



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Do We Have a Prayer?”

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Three reflections delivered on July 27, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*The function of prayer is not to influence God,
but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.* Soren Kierkegaard

*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.* Mahatma Gandhi

*I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless.
I pray because the need flows out of me all the time—waking and sleeping.
It doesn't change God—it changes me.* C.S. Lewis

Reflections

Karen Solheim:

I pay attention to those voices, those twinges, when I know that something is just not right...not only with the universe in general but also within my small realm of existence in particular. And I twinged when the topic of discussion for my small group ministry was to center on prayer...so I knew that I wanted and had to make meaning out of that which was troubling me. Thanks for being here this morning.

Years prior to my SGM selecting this topic, I knew that prayer was a concept about which I was unsettled. For example, when my principal condoned one of the coaches giving a Christian prayer at our beginning –of-the-year faculty breakfast, I had to file a formal complaint, not a good way to start a school year, but the only way I could have a clear conscience. From this instance, I figured out that I am not against prayer in general, but I do think that broad mindedness concerning public prayer needs to be practiced in a non-religious setting. In a religious setting, well, then, halleluiah, blessed be, Namaste, amen, shalom, salaam ...let the words of that faith tradition dominate.

In years prior, I also realized that my praying as a child was problematic. I remember as a Lutheran youth that the big meal of the day was always accompanied by the Common Table Prayer, the best known mealtime prayer among North American Lutherans: “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. and Let these gifts to us be blest.” However, now as a non-Lutheran adult, I am not

as bothered by the content of the this prayer being recited before holiday dinners in my parents' home but more its rote recitation sans emotion. Instead, I prefer what I affectionately refer to as the Harry Schomberg meal blessing in which each participant shares that for which he or she is grateful. This seems to be a much more real and intimate way to thank the universe for the abundance it provides and a way to know the hearts and minds of one's dining companions.

The classic children's prayer "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" always accompanied my childhood bedtime. In adulthood, I find the last two lines that I learned of this classic 18th century children's bedtime prayer most discomfiting—"If I shall die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take"—What a horrific and disheartening message to give to children...exposing them to an unpleasantry—death—at a time that might not be age appropriate.

Again, however, in my youth through constant mandated repetition, this prayer also became rote and therefore meaningless.

Instead, as an adult for my bedtime "prayer," I prefer a 12-step tool: the gratitude list. As I try to catch the wave of sleep, for each letter for the alphabet, I mentally list one item, one thing, one person, for which I feel appreciation. For example, A—avocados, B—beaches. I don't think I have ever made it through the entire alphabet, not because twenty-six things don't exist for which I feel grateful, but as I begin my gratitude list, happiness and peace fill my heart and sleep then fills my body.

So...prayer for me needs to be real, not rote, simple, and personal.

But why should I pray?

When our SGM discussed the topic of prayer, two of the supplied readings, both of which are contained in today's order of service, resonated:

The first is by Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, widely considered the first existentialist. He writes:

"The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays."

In my past naivety, I really believed and readily participated in the bargaining stage as one of the five as proposed in Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying*. God, if you will only bring me a puppy, I will eat all my vegetables. If you won't let my parents find out that I [you can fill in the blank here], I will become a nun. Well, you get the idea. Imagine my disappointment when my prayers were not answered tangibly...or were they? Regardless of whether you believe that no answer to prayer is indeed an answer in itself, I really was clueless about function of prayer to change the nature of the pray-er.

Lay theologian, novelist, and poet echoes Kierkegaard's sentiment: "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need lows out of me all the time, waking, and sleeping. It isn't change God. It changes me."

Lastly, how should I pray?

One of the most famous Christian prayers is The Lord's Prayer, also called the Our Father or the Pater Noster. According to the New Testament, Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples in response to a request by one of them to teach them "to pray as John taught his disciples."

Contemporary novelist and nonfiction writer Annie Lamott also gives guidance. She writes:

I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple.

She continues:

You may in fact be wondering what I even mean when I use the word "prayer." It's certainly not what TV Christians mean. It's not for display purposes like plastic sushi or neon. Prayer is private, even when we pray with other others. It is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let's say it is communication from one's heart to God. Or I that is too triggering or ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, the force that is beyond our comprehension but that in our pain or supplication or relief we don't need to define or have proof or any established contact with. ..."Let's not get bogged down on whom or what we pray to. Let's just say prayer is communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or Goodness, or Howard, to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something unimaginably big, and not us.

Finally, what should we pray about?

In true Thoreau simplicity of "simplify, simplify, simplify," I really like what Annie Lamott suggests. "My three prayers are variation on Help, Thanks. Wow. That's all I ever need, besides the silence, the pain, and the pause sufficient or me to stop, close my eyes, and turn inward."

Help. Thanks. Wow.

Help. Thanks. Wow.

Jim Thomas:

(To be added)

Merridy McDaniel:

Ok, now.... stop.....thinking....

HAH!

Couldn't do it, could you?

Of course not.

Why not?

Perhaps because, as Descartes concluded a few centuries ago after staying up all night, Cogito, Ergo, Sum, or, Thinking, therefore, Being.

And we don't just think, we think *about* something, like what crazy nonsense is she going to say next?

Or

is Israel going to overrun Gaza; could the Mayan calendar actually have been off by an understandable margin of error with the result that they were right after all and the world really is going to end in an apocalypse that begins in the middle east?

Oh my Goodness Gracious!

Or are the results of that biopsy going to be benign or malignant this time?

We devote some of our mental activity to worrying; some to hoping; some to regretting; some to planning & plotting; some to reviewing and re-living; some to monitoring and some to directing our limbs and fingers and so on and so forth.

Being a non-theist, understanding why I pray, and I assure you, I do indeed pray, is a bit of a challenge.

This challenge is mitigated some by accepting the existence of a plethora of personalities that share my location in the space-time continuum. They aren't, or at least I don't believe they are, autonomous, although my co-workers assure me that they are, and provide endless examples of things I have said in the past that I would have no difficulty at all, denying having ever said, under oath. My co-workers eventually coined a term for these, and call them "merridyisms", loosely defined as something that sort of sounds like it might be true, but a review of the facts will reveal that it is demonstrably false. When I studied philosophy in graduate school, I was never quite able to get past the unshakable belief that both the proposition or assertion "p" and the it's opposite, the proposition or assertion "not p", must both be true at the same time, in the same place. One of my fellow students once threw a chalkboard eraser at me, but not because of that, and as you can see, it had no effect.

As a Unitarian-Universalist, I accept the Universe to be all that exists, and I don't believe in or see any ontological necessity for a Being or Deity that somehow is both independent of existence, is the cause of existence itself, and yet nevertheless will respond positively to a plea or prayer, whether spoken or merely conceptualized, *if properly constructed*, by any one of six billion or so members of my species on this small, watery blue planet, orbiting a nuclear reaction of immense proportions that is but one of an incalculable number of other nuclear reactions whizzing about one another at vast distances, by changing something that is or will be because one of them should happen to believe it should not be the way it appears to be, but should be otherwise, and politely requests the Deity make the change.

No, I'm content with my infinitesimal and insignificant place in space-time, knowing also that I am home to a very large number of bits and pieces of autonomous entities and other stuff that have happened to coalesce and cooperate to bring you the apparition standing before you and uttering a series of sounds that likely make no sense whatsoever.

And yet, I accept as inescapable the conclusion that everything that exists, exists in some relationship with everything else that has existed in the past, is existing now, or will exist in the future.

This interrelationship constitutes the totality of existence to my way of thinking: there is no existence absent relationship to each and every other manifestation, past, present and future, and therefore, my actions and beliefs, my fantasies and fears must inevitably change this interconnected web of existence of which I am a part.

I'm also a fan of the theory that there may be some state, condition or event that has only the most remote probability, yet is nevertheless possible, and that if it is possible it could just as well happen now as a trillion years from now, like, for example, my speaking coherently for five minutes about what prayer constitutes for this particular non-theist self-centered bit of bio plasma.

So what do I pray for, eh?

Mostly, being a self-centered bit of bio plasma, I pray to be spared some humiliation which I so richly deserve – that my perseverance in some folly, misbehavior or another magically does *not* result in the customary outcome to be expected from such folly or misbehavior. I do indeed continue to do the same things and still believe in the possibility of different outcomes.

And yet, in the words of my Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki, that is Not Always So:

I also pray that we finally do beat our swords into plowshares and that our children's children and all their cousins learn to live in peace with one another and the other living beings with whom they share this place, their home.

Thank you very much.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How do you understand prayer or meditation, and what experiences have contributed to this understanding?
2. In the face of conflict, crisis, grief, and perhaps even despair, has prayer or meditation found a place in your coping and recovery? Is so, how?
3. In the wake of great relief or celebration, has prayer or meditation found a place in your affirmation of what has happened?
4. If you pray, who, if anyone, or what are you praying to? Is prayer possible if you don't believe in God?