

To Pray or Not to Pray, That is the Question

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ October 21, 2007

I was brought up Roman Catholic and was considered “devout.” I rarely questioned my faith. However, while at college, one day I went to confession. A visiting priest decided that because I was not remorseful about a particular “sin,” I should no longer receive the sacraments until I became properly repentant. Wow! I was surprised...shocked.... Hurt...confused! I was effectively being excommunicated! After the shock, I began to do what I had thus far in my life avoided, I began to think.

Let me set the scene. It was - the mid 1960s, the era of civil rights, the Women’s movement, Viet Nam. I was overwhelmed with the newness of it all. All of a sudden I had lots to think about, to reflect upon, to decide how I – the me I hardly even knew - personally felt about the world around me. And with all these topics, I could now add religion to this list.

I asked, Why couldn’t I be a priest....or even an altar boy? Why do unbaptized dead babies go to Purgatory instead of heaven? Why is the pope always a man?

I began to study the prayers that I had been saying by rote. As I looked through my new lens, I was horrified. I wanted nothing to do with worshiping this male God, and then, with any god. I did not want to prostrate myself, putting myself in this guy’s hands every time I wanted something. I did not want to thank him for every joy. What a dependent status. I wanted to take charge of my life. Anger rose as I became disillusioned first with my church and then with religion in general. I reject God based religion in general and I rejected prayer in particular. I suppressed all thoughts of religion for many, many years. But with time, my anger subsided. It was replaced with a different feeling. I felt a sense of ..loss.

I began to read on spirituality and religion. I realized that I missed many of the practices of my prior religion. As I allowed myself to be open and vulnerable to exploring those feelings, I recognized that, among other things, I missed the comfort of prayer. This insight both surprised and confused me

Maybe I still wanted to pray. But what would that mean to me in my present state of spiritual development? What was it that I felt that I was missing? Would prayer, perhaps in a new form, satisfy that need? Just what was prayer anyway? The discomfort grew until I could no longer ignore it, so I began to explore this powerful longing. I invite you to share this journey with me. According to Merriam Webster, prayer is an address or petition to God in word or thought or prayer is an earnest request or wish. At this point in my life journey I am a non theist so I was not interested in addressing a god, but the second part of the definition, “an earnest wish or request” was one that made sense to me. Another definition, one found in an old hymn also resonated with me. “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed.” Yes, that sounded right.

I decided to look at different types of prayer, not inclusively, exhaustively or intensely, just as an umbrella.

First there is the petitionary prayer, or, as many of us know it, the Request Line. You know: “Puh’leas God don’t let this happen” This type of prayer often has the BIG PROMISE attached. “God, if you just let me do well on this project, I’ll do housework without complaining.” “God, If this sickness passes and I get well, I’ll do charity work for a year.” And then we have every Catholic child’s favorite, “God if you only let my team win this one baseball game, I’ll become a nun.” The prayer request line ranges from personal to global.

Then there are the prayers of emotional release – They are usually the short, exclamations that occur when faced with a crisis. “Oh, God, how could you let that happen,” “Oh, my God!” or a simple “Thank you Jesus.”

Praise and worship prayer is very popular right now and can be seen on many TV stations as well as many churches. Ritualized prayer describes a set of prayers such as the Rosary, Prayer Bead sets or Penance; blessings, prayers of the dead and many prayers of forgiveness and atonement also fall under this grouping of ritualized prayer.

Another prayer style is intercessional prayer. In this type we ask a deity to please intervene, to please help someone besides ourself; It’s closely related to the request line. Let me tell you a personal experience with this type of prayer. Several years ago I was running a learning lab in a strip mall. You know, the kind, a row of picture windows inviting customers in. My business neighbor entered. We discussed my recent eye surgeries and my upcoming surgery. She asked if I would mind if she prayed for me. “Certainly not,” I replied. I was willing to accept all the help that I could get. At this point she stood up, lifted both her arms like an eagle preparing for flight and, in loud voice, started invoking “Oh Lord God Jesus Christ, come to the assistance....” I stood there in reverent amazement, hoping fervently that no one would enter my establishment as she incanted her blessing! She took her prayer seriously and publicly!

Although I do not believe in her kind of prayer, although I was terribly embarrassed by her public demonstration of faith, I also admired her devotion and appreciated her witness. She offered me the assistance of something that she believed in with her whole heart and soul. I was comforted by her conviction and by her sharing.

So we might ask ourselves, if one wanted to pray, how should one pray? I like the following response by Pope John Paul II: "How to pray? This is a simple matter. I would say: *Pray any way you like, so long as you do pray.*"

There are many forms of prayer. We have traditional western style group church prayer - Sit down, stand up, kneel, stand together, say words together, be in silence together. There are also prayer circles and prayer vigils. Both include a whole lot of praying over a longish period of time. For example, groups might pray for the Earth, an ill person or a death row inmate.

Singing and chanting are also forms of prayer. The Lord’s prayer set to music is popular and Ave Maria is the prayer of choice at many weddings. On his official website, Ram Dass has an audio of the consecration of a temple in India. In the town where the temple is located, the people feel that saying the name of God over and over cleanses the lips, mind and heart of impurities thus allowing one to enter a different universe. To correctly consecrate this new temple, the name of God was repeated over and over 24 hours a day for one whole year. Thus, every minute of every hour of every day, for one whole year, passersby could hear in song - _Sh-ree Ram Jay Ram, Jay ah Jay ah Ram.

A **mantra** is a religious syllable or poem, typically from the Sanskrit language. Mantras are primarily used as spiritual conduits, words and vibrations that instill one-pointed concentration in the devotee. They are repetitious, said often in a chant or song like fashion. The mantra that many of us are most familiar with is the Buddhist six syllable mantra. Om Mani Padme Hum which literally means “Behold the Jewel of the Lotus!”

Since viewing a written copy of this mantra Om Mani Padme Hum is said to have the same effect as saying it, people use prayer wheels, prayer flags and also painted stones and signs to

spread the word. The more copies of the mantra one displays, the more benefit; thus, a small prayer wheel has 20 yards of prayer tape with the mantra written over and over inside the wheel and also carved on the outside. As the wheel spins (or the flags blow in the wind), the prayers are spread throughout the world and the benefit associated with them is dispersed. Small prayer wheels look like toys. Large ones line walkways at temples. Although prayer wheels were first mentioned in 400 AD, they have been modernized. For example, since a computer's hard disk spins hundreds of thousands of times per hour, and can contain many copies of a mantra, we can turn any computer into a prayer wheel and many folks do just that.

In the US we have a custom similar to mantra stones and prayer flags. It is called Billboards! Road signs! Barn roofs and Newspaper advertisements. When you see the side of a barn, think not only of the Tennessee signs "See Rock City" but also of "Jesus Saves," and "Have you found Jesus?" billboard signs and bumper stickers.

Prayer jewelry is also popular. These include prayer beads, rosaries, and the crosses that I absolutely loved as a child, ones that you look through and see the Lord's Prayer. There are prayers written on every conceivable tourist item. How about the little cloth bracelets - WWJD (What would Jesus Do) and PUSH (Pray Until Something Happens)? And now we have the Peace Bracelets put out by the American Friends Service as well.

Many would call meditation, prayer; others disagree. Merriam Webster tells us that meditating is to focus one's thoughts, to engage in contemplation or reflection. I like yet another definition, one put out by a medieval monk, Theophilus, who said- "Prayer is talking to God; Meditation is listening to God." Even when we take out the G word, it still makes good sense; "Prayer is a concerted effort to say something; Meditation is a concerted effort to free yourself from your ego to allow new associations to form."

Contemplative or Centering Prayer is a very popular form that is sometimes called meditation. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church centering prayer **is nothing less than a close sharing between friends**; it means taking time to be alone with Him who we know loves us. Whether you use a centering prayer like the Catholics or a Zen meditation, the similarities are striking.

Let us pause now and sing Hymn #352 as a way to personalize the meditative or centering experience.

Many UU congregations affirm: "Service is our Prayer." Social action is, for many, the way of reaching the interconnectedness of the world, the mystical and the right. Jean M Rowe, in a wonderful web article, states: 'I want to know that my life is worthwhile. Prayer is an action, a way of getting beyond our ego-in-charge selves, and more in touch with our interconnectedness. And to pray that kind of prayer, you do not even have to believe in God, you have to believe that there is more meaning and purpose in life and that you are a part of it.'

Unitarian Universalists believe in character. One way to build character is to help others and, as we help others, we find purpose and meaning to life. Service becomes a path to wholeness, to unity, to overcoming the split between oneself and the Other.

Emerson wrote, "All honest work is prayer." Everything constructive we do is prayer." In Sinclair Lewis' work, *Arrowsmith*, Arrowsmith is in his new laboratory and prays for several things ending with "God, give me the strength not to trust in God: This is the prayer of the scientist."

Robert Frost wrote:

*I turned to speak to God, about the world's despair
But to make matters worse; I found God wasn't there.
This is often the experience of the religious liberal who does not relate to the God on the
other end of the telephone line. Frost continues:
God turned to me (Don't anybody laugh)
God found I wasn't there—at least not over half.*

Our question then is: are we there in prayer. For what do we want prayer? What purpose does it serve? Many feel that taking the time to pray, sanctions our search for meaning in life, helps us focus in on what is important to us, develops perspective and adds to the richness of our relationships. Simply put, folks who open themselves to reflection on their needs and desires may embrace more fully the breadth of their existence. For many, prayer is a comfort. One feels listened to, if only by oneself. For others it is the opportunity to indulge in questions, to acknowledge reverence, to reach into the beyond.

And, do Unitarian Universalists pray? Indeed they do, in very many different ways. Many have a difficult time praying without praying to some thing or some body. Although they may have a negative reaction to the term “God,” its okay for some to address the Divine Spirit, Holy One, God Within, or Creative Life Source. For others, that does not work. I know that I tried praying to my divine spark, that core within, the part of me that knows what is good and true for me. But I found that I could not pray to any source. So I tried using the earnest desire approach. Instead of “Source of the Universe, please save Mary from her disease,” I simply prayed, “May Mary get well.” For me, that works.

Daniel Budd, a Unitarian Universalist Minister then at the UU Church of Buffalo New York writes:

The best advice on prayer I have found was given long ago by Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said that prayer was nothing to flaunt about or show off. It is a personal matter, an intimate aspect of our living, and not the public proof of our righteousness. Prayer begins in the heart, that secret place within us all.

Other living traditions have taught me that prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this mystery to dwell. Prayer is a covenant we make to be of service. Prayer is a way of living with the very questions that perplex us.

Prayer is an opening of the human heart. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said “Pray like this,” simply, from the heart.

From a different perspective, The Reverend James Ishmael Ford, minister of First Church Newton Massachusetts and also a Zen Priest writes:

“We can know ourselves and our place in the play of the cosmos through sustained attention to what is going on. I’ve found the beauty and mystery and grace of our existence are revealed in prayerful attention. Through attention we can come to know the connections.

In my thirty years delving into the Zen practices of bare attention, this has been my experience. At the moments with our complete nakedness to what is, we find our

foolishness and glory are all revealed. Here our hearts and minds open. And here, we come to an experience that is worthy of those wonderful words “meaning” and “purpose.” Within this prayer, within this attention, we can find our connections as a deep intimacy and out of this knowledge we find a moral perspective, a call to justice and a peace that passes all understanding.”

Thanksgiving is around the corner. So, here, I include three prayers of table grace that can be used over this holiday season. Each can be started with an invocation or closing to customize it to your personal faith tradition:

May we hold hands quietly for a moment...feeling love flow around us and through us, knowing that as we give love away there is always more within.

As this food nourishes our bodies, may our hearts and minds be nourished also with grater love, sympathy and understanding.

May this food which we are about to eat nourish our hearts, minds and souls as it nourishes our bodies, giving us the wisdom, strength and stamina to do good works.

My favorite prayer is the Peace Song, first learned in a Unitarian Universalist Church, but one that is out of favor now because it contains the phrase “With God as Creator.” This song, for me, is too beautiful to dismiss because of minor theological differences. Why not encourage folks to say whatever works for them. What, you may reply. Then the song breaks down into many voices instead of one uniform expression. Hmm, you mean that we are not all the same? That there is diversity in our congregations. What a novel idea. I close with a reading of the words to the Peace song, my favorite prayer.

*Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.
With friends as my teachers/God as Creator/love as our guide,
family are we.
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.*

*Let peace begin with me.
Let this be the moment now.
With every step I take,
let this be my solemn vow.
To take each moment and live each moment
in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.*

May it be so.