus teaches us to love our enemy. How difficult this is if the enemy is another. Even more so if the enemy is ourself. Standing sentry at the



portal of our minds, this enemy is ever ready to fend off the influx of better thoughts. How quick we are to remind ourselves that we have done wrong or been wronged, given or received pain, failed or been thwarted in our endeavors, missed out on some happiness or had it

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The Prayer is in the Playdough

Rev. Kathleen McTigue

...Real spiritual growth depends on our willingness to be transformed. And very little transforms us as thoroughly as sharing our lives with children.

In my office—in the ...room in the house that is theoretically all mine—I have created a small altar. It is nothing elaborate, ...a cardboard box dignified by its covering of Guatemalan cloth. It holds the multitude of small things I've found over many years that symbolize the people and places woven into who I am....

When Hannah [my older daughter] began to reach for my altar and crow her pleasure, I realized that ... another dimension of my spiritual life was destined to change. I would hover, vaguely scandalized, as she fingered her sticky way through my treasures. ...By the time my second child, Maris, could crawl, I had resigned myself to sharing the altar.

I find my stones and shells in the pockets of my children's overalls, tucked behind the couch cushions, or hidden in the children's own treasure boxes.

They've been stuck into ungodly pink or blue playdough creations and forgotten and put to bed with dolls and stuffed animals. Once or twice a week I regather my precious fragments and rearrange them on the altar. I am Sisyphus, knowing that each time I put things back together they will be relentlessly dismantled.

...The altar has become a metaphor for the spiritual path I walk as a parent. The sacred is left vulnerable and unprotected

from the gleeful fist that reaches for it. Sometimes it gets lost for days or weeks, other times it's chipped or discolored by the excessive affection it's received.

When I stumble on pieces of the altar in some unexpected corner, I touch them as if for the first time, hold them lightly, and lift them again onto the uncertain sanctuary of the altar. I struggle with shared ownership, with the imperative to let go, to be surprised. I work with this new form of prayer, which does not come easily, built as it is on relinquishment and the open hand. The path doesn't resemble the austere life of the spirit led by the saints I once hoped to emulate. But my prayer is there, in the midst of life, where children are born and raised and where they become our wisest teachers.

Source: <http://www.uuworld.org/1999/0799comment.html>



Family Activity: *Creating an Altar*

Have each member of the family gather items that are special and create an altar that blends these objects together. Once the altar is assembled, have each person share what each item means to him or her.

Guided Meditation:

The Balloon

Melissa Eisler

This brings a visual component to a ... simple deep breathing exercise. You can do this standing or seated.

1. Relax your body and begin to take deep inhales and slow exhales through the nose.
2. Start to take a slow, deep breath to fill your belly up with air, as if you're



trying to blow up a big balloon. Expand your belly as much as you can.

3. Slowly let the air out of the balloon (through the nose) as you release the breath from the belly.
4. Encourage your kids to feel their entire body relax each time they exhale, each time air is slowly being released from the balloon. You can even make a "hissing" noise to encourage them to slow down the exhale even more, "Like letting air out of the balloon."

Continue for several minutes.

...Young kids, especially under the age of 6, love the extra movement when they're learning to bring awareness to their breath. Encourage them to stand up in a relaxed way and follow these steps:

1. Ask them to think of their favorite color and picture a giant balloon of that color in their mind.
2. Then have them take a slow, deep inhale through the nose, filling up their tummies with air as if trying to blow up a giant [their favorite color] balloon. As an option, you can also have them stretch their arms open and overhead to represent expansion and the big balloon.
3. When their balloon is totally full, have them hold their breath at the top, and then you can "pop the balloon" for them (gesture finger to belly) and they can fall down as they exhale.

This one will likely elicit giggles and awareness of their breath.

Source: <https://chopra.com/articles/3-kid-friendly-meditations-your-children-will-love>



Your One Wild and Precious Life

(Continued from page 1) **Intro to Theme**
within and beyond ourselves."

What is prayer for you? Mendelsohn continues, "[Prayer] is an effort to reach deep and to reach out and to become what we would like to be, and need to be, and ought to be. Proper prayer is not a petition to escape realities. It is an effort to face up to realities, to understand them, to deal with them. It is an expression of the desire to grow in spiritual stature, in courage, in strength, and in faith."

James Luther Adams wrote, "...To be genuine, prayer must lead to a sense of the ultimate, and yet also to a sense of the intimate..." In the end, intimacy and ultimacy are the yin and yang of religious life. We can experience these in many different dimensions of prayer.

For some, prayer is a conversation with God. But don't make the mistake of thinking that you know what they mean by the word God. You can only know by asking and I would venture to say that if the person has any spiritual depth at all, their notion of God might well surprise you. Consider these words by Episcopal Bishop Shelby Spong: "I do not believe that there is a being, a supernatural deity, standing over against the world who seeks through some invasive process to imprint the divine will on the life of my world. The deity I worship," he explains, "is rather part of who I am individually and corporately.... God is the presence in whom I have my being."

For some, prayer is a conversation with themselves. As Gerald May said, "Prayer is all about the deepest longings of our being." Giving voice to those longings in quiet solitude can be both affirming and liberating. As UU minister Ken Collier writes, "Prayer is anything that reveals to you the holiness, the beauty, the healing, the uniqueness, and the wholeness of your life."

For some, prayer is service done on behalf of others. As the African-American sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "the prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence, not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling

unto day shall make a life worth living." Universalist minister Lon Ray Call explained, "Prayer doesn't change things. Prayer changes people, and people change things." Or finally, as Dorothy Day explained, "I believe some people—lots of people—pray through the witness of their lives, through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people."

For some, prayer is praise, their response to the experience of astonishment, wonder, or awe. As the poet Mary Oliver writes in her poem, *The Summer Day*, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. /I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down /into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, /how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, /which is what I have been doing all day. /Tell me, what else should I have done?"



She then writes, "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?/ Tell me, what is it you plan to do/ with your one wild and precious life?"

For some, prayer is an expression of gratitude. Arliss Ungar writes, "Each morning as I step outside to get the newspaper, I stop to notice something for which I am grateful. I give thanks for the feel of the cool wind on my face, or for the beauty of the clouds in the morning sky, or for the call of the quail up on the hill. It's my way to start the day with a prayer." The medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt said, "If the only prayer you ever say is, 'Thank you,' it will be enough."

Finally, for some, prayer is seeking forgiveness, perhaps undeserved, but as necessary as the air we breathe. What is prayer for you?

Many Unitarian Universalist are more comfortable with meditation than prayer.

Meditation is a spiritual practice. Karen Morgan writes, Meditation is a technique that creates a stillness which brings us into the present moment so that we can find and face ourselves. It's a way to unlock your full potential in all areas of your life. There are many different ways to meditate..., however the common thread among all of the methods is concentration. Each method involves a way to focus your concentration so that you become present to your deeper self. Getting connected with your deeper self will allow you to find answers to the questions you face in life. We have all had instances in our lives of this type of connection and stillness—think of a time when you looked into a newborn baby's eyes, or looked at the night sky and felt the wonder of the vastness, or sat by a river and allowed the sound of the flow move you into a state of stillness. These were spontaneous experiences. Meditation is about having these experiences purposefully."

Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh says, "Meditation is not an escape. It is the courage to look at reality with mindfulness and concentration. Meditation is essential for our survival."

One way of comparing meditation with prayer is to note that the latter tends to be kataphatic, while meditation tends to be apophatic. Kataphatic is an approach that is content-oriented with the content often focused on God or a person. Apophatic is a consciousness-oriented approach, which seeks to empty the mind rather than focus on an image.

Rather than focusing on content, meditation often focuses on breathing to help clear the mind. There is an old dictum that counsels: "If you try too hard to meditate, you can't." The resolution of this quandary in Zen Buddhism is captured in this way: "Quit trying. Quit trying not to try. Quit quitting."

It should be clear that meditation requires commitment to cultivate skill over time.



Hallowed, and Made Whole

(Continued from page 4) **Meditation & Prayer** snatched cruelly away.

...The promise of confession is integrity. Confession is an honest confrontation with ourselves as we are. This, coupled with a faith in forgiveness, can heal us. If we dare to delve into our brokenness, confess and beg forgiveness, the healing process will begin. Through confession, coupled with the will to change, we gain in strength and dedication. Having known what it is to be broken, we begin to discover what it is to be whole. Confession is a pledge toward wholeness. It cannot change the past, but it can help to bring the present out from under the shadow of the past. In this alone there is power.

A second kind of prayer links self to other, whether a

person or a thing. At its most primitive, such prayer amounts to little more than begging for something we cannot have. Pray all we want for wealth or fame or happiness, in selfish prayer there is no power save the power of illusion. But by keeping ourselves mindful of others, of their needs and the ways in which our lives intersect with theirs, any number of good things may happen.

...We become part of all we pray for, and it a part of us. Distances are bridged, our relationship to others becomes more organic, and thereby our wholeness is enhanced.

...There is only one sure cure for estrangement. It is reconciliation. Reconciliation is not accommodation; it has nothing to do with compromise. It demands a change of heart, a radical refusal to be trapped by our bitterness.

...Though we have little power over what others think of us, we do have the power to free ourselves from our anger toward them. We picture them in our mind. And we pray for them. It is hard to hate and pray at the same time.

Reconciliation, with those we think we hate as with those we try to love, is a

living symbol of that which, in theological terms, is called atonement. Atonement is, literally, at-one-ment, the redemptive uniting of parts into wholeness.

The moment we pray for others, our attitude toward them changes. And due to the relief we feel once unburdened of our spite, the way we approach them will change as well.

In certain instances, the only thing that stands between estrangement and reconciliation is an inability to imagine the possibility of reconciliation. In its very essence, to pray for another is an act of reconciliation.

The third kind of prayer is the most healing of all. It is a way of saying yes to life, a yes of gratitude and trust. Blending all dissonance into a larger

harmony, putting all the parts in perspective of the whole, we say, "I am in Thy hands, Thy will be done." In such a prayer, we ask nothing of ourself or for another. We simply acknowledge life's wonder and mystery, not taking it for granted, but receiving it as a gift.

This is the most important of prayers, a loving token of fidelity to all that lies beyond our power to effect or change, an expression not of obligation but of appreciation, not of guilt but gratitude. It is a way of letting go and for a blessed moment being swept away.

In the *Psalms* it is called the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Not only do we sacrifice our ego by acknowledging the receipt of undeserved gifts, especially the gift of life, we also find our life rendered sacred by this same acknowledgment. Sacrifice means to render sacred. By suspending the claim of our own ultimacy, willfulness, and authority, we are freed to perform this sacrifice. The present becomes one with eternity. In eternity, division and brokenness are overcome. Where once we harrowed, we are hallowed and made whole.

Source: no longer online

Sit! Stay!

Training the Puppy

Jack Kornfield

...Meditation is very much like training a puppy. You put the puppy down and say, "Stay." Does the puppy listen? It gets up and runs away. You sit the puppy back down again. "Stay."

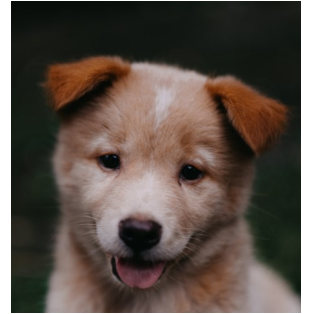
And the puppy runs away over and over again. Sometimes the puppy jumps up, runs over, and pees in the corner or makes some other mess. Our minds are much the same as a puppy, only they create bigger messes. In training the mind, or the puppy, we have to start over again and again.

When you undertake a spiritual discipline, frustration comes with the territory. Nothing in our culture or our schooling has taught us to steady and calm our attention. ...Finding it difficult to concentrate, many people respond by forcing their attention on their breath or a mantra ...with tense irritation and self-judgment, or worse. Is this the way you would train a puppy? Does it really help to beat it? Concentration is never a matter of force or coercion. You simply pick up the puppy again and return to reconnect with the here and now.

...Always remember that in training a puppy we want to end up with the puppy as our friend. In the same way, we must practice seeing our mind and body as "friend." ...It takes a gentleness and a kind-hearted understanding to deepen the art of concentration.

...Meditation is a practice that can teach us to enter each moment with wisdom, lightness, and a sense of humor. It is an art of opening and letting go, rather than accumulation and struggle. ...It is an amazing process we have entered when we can train our hearts and minds to be open and steady and awake through it all.

Source: *A Path With Heart* by Jack Kornfield,



Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion Prayer & Meditation

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of *Touchstones* and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: “If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud something like revelation takes place. Something is ‘given’ and perhaps that something is always a reality outside the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy.” May Sarton

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake) (adapted) (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: “I laughed when a talk show host recently asked a little girl performing back flips on her show, ‘How did you ever learn to do all of that?’ and the girl responded, out of breath, ‘Practice.’ The same goes for prayer. You may have heard prayer

referred to as a ‘spiritual discipline’ or a ‘spiritual practice.’ I am learning that this is exactly what it is. Prayer takes both regular practice and discipline. Prayer is *intentional* spiritual reflection.” Marisol Caballero

Living the Questions

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. Have you prayed? If so, what inspired your prayer?
2. Has prayer been helpful or hurtful in your life? How?
3. Which do you prefer, prayer or meditation? Why?
4. How has prayer or meditation changed for you over the years?
5. How do you understand prayer and meditation from a Unitarian Universalist faith perspective?
6. Some spiritual teachers say that prayer is about listening rather than talking. What would you want to listen for?
7. Some pray to God, others to Earth Mother, the Universe, the Sun, the spirit, or to life itself. If you prayed to life, what would you say?
8. The covenant written by L. Griswold Williams states that “service is our prayer.” How can service to others be a prayer? Do you make service a prayer? How?
9. What benefits do prayer or meditation provide people?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice

(Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison)

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words Rev. Philip R. Giles (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Breathe!

Meditation

Vera Nazarian

Meditation is a mysterious method of self-restoration. It involves “shutting” out the outside world, and by that means sensing the universal “presence” which is, incidentally, absolute perfect peace. It is basically an existential “time-out” — a way to “come up for a breath of air” out of the noisy clutter of the world. But don’t be afraid, there is nothing arcane or supernatural or creepy about the notion of taking a time-out. Ball players do it. Kids do it, when prompted by their parents. Heck, even your computer does it (and sometimes not when you want it to). So, why not you? A meditation can be as simple as taking a series of easy breaths, and slowly, gently counting to ten in your mind.

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