

***“This Is Our Prayer”***

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops

Faced with a materialistic culture that conjures up a hunger for ‘stuff’, we yearn for spirit.

The shallowness of a society enthralled with entertainment and appearance drives our longing for depth.

Lost in the busy and overwhelming demands of daily life, we hunger to hear the voice (and desires) of our deepest self.

Tempted by the narcissism of our time, we crave a community that reminds us of needs greater than our own. Isolated, we search for connection.

Depleted, we thirst for beauty. We long for “more.”

This yearning for more lies at the heart of every religious tradition. It cuts across and unites all of our diverse beliefs. You might even call it the mystical dimension of faith.

Regardless of whether we are theists, agnostics or atheists, yearning puts us in touch with “otherness.”

Perhaps you experience yearning as coming from a divine other... while the person next to you experiences yearning as coming from deepest self.

We are each pulled by something that is both “deeply us” and which is beyond us at the same time. Unitarian theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman, once referred to this pull as “The Divine Lure.”

It’s the kind of yearning that gets us back on track, leads us to wholeness and reminds us who we most want to be.

I believe that prayer is an intentional, outward expression of our spiritual yearning.

There are a thousand ways to pray.

When we speak our heartfelt intentions aloud or with silent hearts, we can honour life or death, and acknowledge hope or horror. Prayer is not just a way of naming what we yearn for, but also of harnessing our own power, including what we choose to do with it once we harness it. Prayer is power. We need not fear prayer; to the contrary, we need to reclaim it as a practice.

Yet in a world where a few radicals have used their prayers to bring about violence, and where there are a great many believers in the Christian tradition and beyond who’ve confused prayer with

patriotism, nationalism, and sectarianism, it might seem easier just to write off the whole enterprise as something to fear.

People are people, and all hunger for the same chance to speak their hopes out to a waiting universe. Peoples' prayers are as varied as human hopes and dreams have always been.

In the final measure, it doesn't matter to whom or to what you pray, or what you pray for; the prayers of people the world over, for better and for worse, are far more alike than they are different.

As a religious denomination, we know exactly what type of prayer where not interested in. What does the term prayer means for Unitarian Universalists?

That leads to several closely- linked questions: who are we praying to? Why are we praying? And what are we praying for? How we answer these questions describes the nature of what prayer means to us, and also determines if, in fact, we are willing to engage in this pursuit.

I was curious to hear what others had to say about prayer. I turned to a group of UU ministers and seminarians on social media. I asked, **"do you pray? Why, how?"** – there was great interest in this topic and range of responses...as you'll soon see, from many different perspectives.

With the help of \_\_\_ and \_\_\_, here is a sampling of 20 individuals had to say. (read in sequence by 3 voices)

- I pray all the time. I'm theist, so I feel there is some sort of conversation going on. God is an experience and an entity for me, so I get the sense of acknowledgment and holding. Prayer opens me to different ways of going about things and allows me to notice small amazing things. It's definitely not a wish-granting system.
  - No. Nor do I reach for the sky like I'm trying to catch a touchdown pass. Quiet reflection is as close as to praying I can manage.
  - I throw wishes out into the universe. Wishes for peace and wellbeing for specific folks going through struggles. Also for my ex (which is more of a meditative practice for me of forgiveness and letting go).
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- No matter who or what we direct it to, prayer is about our attention. Prayer is a conversation with Mystery. Prayer keeps us humble – it is a way for us to acknowledge what we don't know,

and get us in touch with what we desire, what we need, what we feel. Prayer means loving with intention.

- Yes. I believe the creative spirit of love and justice is all around. I speak to and ask guidance of that spirit. I hold needs of myself and others intentionally in spiritual reflection, which I refer to as “holding (you/situation/family) in light.
- I have not been able to make myself pray authentically the way I could when I was young, and I miss that. But I now pray with collaging (vision boards) and Tarot and showers and community. I pray by reciting my daily gratitudes at the family dinner table.

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- I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.
  - I draw healing or protective energy circles around people when they ask for prayers or if I think of them as needing it. Generally, I wrap the world.
  - In our home, we say a short child's prayer before meals. I like the practice of stopping to express gratitude.

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- No. I meditate!
  - I say mantra and I try to find stillness in my mind and heart. That’s as close as I get to prayer.
  - It just generally doesn't occur to me whether or not I find merit in it. But admittedly, I say the Lord's Prayer before take off on an airplane every time. There's comfort in the ritual.

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- I didn’t pray until I learned of the Sufis and the whirling dervishes. Dance and song as prayer. Praise and joy as prayer. Despair and anger as prayer. Yes. I pray.
  - Yes. listening to, and learning from a power beyond human agency.
  - I pray a lot. My wife and I even say a prayer before we eat. Prayer is connecting with the creative, loving, ever-present divine energy all around and inside us.
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- Yes. There is a certain internal state I can only reach by imagining conversing with an external power. Whether such a power really exists or not is a separate question.
  - No, but I do lovingkindness meditation and send out good thoughts into the world.
  - I believe that most of what we think, say, and do is a "prayer" of sorts, an affirmation for--or against--Life; that's how I interpret "pray without ceasing."
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- Listening to the still small voice...
  - I was taught that it is best to start with gratitude, then think of others, then yourself & then more gratitude. I think as with many spiritual ideas, people get lost arguing about specifics. Does it matter exactly who I'm communicating with?
  - I do pray, often - as often as I can. And I know that I don't have a real firm grasp on Who/What I am "praying to". But it works anyway, so that's enough for me. The mystery of it all is so interesting, and I'm not in a huge hurry to figure it out.
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I grew up Roman Catholic in a conservative decade in Quebec. Prayer interwove through every aspect of my day- at school, in church, and at home. I was surrounded by prayer.

Much of it, at school and church anyway, was rote—reciting certain words on cue at specific times; Hail Mary, the Lord's prayer, the prayer of contrition, and so on. Prayers in French, English, and even Latin. Before class began, before and after the lunch hour, following confession, and for every other conceivable occasion.

While prayer was all around me, we didn't really spend time talking about what the concept meant, so as a kid I arrived at my own conclusions.

I believed that God must hear these prayers. And if prayers are heard, God must acknowledge and respond in some way. No response would mean that God didn't care about me, and I just didn't believe that was possible.

Well, I'm all grown up and a Unitarian Universalist; I can now understand the term "God" metaphorically. In the broadest sense, we might think of God as the "spirit of life," that universal ministry and/or energy that permeates everything. At the same time, I think we humans find it hard to conceptualize something so huge and ambiguous and abstract.

I don't believe there is a divine being on a cloud somewhere listening to my pleas, but I do believe in acknowledging to god or the universe in some fundamental and meaningful way my own recognition that I'm not really in control, that I'm afraid, and that I'm counting on a lot of external things to help get me to where I want to go.

Prayer is a way to connect and reconnect to ourselves as magnificent, fragile vessels of love, sometimes with intimates, and sometimes with strangers, and affirming our choice to remain connected so that we're not lost in the vastness of space and time.

At home, growing up I would listen to the rosary being recited on the radio with my grandmother. We'd sit quietly together on the edge of her bed for an hour, she murmuring the repetitive pattern of words— ten Hail Marys followed by the Lord's prayer... ten Hail Marys, the Lord's prayer... And I mostly lulled into a stupor of comfort by my grandmother's closeness and the peace surrounding her.

At bedtime, in the dark and quiet, I had a much more spontaneous or extemporaneous way of praying. Like conversation with the ultimate parent. By the time I was eight or nine, I had grown increasingly suspicious of the God of my religion... The all-powerful, white, male, supernatural dispenser of favour unto a sinful fallen people.

I knew enough to discard that concept. I retained Jesus as the lead character, the embodiment of love, compassion, goodness to whom I chose to pray. What were my prayers about? Well, much of the time I would pour out my fears and worries of my life –

I prayed for the soul of my sister whose death had fractured my family; I prayed for the restoration of my deeply depressed mother-that shed stop crying in the closet, and might nurture again; I prayed for the safety of my father at sea in his job as a ship's captain;

I prayed for myself- that those two bratty kids at school would stop making fun of me, that my dog live forever because he was my saving grace, and I prayed that somehow I would pass arithmetic that year.

So, yes , it was a kind of a wish list, interspersed with uttering my gratitude for the blessings in my life, and bargaining with God as to what I would give in return for prayers granted. It all changed when I became an adolescent.

In the book, *Beginners Grace: bringing prayer into your life*, Kate Braestrup's reflects on arriving at her theological identity. I can relate. She writes:

*"In my youth, I was agnostic. Then I decided I'd go for broke and be an atheist. Later on, when I realized that neither of the A words fit, I still tried to avoid using the word "God". It carries so much patriarchal baggage, and the feminist alternative, "Goddess" sounds too much like "stewardess" or "actress", a demeaning diminutive of a "real" word that was reserved for men.*

*Besides, I thought I had invented this brand-new thing, this spirit, this... Well, George Lucas had taken the word "force" or I would've given that a try.*

*"May the force be with you" could be a real cool blessing if only Obi wan Kenobi hadn't said it first.*

*Anyway, here was this thing I was called to serve in worship, but naturally, there would be no irrationality's or bigotry's in my practice exclamation and since my conception of the holy was shiny new and pure, why name it by that old, discredited three letter word?"*

For years, I concluded that all established religions are hopelessly corrupt and will have to start all over again from our smarter and more knowledgeable perspective. However, most – perhaps all – religions were founded by people who thought that was exactly what they were doing, which should've given even the most confident would-be modern messiah pause.

My theology today is embarrassingly simple—god is living love. I don't want or need a larger definition. I don't think it is helpful for Unitarians to get so hung up on theological differences if we really intend to make compassionate efforts in our relationships with people of other faiths and religious traditions. Harping on what we're not and what we don't believe is as alienating as the certitude of fundamentalist religion. Words are imperfect tools in communicating, and prayer is no different.

Braestrup writes:

*There is nothing disingenuous or sacrilegious about changing the words of a prayer: the Bible itself contains different versions for many stories and prayers, and God's name is described in many, many ways. In order to speak of God at all, we have to use some sort of word, but to insist on the perfection of a particular word is to mistake the window for the view.*

Prayer, like the Sabbath, was made for the human, not the human for the prayer. If you can't use the word "God," don't use it.

Reject certain prayers or all prayers, certain churches or all houses of worship. Toss the whole religious kit and caboodle out if you really have no need of it.

But don't let the lies and violence of predators, the purveyors of bigotry, and thieves of faith take the gift of prayer from you, too. These are your human birthright: a consciousness capable of increase, and empathy inclined to expand. They belong to you.

If we can liberate ourselves from notions of prayer that don't work for us, a new question emerges:

What understandings of prayer might actually help us? This can be a challenging question, but taking on that challenge can yield a rich and meaningful spiritual practice, one that can connect us to our shared dreams, struggles and values as human beings.

Prayer is a way to gather power together, to name some deeper truth and to put words to the collective and personal yearnings of people.

In this rational religion of ours, with all our rational minds, we could be tempted to say that praying is pointless, that we don't believe in a miracle working God, but I will tell you that such an expression is nothing short of smug if you haven't been there – been at the cold dry centre of your suffering – reaching out for any blessed hope, you might find, even if it takes the form of a prayer, you had long given up on.

Though over 30 years ago, I recall clear as day watching my father die in the hospital, his heart seemingly exploding suddenly from a final heart attack. Alone with him, I watched his eyes grow wide, his last breath sounds like a deflating, groaning balloon. Shocked, stricken by the enormity of the moment, my response was automatic. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want..." and so on, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm became my means of coping. Patriarchal theology aside, I was comforted by speaking these same words that thousands of mourners had spoken for centuries.

Let's talk nitty gritty the how and why of prayer:

Most religious traditions embrace some form of prayer as a part of meaningful spiritual practice. The forms, purposes and addresses of prayer vary greatly, but scholars and many traditions agree that there are four general categories: adoration, confession/contrition, Thanksgiving, and supplication.

Prayers of adoration name and connect with whatever it is we understand to be sacred and worthy of love and reverence. This form of prayer answers the question what is sacred to you? What is most worthy of your love, allegiance, commitment, praise or veneration? Where do you perceive joy and beauty in yourself? In the world? How do you name and affirm the existence of that beauty and joy?

Prayers of confession or contrition claim responsibility for the fullness of ourselves, including the qualities or acts of which we are least proud.

These prayers ask where are your limits? Where do you feel stuck? What are the qualities you possess that are holding you back from acting as your most compassionate, joyful self? What are your greatest gifts? How have you fully brought those talents and strength to the service of the altar of humanity? Where have you caused harm? In what aspects of your life are you out of right relationship with yourself, with others, with the earth, what do you regret, and what would you repair?

Prayers of thanksgiving acknowledge and celebrate the blessings and gifts of life.

These prayers ask what small moments of beauty joy grace or connection have you unexpectedly experienced today? How did you experience the sacred in your own life today? What are the solid, constant gifts that make it possible for you to live your life? What things – relationships, resources, conditions – have you perhaps taken for granted?

Prayers of supplication open in ourselves the ability to surrender control while courting creativity and cultivating hope as we seek to change circumstances in our lives and our world.

These prayers ask what circumstances in your life seem beyond your control? What would make it possible for you to approach those circumstances with renewed energy, creativity, trust, or love? What are your deepest hopes and yearnings – for yourself, for your community, for the world? What are the things that seem most in need of movement, change, or healing? What are your wildest, least rational dreams and aspirations? Your simplest wishes?

Petitionary prayer is what we do when we pray for the fairly specific thing: that our airplane remains in the sky, that our children’s math teacher be cured of bile duct cancer, that automatic weapons be banned period.

Petitionary prayer is the form of prayer that most obviously assumes a two-way communication between the supplicant and God, but all prayer traditionally derives its value and its meaning from that assumption.

So, we pray because we are afraid, or worried, or confused, lost, anxious, in pain. We pray to lament, to bless, to praise, to reconcile, to forgive. We pray for protection, hope, renewal, to center, to find peace.

It’s not about outcomes, nor is prayer meditation—meditation’s purpose is to empty; the purpose of prayer is to try to fill.

William James – the 19<sup>th</sup> century American pioneer in the field of psychology of religion, argued the petitionary prayer would be a problematic practice for Christianity in the modern age. He predicted that as petitionary prayer was brought forward into a science-based world, it would be seen increasingly as inelegant and intellectually embarrassing, especially when placed alongside the marvels of science and scientific medicine.

Rev. Margaret Guenther wrote, “true prayer, whatever outward form it might take, is first and foremost a condition of loving attentiveness to God in which we find ourselves open and receptive to who we are in our deepest selves.”

Maybe another way of phrasing this is to say the prayer brings us to greater/broader/higher consciousness – or at least it should.

So if the practice of prayer, whatever form it takes, encourages us to wake up! pay attention! and become more conscious, it should also inspire us to compassion, helpfulness, and empathy.

It seems to me that prayer is a fundamental recognition that there are forces in this world that are utterly beyond our control.

In my own life, I pray quite a lot.

I pray for my family, that their lives are rich and fulfilling, that they are safe and feel my love even though I am away.

I pray for the wisdom to recognize the right thing to do each day, and the strength to carry it out in spite of my weaknesses and tendency to stray.

I pray that I will be given the opportunity to help others and make a difference for the better in people's lives.

I call out my gratitude for the gift of my life; the beauty and blessings in it.

I pray for this congregation, for the future of this Fellowship, if there is to be one, and to have the strength and courage to guide you along the journey, regardless of where it carries us.

Liberate your own prayer. Have an intentional conversation with god or the universe. It may not change anything, but it may help you respond to the rest of the world in a way you did not before.

Pray to align your full attention with your desire to connect with that which is larger than you.

This can take many forms, from the quiet cultivation of stillness to the deliberate naming of all that you are grateful for—name the goodness in your life.

Whatever its form, prayer creates an internal shift.

Reinhold Niebuhr noted: "Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things...prayer is not hearing voices, prayer is acquiring a voice. "

May you find and express your own prayerful voice; may it give wing to spiritual flight.

May our prayers serve as a means of sharing our love with others. As one's message, joins the smooth silent static made by us little humans the world over as we tap into concepts we barely understand but that sustain us just the same; fierce and desperate hope, a search for what is right and true, and a whole-hearted embrace of the One whose breath fills our own lungs.

May it be so, and amen.

**Resources:**

Kate Braestrup. *Beginner's Grace: Bringing Prayer into Your Life*. (2010) New York: Free Press.

L. Annie Foerster. *For Praying Out Loud: Interfaith Prayers for Public Occasions*. (2005) Boston: Skinner House.

Maggie Oman Shannon. *The Way We Pray: Prayer from Around the World*. (2001) Berkley: Conari Press.