

Let us Pray
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Let us pray.

Some of you may have bowed your head a bit. Maybe you closed your eyes. Perhaps, you took in a deep breath as you waited to hear how I started the prayer and to whom I addressed it.

Others may have groaned a little inside, because you don't pray, you don't like the word pray, and wait.... didn't we just pray a few minutes ago?

Still, others didn't close their eyes or bow heads – either because you thought that I wasn't about to actually pray, which I wasn't, or because prayer is not part of your theology.

Unitarian Universalism is a pluralistic faith. Our theologies differ, and that includes the way, and to who, and how, and If we pray.

In seminary, as part of our ministerial formation, we are asked to have a spiritual practice to support our development as spiritual leaders. Makes perfect sense! Even before attending seminary, I engaged in spiritual practices. I have had an on and off again relationship with meditation for years. Meditation and I have formed a friendship and even courted at times. Then, we lost touch – sometimes for an extended period of time – yet, we keep trying to find our way back to each other.

According to the Buddhist Centre, meditation quiets the mind by encouraging and developing “concentration, clarity, emotional positivity, and a calm seeing of the true nature of things.”¹ I want all those things, but our on again off again relationship makes me consider the possibility that meditation may not be the path for me. It may not be my “best friend forever” spiritual practice. It may be time to move on and explore other contemplative practices.

I'm intrigued with prayer. Instead of trying to quiet the mind, I've heard it said that being restless, doubtful, distressed, and distracted are ideal emotions for engaging in prayer. That sounds good to me! So, prayer and I are getting to know each other. Or, to be more accurate, we are becoming re-acquainted with each other. Prayer and I were companions many years ago. It was a complicated and tumultuous relationship that ended badly. So, re-engaging in prayer is like being re-introduced to a childhood friend who had once betrayed my trust.

As a child who was raised Catholic, I was taught to pray. My family prayed faithfully before every meal. I said my prayers at bedtime to bless all the people I love and asked God to keep them safe. There was one prayer that I never told my parents about. It was one that I prayed silently from my young heart to Jesus. I prayed to not be disabled anymore. I prayed to Jesus because in my religious education classes, I learned that he performed many healing miracles.

¹ <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/text/what-meditation>

Jesus made the blind see. The people with leprosy were healed. He even brought people who had died back to life. And, most important to me... a paralyzed man was able to rise and walk. If Jesus could perform miracles for them, then surely if I prayed hard enough, he would perform another healing miracle. But, no miracle came. In spite of my most earnest prayers, I was still disabled.

As a legacy of my youth, I have a complicated relationship with prayer. I have many questions, doubts and fears. In my preaching class, the professor told us sometimes the sermon a minister preaches is the sermon they need to hear. It's the place where they are seeking to find clarity and deeper truth and meaning for questions that have no clear answers. This is one of those sermons.

As I take tentative steps toward re-engaging with prayer, I'm finding I have resistance, doubts and – like a good Unitarian Universalist – I have more questions than I have answers. So, I'm preaching to you today as a seeker, to share some insights I've learned, and to have a conversation of possibilities. I have a prayer for this sermon. My prayer is, it will ignite curiosity and inspire desire for further discussion and mutual exploration. There is a conversation in the parlor after the service and I'm excited to explore Prayer with you. To hear about your insights and experiences so we can learn together.

But, for now, let's start at the beginning – What is prayer? And, Who or What are we praying to? Although our theologies of how, or if, we pray may differ, within a wide range of faith traditions, prayer is a relational practice and it involves communication. It's communicating what is in one's heart to a mysterious something that surpasses understanding. Something unseen. Something we might call divine intelligence or Love energy... Something to do with the eternal, with vitality, intelligence, kindness.

There are many names for God – Allah, Adonai [A-Don-I], Spirit, Holy One, The Divine, Gaia, Goddess, The Sacred, The Eternal Metaphysical Absolute. But, let's not get bogged down on who or what we pray to. Let's just say prayer is communication from our heart to the Great Mystery of Life.

After twenty-five years of praying, the author Anne Lamott wrote the book, *Help. Thanks. Wow.* She has come to believe that all prayers are variations on these three essential prayers.

“Help” is asking for assistance when we feel desperate or hopeless.

“Thanks” is expressing gratitude.

And **“Wow”** is often prayed with a gasp when we are feeling awe at the world.

Thinking of this time of year, we can see these essential prayers revealed in the story of Hanukkah and in the spirit of Advent, which is to wait in hopeful expectation for something good to come.

Tonight, is the first night of an eight-day celebration to remember the miracle story of Hanukkah. During the second century, the Jewish people rose up against and drove out the

Greek-Syrian oppressors who had desecrated Jerusalem's holy Second Temple. Judah the Maccabee ordered the Jewish people to re-dedicate the Temple and light the menorah. The problem was, there was only enough oil to keep the menorah candles burning for one day. However, the candles continued burning for eight days, giving them enough time to find a fresh supply of oil.

In this story of Hanukkah, I imagine the Jewish people were feeling desperate to make the Temple holy once again. Having tremendous love and faith in Adonai, a common Jewish name for God, I imagine they gathered around the menorah in fervent prayer, imploring Adonai for Help.

- As it is with prayers, I imagine the people in the Temple prayed and then waited, in hopeful expectation for something good to happen.
- I imagine when they saw the menorah candles continuing to burn day after day, they gasped in awe of the miracle that was happening before their eyes. Surely some of them exclaimed, "Wow!"
- And, I imagine when their friends returned in time with a fresh supply of oil, they bowed their heads and said prayers of Thanks as grateful praise poured forth from their joyful hearts.

In Anne Lamott's book, the chapter on Help is the longest and that's probably with good reason. Even those who don't believe in the power of prayer, probably let a cry of "Help!" slip out now and then with a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe something bigger than us will respond. Prayer is a leap of faith. We don't really know who or what is listening or if our prayers make a difference. And yet, I do I find myself letting out a cry for "Help" when my heart is holding more than I can bear.

When I'm in the depths of pain and fear, my rational mind turns off and I spontaneously step into the hope that someone or something is listening and will answer my prayer. I sometimes hear myself saying "God, please help!" reverting back to a younger theological version of myself, seeking intervention from a personified Deity who I want to believe loves and cares about me and my personal suffering. I am like a child who is crying out in despair to a parent, "Please Help!" I can't do this by myself. This is too big to bear alone.

Often our first prayer is a cry from deep within ourselves to the eternal source of Life or Love asking for help. We may find ourselves spontaneously praying for Ourselves, Loved Ones, and the World when our heart aches and we are feeling helpless and afraid. Aren't there times when you too want to cry out in despair, "Please Help!" this is too big to bear alone?

When we're at the end of our rope and don't think we can take one more step forward, I think many of us want to believe that prayers make a difference. But, who knows if it does. Maybe. Maybe Not. Who can say?

Prayer is like planting a seed deep in the earth and then waiting for something to happen. We're not sure if the seed will sprout. We're not sure if it will have the right conditions to

grow. We're not sure what kind of flower will emerge, or even if it will be a flower. It's a mystery. We pray, we wait, and stay open to the hopeful expectation that something good is happening.

The type of waiting I'm talking about is not passive though. We can engage in what I call Active Waiting. We can actively water the seed of our prayer, give it fertilizer, make sure it gets enough sunlight and has the best chance to grow and flourish.

In Active Waiting, we are co-creating with the Mystery of Life and making ourselves ready by being attentive to what is unfolding. We are listening to the whispers of our heart and being open to receiving an answer to our prayer in whatever form it takes. Prayer is a mystery. Responses happen in their own time and in their own way.

As hard as it is, an important truth about prayer is that "No" is also an answer. Just because our belief that something is in our best interest does not always mean that it is. It's really impossible to know for certain what the best possible outcome of a situation is – for ourselves or for others.²

When I was a young girl, praying to Jesus for a miracle and to no longer be disabled. The answer certainly seemed like a hard "No." But, fast forward 30 years later and I did experience a healing miracle – not of my body, but a healing of my heart and spirit. It was a healing that shifted my relationship with my disability.

I went from rejecting the disabled parts of myself to embracing them as part of my Whole self. It was an inner healing that happened over time through years of actively engaging deep personal and spiritual development. Is it a healing miracle? To me, it is.

I don't want to give you the impression that everything is now sunshine and roses. There are still times when having a disability is really hard and I wished I wasn't disabled. But, my despair doesn't last as long and I'm able to accept the challenges of having a disability with more grace. And, I am deeply grateful for that.

What I'm most grateful for is – having a disability has been the greatest catalyst for my spiritual journey. As in any spiritual journey, it's a spiral. Always another challenge with an invitation for greater acceptance of what we resist and the possibility for greater wholeness.

Perhaps Divine Intervention types of miracles do happen sometimes. I hope so. I like to believe they do. However, more often, manifesting the change we desire requires some effort and participation on our part. Prayers are often answered in the place where effort and mystery meet. When we bring all of our energy and commitment to the table, mysterious doors can

² Wikstrom, Erik Walker. *Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005. 42-43.

open in unexpected ways. Sometimes our prayers are answered by giving us something we didn't even know we wanted or needed.

How can you tell if prayer is making a difference in your life? It's often subtle and sometimes it's not immediately obvious. We begin by paying attention to what is happening right before our eyes and seeing the first rays of hope that our prayers are being answered. Has your behavior changed over time? Have you become more generous? Or more patient? Has your world become bigger? Is your heart more tender? Are you ever so slightly kinder to yourself? These are some of the ways that indicate prayer is manifesting changes in your life.³

Why do we pray and does it make a difference? A scene from the movie *Shadowlands*, may sum it up best. When C.S. Lewis is asked by a colleague about his wife's cancer, "Have you prayed for her healing?" And Lewis replies, "That's not why I pray. 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."⁴

Maybe that's exactly why we pray, because it changes us. And, when we start noticing those changes – may we gasp in awe at the miracle that's happening before our eyes and exclaim, "**Wow!**" Then take a moment to say a prayer of "**Thanks**" in gratitude for the miracle you helped manifest.

May it be so. Amen.

³ Lamott, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow*. Grand Haven, MI: Brilliance Audio, 2012. 21.

⁴ <https://www.quotes.net/mquote/84491>