



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Role of Prayer for Unitarian Universalists”

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Centering Thoughts

The more you pray, the less you'll panic. The more you worship, the less you worry. You'll feel more patient and less pressured. Rick Warren, THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTMAS

Be not forgetful of prayer. Every time you pray, if your prayer is sincere, there will be new feeling and new meaning in it, which will give you fresh courage, and you will understand that prayer is an education. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

Pray to catch the bus, then run as fast as you can.

Julia Cameron, THE ARTIST'S WAY: A SPIRITUAL PATH TO HIGHER CREATIVITY

Love people who hate you. Pray for people who have wronged you. It won't just change their life...it'll change yours. Mandy Hale, THE SINGLE WOMAN: LIFE, LOVE, AND A DASH OF SASS

Sermon

Most UU,s will answer “No” when asked if they pray on a regular basis. I believe that if we have a better understanding of prayer and study its effects, we might be more comfortable with and benefit from the spiritual practice of prayer. I will start us off with a prayer that I have found, as an example of the type of prayer that I will be recommending here and which might make us more open to the topic. This prayer is called: “Prayer of an Anonymous Abbess” but was really written by Margot Benary-Isbert. It is addressed to “The Lord” but I will ask any who object to that to please ignore that aspect as I will be speaking to the issue of who to pray to in a moment. It goes like this:

Lord, thou knowest better than myself that I am growing older and will soon be old. Keep me from becoming too talkative, and especially from the unfortunate habit of thinking that I must say something on every subject and at every opportunity.

Release me from the idea that I must straighten out other peoples' affairs. With my immense treasure of experience and wisdom, it seems a pity not to let everybody partake of it. But thou knowest, Lord, that in the end, I will need a few friends.

Keep me from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point.

Grant me the patience to listen to the complaints of others; help me to endure them with

charity. But seal my lips on my own aches and pains -- they increase with the increasing years and my inclination to recount them is also increasing.

I will not ask thee for improved memory, only for a little more humility and less self-assurance when my own memory doesn't agree with that of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be wrong.

Keep me reasonably gentle. I do not have the ambition to become a saint -- it is so hard to live with some of them -- but a harsh old person is one of the devil's masterpieces.

Make me sympathetic without being sentimental, helpful but not bossy. Let me discover merits where I had not expected them, and talents in people whom I had not thought to possess any. And, Lord, give me the grace to tell them so.

Amen

Ok. I am sure that there are a few others beside myself who could benefit from saying that prayer from time to time.

While we are contemplating this small bit of wisdom we should review some definitions. One definition of prayer is: "Prayer is the practice of connecting to something deeper and more meaningful in life." It usually is rooted in a sense of spirituality. It may be spoken or silent. It may be done individually or in groups. It may involve reading or reciting previously determined words or may be spontaneous and unscripted. It is different than meditation in that it is directed at something; usually a higher or deeper power but it may be directed to oneself. One of my friends who is a *devout atheist* says that when he begins his creative work he says a prayer to himself to remind himself that he is most creative when he ignores the rules of his craft that he had been taught. If his name were Joe his prayer might be: "Joe, ignore all those rules and work from your heart."

That is a perfectly wonderful way to pray and is acceptable to Atheists, Agnostics and Humanists who might object to addressing their prayers to say, God. However, if you don't want to address your thoughts to anyone or anything you can still benefit from some meditative activity. My suggestion today, is to try some actual prayer; addressed to whatever or whoever you find holy, sacred or meaningful. I believe you will find there is benefit in it. I will address this a little later in this talk.

There are several kinds of prayer and several elements found in prayers. Prayers of praise exalt the higher power and humble the one praying. While humbling one's self is a useful exercise I don't think much of prayers of praise. Friedrich Nietzsche said, "I cannot believe in a God who wants to be praised all the time."

As a theist, the God I believe in is not such a narcissist that he needs me to constantly tell him how wonderful he is. There is some value however, in reminding yourself of the strength of the higher power to whom you pray so that you will feel that your prayers are effective.

Another form of prayer is a prayer of Thanksgiving. There is actual evidence that reviewing a “gratitude list”, a list of what has to be thankful for, on a regular basis, tends to make one happier. If you do not wish to address your thanks to a higher power, I would suggest focusing on the list rather than on who you are thanking.

I am reminded of the words of Søren Kierkegaard who said: “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.” That brings us to another form of prayer the prayer of requesting the higher power to do something for you or to change the world to make you happier. This is like what happens before most football games (or wars) when each side may pray for victory. I am confident in my belief that God as I understand him does not pick sides in such events. Now if one prays for no injuries or that those praying perform to the best of their abilities; those are prayers that might be answered; especially if there is a higher power. Indulge me in a few more quotations on the subject.

First of all if I may quote myself: When my psychotherapy clients speak of what they pray for, I often would tell them, “God always answers prayers, but often the answer is “No.” Now to quote some more illustrious folks than myself, both Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi have each said the prayer is not asking. She is quoted as saying, ““Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts.” While Gandhi’s quote is, “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.” Gandhi is also quoted as saying, “The inner voice is something which cannot be described in words. But sometimes we have a positive feeling that something in us prompts us to do a certain thing. The time when I learnt to recognize this voice was, I may say, the time when I started praying regularly.” And lastly, President John Kennedy may have said it best at a National Prayer Breakfast when he suggested, “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men.”

What I am suggesting is that the prayers that are most useful to UUs and most likely to help anyone who wishes to pray, are those in which we pray to be better people. These are prayers which we invoke that which we find holy and powerful to aid us and in which we spell out the thoughts, attitudes and actions that will bring us closer to becoming the sort of person we understand we wish to be.

That is not to say that when we are most afraid, most threatened or in difficult or dangerous situations, we should not pray for health and safety for ourselves and those we love. Prayers in those circumstances can reduce our anxiety and have physiological as well as psychological effects to strengthen our own healing abilities and even our immune systems. Prayer has effects on both our cortisone and adrenaline levels. There have numerous studies that show better outcomes for cardiac surgery and cancer treatment when the patient prays. Prayer calms us and helps us focus before any stressful event. There are even some studies which show that if someone else prays for a patient they have better outcomes than if they are not prayed for, even if the patient does not know that they are being prayed for. There are some studies that do not show this effect but it is clear that paying and knowing others are praying for you makes you feel better, perform better and boosts survival rates.

When I was waiting for surgery once a nun came into my room to ask if I wanted her to pray with

me. I was hooked up to monitors and I was able to see that my vital signs improved as we prayed. My heart rate and blood pressure dropped significantly. I could clearly see the benefit. It is said that there are no atheists in the fox holes. Be that as it may, prayer in extreme situations does clearly have value.

Michelle Roya Rad, MA PsyD, list several psychological benefits to prayer. She notes that among other effects:

Prayer, when done with the right awareness and intention and in moderation, can be beneficial in a number of ways:

1. It can give people a moderate sense of optimism and a healthy dose of hope...
2. It can help people cultivate a sense of gratitude... and to remember that at any moment, there is so much more positive than negative to life. And that sometimes, what seems negative may be otherwise.
3. It can help people delay gratification and control impulsive actions by using this time to calm your mind
4. It can give people time to be able to see things from a broader perspective.
5. It can help people focus and concentrate.
6. It can help people forgive easier, and detach from the past and move forward.
7. It can be used as a time of self-affirmation to increase one's confidence ...

She concludes that, “by repeating a series of meaningful, positive, lifting, and thankful phrases, you can retrain your brain to be more positive, be aware, be able to focus and concentrate and to let go of unwanted thoughts.”

Do UU’s pray during services? Yes we do even when we don’t acknowledge it. Look at the words to our favorite hymn #123. Clearly this is a prayer to “The Spirit of Life.” We pray for justice for compassion, for closeness and for freedom. We ask the spirit of life to come unto us to achieve those feelings within us. This is just the sort of prayer of which I encourage us to use.

And where there is sadness, joy,
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Now if you would open your gray hymnals to #702 and read with me in unison the UU version of this prayer ...

Now you can decide for yourself which version is most moving and meaningful to you. I do not of course pretend to know whether there is or is not some kind of higher power but if you do believe then you may address your prayer to that power and if you do not you may still evoke something in yourself by contemplating prayerful words.

I am suggesting that you give some kind of spiritual practice or prayer a place in your life so that you may derive the benefits of doing this. Specifically I would suggest that you either find a prayer that you like or modify one to suit your needs or even write one yourself if you feel a bit of a creative spark and find a brief moment to pray daily or (at least with some regularity) as I do with my daily morning prayer. If you do, I will caution you to focus on the meaning of the words you are praying and not just recite them by rote since if you do the words will lose their power and meaning. You might alternate or switch prayers from time to time to prevent that from happening.

Your prayer may be a poem or even a song. St. Augustine is quoted in the Catholic Catechism as saying, “He who sings prays twice.” So you may sing your prayer but still focus on the meaning. After all how many of us have been aware of the prayerful aspect of many of our hymns?

I would also recommend that at the end of the day you reflect on what you are most grateful for that day. You may or may not be grateful to a higher power but the process of focusing on the best aspects of your life each day, despite how difficult the day may have been, has been proven to improve your overall happiness which you may take as blessing.

I will end this talk with a prayer (no surprise there). This is a prayer I wrote one day as part of a group exercise in deepening our spirituality. I present it as another example of the kind of prayer you might use or create yourself for your own spiritual practice. Please take a moment to look it over and if you wish to modify it note the end paragraph and then let us all say this together. I will start with the first line which you may say or change or skip as you feel best:

A Prayer, by David Jarrett

Spirit of Life and Love,

Help us to celebrate our mutual humanity.

Help us to always acknowledge that that we are, at our cores, more alike than different.

Help us to recall that whatever elevates us is so much greater when it also elevates others.

Help us to always be aware that what harms or damages one of us harms and damages us all.

Help us to strive to be open and ready to reach out to others in need.

For when we are part of many we are always so much more than just ourselves.

As UUs we may choose to invoke whatever we find most holy and divine in the first line or skip the invocation completely. We can also change “Help us to” to “Let us” or “We shall strive to”. Use the words and phrases that most move and inspire you.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How does the idea of prayer make you feel?
2. Do you pray? How often? To whom do you pray? What is your prayer like? What do you say?
3. What are the best kinds of prayers?
4. Should we pray more during Sunday services?
5. If there is no God, does it still make sense to pray?