

The Voice of Deep Down Things

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One Sunday, many years ago, in the receiving line after the service, one of my congregants asked me: “Why do you often say during Joys and Sorrows that we’ll be sure to keep someone *in our prayers*? I don’t pray and I don’t know anyone here who does! Besides, I thought I could give up all that *religious* who-ha when I became a Unitarian Universalist.”

So tell me, Robin,” he continued, “do you pray and if you do, to whom do you pray and what do you pray for?” (Yes, most folks just say, “Thank you” in the receiving line, and *that’s* what I pray for! )

Suffice it to say, the receiving line wasn’t a good fit for unpacking these tantalizing questions, although I loved hearing them and having the chance to mull over some possible answers. A proper vehicle has opened as we proceed through the Touchstones theme of Prayer and Meditation, so we’ll take a closer look together this morning at a few aspects of the sometimes cringe-inducing, loaded and ever-complex activity known as “prayer.”

In Paul’s letter to the Thessolonians, the Apostle instructs us to “pray without ceasing. If necessary, use words.” Americans, in general, take this admonition to heart. Gallup polls for over 40 years have shown little change in their reporting on the number of Americans who pray--about 9 out of 10.

Even with a downturn in participation on religious life, Americans, along with the Irish, are the most praying people in the modern world. In both these countries, some 65 per cent of respondents claim to do a portion of their praying while performing other activities, such as housework, jogging, or driving. Being on Social media? Probably. Women are more likely to pray than men, older persons than younger persons, people of color than whites, and less educated persons more than better educated.

Like my colleague Marilyn Sewall, I don’t know how many Unitarian Universalists pray. Sewall suspects that because of our socio-economic level--which is the highest of any religious group, except for the Reformed Jews—that we do not pray as often as other Americans.

“Prayer assumes some degree of humility,” she writes somewhat harshly, “it calls for relinquishment, and, you see, we Unitarian Universalists tend to be uncomfortable with these concepts. Why should people as smart and capable and self-contained as we are, pray?” It implies weakness or unsophistication or the notion that we can’t handle or finesse life .

Additionally, some of us may not be able to reconcile prayer of any description or variety with reason or science or humanism or whatever it is we adhere to. Surely, there are those among us who relish the pungent definition of prayer in the Devil’s Dictionary by Ambrose Bierce: “Pray, A verb. To ask that the laws of the Universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.”

Some pundits quip that UUs either address their prayers “to whom it may concern,” or pray at most to one carefully curated God whom we consider on-call. As always, I think these self-effacing jokes and overly harsh critiques sell us UUs far short of who we are (historically and today) and what we yearn for in our religious lives.

Besides, if these self characterizations were true, we would not have a very modern hymnal loaded with traditional and new-fangled meditations, hymns of praise and transcendence, a choir that regular sings about prayer or pieces based on prayer formats, or the oft-dreaded word *Prayer* itself still there in all its glory in Orders of Service in many of our congregations. The UUA has published a pamphlet on various ideas about prayer among our flock. Wouldn’t we have driven out these elements like St. Patrick beating the snakes out of Ireland if we truly found them so repugnant or timeworn?

If we expunged every selection in our hymnal that alluded to prayer or those other cringy words like worship, God, and church, we’d be left with something as thin and shallow as *The Little Golden Book of Religion*. While we’re on this subject, “worship” is from a Middle English word – *worthscipe*, “to shape meaning,” and there is truly nothing more UU than that!

Let’s remember that we needn’t throw out the baby with the bathwater, discarding useful and adaptable spiritual tools, words, or concepts like prayer simply because they seemingly represent vestiges of religious

traditions we've abandoned or have made us feel small. In my case, Jewish prayers in a language I do not comprehend that center a patriarchal God.

As a UU, it's still all right to "pray without ceasing," even if you are not genuflecting, encanting Baruchas, reciting the Quranic verses, or intoning Sanskrit chants.

That said -- to decide, as a UU, to engage in a spiritual practice such as prayer, requires (like everything else about being a UU) that you define your term and explore the truth and meaning inherent in practice for you personally. For instance: Is prayer a vehicle for petition? Is it a way to receive divine intercession? Does prayer offer you a way to lift up your gratitude or access your pain? When you pray, are you waiting or acting, speaking or listening, separate from or holding the hand of the sacred as you understand it, are you expecting some result or striving to rest more gracefully in what's "real" for you? Tantalizing questions, to be sure.

In a sermon to his own skeptical congregation, my colleague Kenn Hurto cleverly categorized the four basic kinds of traditional prayer as: "Please, Thanks, Oops and Wow!" The prayer of "please" is one of petition -- "Please God, bless Mommy and Daddy and keep us safe." The prayer of "thanks" offers gratitude for blessings received; and "Wow" prayers affirm the wonder and awe of the Universe from which those blessings flow. The prayer of "oops" ask for forgiveness or redemption when we fall short of who we wish to be.

Praying itself also takes many forms -- spoken and silent, still and mobile. We can pray through such vehicles as ecstatic dance, Tai Chi, yoga, silence, Taize chanting, prayer beads, guided meditation, and singing, about which St Francis remarked: "When you sing, you pray twice." Short of mimicking Whirling Dervishes, we've experienced an assortment of these prayer modalities in our service this morning.

After Joys and Sorrows, I am often known to ask the congregation to "hold someone in love and light" (a euphemism for prayer, I suppose). My invitation represents a request that the community hold this person in their healing intention so that this person is able to move companioned through their crisis with courage, companionship, and grace.

I define this type of praying as "asking the Universe to support us rather than asking a personal God to save us or fix things." In this way, we

are *praying* for and with everyone on the planet, including the Mysterious Presence as we understand it; adding our positive, healing energy as we go.

On occasion, I do jokingly promise folks that “I’ll say a novena (a specific Catholic prayer) for them.” This sarcastic, questionably witty offer is rendered all the sillier by the fact that I was raised Jewish and until recently, wouldn’t have known a novena from a knish.

However, several years ago, while on a Minister’s retreat at a Catholic monastery, I got my comeuppance when I discovered pamphlet in my room, entitled “St. Jude’s Novena” and cracked it open. “St. Jude,” it begins...”listen to our prayer.” And it continues in this vein, “St. Jude, patron of the despairing “Listen to our prayer.” It was the word “listen” that jumped out at me.

“Yes, that’s right,” I remember thinking -- the act and process of prayer are all about *listening* – listening for and being listened to by the still, small voice within your personal house of prayer. Listening as an aspect of prayer is what I’d like to focus on primarily today because I feel it will offer us the greatest possibility of clearing obstacles from the path that might lead us into a more intentional contemplative practice.

I do strongly advocate for the establishment of such a practice – 15 minutes per day is optimal, although even five minutes per day of centering time can ground you more firmly and clearly within your mind, heart, body, and spirit as you go about your daily rounds. Even 15 minutes of intentional breathing (pranayama) can center and ground you with remarkable results,

The word Prayer, itself is anglicized from Latin *precatio*, an invocation or act that seeks to activate a rapport to the Divine through deliberate communication. You may have heard it said that “prayer is when we speak to the Divine and meditation is when we hear our answer.”

I’d like to conflate these two ideas into one – prayer is both speech and hearing; asking and answering. It’s a way to listen for deep down things, spoken by your own still small voice in that personal heart of darkness or longing or confusion or joy known only by you. This prayer dialogue is intensely intimate, but it is far more than self-talk or navel-gazing. The still, small voice – the one who whispers, yells, echoes, laughs, and cries, is more than *your* voice, just as it is greater than solely the voice of a Mysterious Presence.

As I see it, the two voices harmonize while speaking the deep down things that often go unspoken – our fears, our willingness to grapple with difficult aspects of ourselves, our hope, our need for healing or courage, and our readiness (or lack thereof) to integrate changes or losses into our lives.

The Latin term for this practice is *Lectio Divino*– listening to the Divine speaking to us as it breaks through the veil that we often pull down (sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally) between us and our authentic spiritual selves.

Elizabeth Lesser, one of the founders of the new-age Omega Institute broke through her own resistance to prayer and gained the insight that “prayer is a conversation between you and a friend you can barely remember – and yet you continue to speak across time and space, because something tells you this is the friend you most need.” Her favorite prayer, by the way? Not a novena, or a psalm – rather, a prayer by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Han – yes, they pray too.

So, you may be thinking out there in your chairs– Oh yeah? But does it work? No doubt, we live in a results-oriented, fast-paced society, a quantifiable kingdom. We focus excessively about risk to reward ratios and efficacy. We ask: Does prayer “work” as if it were a form of medical treatment, a Pilates reformer, an anti-aging serum, or a diet plan. What kind of odds can you give me? Where’s the evidence or the research results? Got an Excel spreadsheet you can show me? Is it FDA approved?

These questions aren’t entirely without merit as long as we define what we mean when we ask: Does it work? Well, that all depends on what we’re trying to accomplish, in the first place, with our praying.

Research, especially the encouraging experiments conducted by holistic physician Larry Dossey, have demonstrated the remarkable effects of prayer on healing in hospital patients. Yet, regardless of Dossey’s heartening results and despite bestselling books like the Prayer of Jabez that make God sound like a motivational speaker at a business luncheon, prayer is not like a take-out window where we place our orders and pick them up, hot and fresh 15 minutes later.

It’s not an email message marked urgent to God’s inbox or a text to the Universe’s smartphone. Frankly, it is this kind of simplistic equation

about prayer (often drilled into us in childhood) that tends to disappoint people and lead them to believe they have been abandoned by God.

I imagine that back in 1996 when Dosssey wrote his book, “Prayer is Good Medicine,” he could not have envisioned a new social-networking website I bumped into recently called prayabout.com. On this site, you can post a prayer request for anything (really) from mending a broken romance to curing a grave illness. So, the way this works, is that people purchase and light candles for you if they think your prayer is “worth it.”

Just yesterday, one prayer for healing had racked up 67 candles in three hours, another merely 22. How to even begin to address this scheme, eh? So many questions pop – beginning with “Is one prayer more worthy than another? Are cyber prayers from strangers just as good as hand-holding ones from family? How would I feel if I posted a prayer request and nobody ponied up? (oh, the list could go on and on)

Regardless of the vehicle, I believe the best we can do when it comes to prayer is put out our intention to the Universe, seek strength in what comforts us and accept that the answer we may receive to a request (if there is one) is “No.”

In order to accept this, we need to do something difficult, especially for independently-minded, somewhat willful folks like us UUs. We need to give up control, or what is really the illusion of control. It may be counter-intuitive, but it’s more effective to open the gates of the heart and with it, a deeper channel of communication between you and your still, small voice, than grasp with the certainty of the mind. If there is doubt, we can pray for faith; if there is confusion, for clarity, if there is anxiety, for serenity; if there is anger, for grace.

We do not need to wait to be more faithful or expert; we can pray regardless of who is or might be listening. If we are listening, awash in resonant silence, we will eventually hear the words that speak to our hearts and souls. This may not be your Grandmother’s idea of prayer and it can be yours.

If prayer or praying challenges you, you’re in good company. Many devout saints and mortals have grappled with their faith in the practice of prayer. I’d encourage them to consider my notion of praying with and within the Universe, and that when we listen (without attachment to outcome) to

our own still, small voices, to hear not an empty echo chamber, but rather the harmony of sacred and human within us.

Such a blending might transform our hearts and open us to the poetry of mindful and grateful living such as Alla Renee Bozarth's lovely litany—sewing our prayer, sweeping, digging, pickling, computing, dancing, breathing and being our prayer. Or, what the Quakers call, “praying the ordinary.” What matters is the act of prayer and prayerfulness, not specific prayers.

I heard a story recently about how famed Unitarian minister and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson struggled with the topic for his very first sermon (I know the feeling!). Then, a farmhand who gave him the idea. They were pitching hay together, and the day laborer told Emerson that people are always longing for something and therefore, they are always praying. What people need to be wary of is what they are longing for, because that will determine or at least influence the course of their lives. And so Emerson's first sermon was entitled “Pray without Ceasing.”

In your personal room of resonant silence, in your country of darkness or joy, what might the still, small voice ask of you; whisper to you? Every time you feel the spirit moving in your heart, what litany does that heart yearn to pray? What do you adore or praise or regret? What brings gratitude to your heart and lips? How can you get out of your own way and be more present to yourself and others?

The Methodists are famous for asking: “How goes it with your soul?” This is a question we can ask of ourselves in dialogue with the still, small voice. And as we explore and listen, waiting as patiently as we can in the silence, may we gain greater clarity about who we are and who we hope to become when it comes to the deep down things.

To pray without ceasing and only when necessary, to use words.

To make of our lives an offering.

*That's* what I pray for. Thanks for asking.

Blessed be and Amen.

