

“What Is Prayer?”

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Time for All Ages – “Ways to Pray”

*Today I want to talk with you guys about prayer,
which is something a lot of religious people do, including some of us here.*

*You know how, when your mom or your dad or your friend
does something nice for you, and it makes you happy, you say thank you?
Or have you ever seen your folks get dressed up extra-fancy?
You might see them and say, “Wow, you look really nice today,” right?
Or imagine something different:
what if one of your friends says something mean to you
or pinches you or something like that?
Could you say to that friend, “Hey, I didn’t like that!
Please don’t do that again!”*

*Well, most of us know how to say those kinds of things to the people in our lives.
But people aren’t the only things in our life
that make us feel grateful, or happy, or mad, right?
Do you guys like seeing the fall colors on the trees, all the pretty leaves?
Have you ever seen a tree that was so pretty,
it made you want to say “Thank you”?
I sure have!
And sometimes those trees are so pretty,
I actually do say a little “Thank you” in my mind.
For me, that’s a prayer.
I’m actually not sure who I’m thanking exactly.
I have friends who believe in God,
but I’m not sure I do.*

*Me, I think there's something there that makes the trees grow
and makes all of us be alive,
and I don't know if that something is listening exactly,
but I've tried talking to it, just to see,
and I've decided it feels good to me to say "Thank you!" to that something
when I feel full of that thankful feeling for something really beautiful or really nice.
For me, that's praying.
You don't have to do that, but if you want you can try it out
and see how it feels.*

*And sometimes I feel like I need to talk to that something out there
when I'm mad or sad or worried about something.
Have you ever gotten really mad or sad about something that happened
that wasn't anybody's fault?
A while back I was really mad and sad because my grandma got sick.
She was really sick for a long time, and the doctors tried and tried
but they couldn't make her better.
It wasn't anybody's fault,
but I was very sad and very mad and very worried about my grandma.
And I felt better when I sat down and talked to that big something out there
about how I was feeling. I said, "Please help me with these feelings,
help me show my grandma how much I love her,
and please help my grandma with everything she needs."
Now, the truth is, it didn't change a whole lot on the outside.
My grandma was still sick.
Prayers aren't like magic tricks.
Just because you pray for something doesn't mean it's going to happen.
But I felt better.
And while I was talking it all out I figured out another way I could feel better
was to call my grandma and tell her I loved her.
So I did that, and it made both of us feel better.*

*A lot of people like to pray just by being very quiet
and thinking thoughts in their mind.
And I want us to take a little bit of time right now and practice that.*

*Let's all of us get comfy and take a deep breath in and out.
Now we're just going to be quiet for a little bit,
and while we're being quiet you can think about how you're feeling right now,
and if you're feeling happy you might say "Thank you" in your mind,
and if you're feeling sad or mad or worried,
you might say "Please help me" in your mind.
Or you can just sit and enjoy that feeling of being quiet and resting.
That's good too.*

*So let's be quiet together. You can close your eyes if you want.
And I'll let you know when it's time to come back.*

(Silence)

*Let's come back together now.
This is something you can do whenever you want.
Thank you for being with us today.*

Sermon

It's so nice to be back with you.
It's good to see your faces.

Well, you know, I've really already given the sermon today
when I talked to the kids.

I hope you all know that was for you too!

But it's nice to have a little more time
to talk with you in a more grown-up way
about this rather touchy subject of prayer.

Some of us love prayer and rely on it.

Some of us don't feel any need for in our lives.

And that's OK. That's fine.

I'm just glad to have a chance to talk with you
about this part of my life, and you can make of it what you will.

But especially I want to play with this question of,

can you pray if you don't know who you're talking to,
or if you're pretty sure you're not talking to anyone but yourself?

Let me tell you a little about my growing-up experiences with prayer.
When I was growing up, my family was not a family that prayed,
as far as I knew.

We never went to church.

We didn't say grace at meals or anything like that.

But, still, religion and spiritual practices
leaked into my life here and there.

I had a babysitter for a while who must have been Christian,
because I remember she used to tell me about Jesus
while she was sitting for us.

In fact, I remember my parents kept this "baby book"
to write down different milestones in my life.

This book fascinated me, and once I learned how to read and write,
I was very proud of being able to write in it myself!

There was a space in the book to write down
your child's "first place of religious instruction."

Six-year-old me didn't know what that meant,

but one day I thought about it and boldly wrote down "Our House,"
because that's where that babysitter told me about Jesus!

That was about the extent of my religious training, with the exception
of a week at Lutheran Bible School when I was nine or so, because all
the other neighborhood kids were going.

I didn't like it. I thought the whole thing was kind of creepy,
except for the arts & crafts time when we got to make Shrinky-Dinks.
That was cool.

Still, somehow along the way I did get the idea
that lots of grownups believed in this person called God
who was out there somewhere,
and there was this thing you could do called prayer
to talk to this God-person and ask for help when you needed it.

I remember when I was 10 years old,
our family adopted a puppy, this super-cute black lab we called Bo.
Bo got sick when he was still just a puppy.
The vet told us he had a really serious disease called parvovirus,
and he might die from it!
I was so scared and sad. And I didn't know what to do.
So I started praying to whoever, whatever might be out there,
"Please don't let my dog die, please don't let my dog die!"
I had no idea if this God-person was really real,
but at least this was *something* I could do
that would maybe, maybe help.
And Bo did get better.
He made a full recovery and got to come home to us.

I wondered, then, if my prayers had helped him get better.
I look back now, and since then
I've seen way too much sorrow and grief in too many people's lives
to believe those kinds of desperate prayers we sob out late at night
have any kind of magical power to save our loved ones.
Yet we still whisper those prayers:
Please, please, please.
Because the torment of powerlessness is so painful.
When a loved one is sick or in danger,
and everything that can be done is being done,
and it still might not be enough,
what is there left to do but beg?
Please, please, please.
Our English words *prayer* and *precarious* come from the same root.
There's a reason for that
which has nothing to do with doctrine or belief.

It's taken me a while to learn that, though.
In my teens and twenties
I never thought of myself as someone who prayed.
I didn't believe in a God, and therefore prayer was off the table.

It just wasn't part of my life.
Yet, at times when I was confused or struggling,
I'd catch myself whispering, "Help me know what to do—
help me see clearly."
If you had asked me who I was talking to,
I could not have told you.
The words just welled up. I still didn't believe in a God,
but the words just came.

I'm grateful that I found a Unitarian Universalist community
that helped me make some kind of sense of my experience.
Gradually I've gotten OK with calling it prayer.
I still don't know who or what I'm talking to,
except that I'm pretty sure "who or what"
is a completely inadequate way to refer to this enormous mystery
at the heart of everything.
And I actually don't think it matters any more that I don't know.

My personal theory of world religions
is that there is something there, something behind everything,
but it is so enormous and powerful and overwhelming
that our limited brains can't take it all in.
We come up with, or somehow we're given,
these images of what this thing is—
Christians and Jews and Muslims call it *God* or *Allah*.
Hindus call it *Brahman*.
Buddhists call it *Nirvana* or refuse to name it at all.
Goddess, Spirit of Life, Great Spirit, the Tao, the Way—
there are so many names for parts of this *something*,
and personally I believe all these names, all these images,
are incomplete; they can't get at the whole because nothing can.

Paul says "Now we see in part, we know in part,"¹
and that's what I think too.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

And about prayer—personally, even if you think you know who you’re talking to when you’re doing this thing we call praying, I don’t believe you really *can* know.

I love what Rumi says:

“When you eventually see through the veils to how things really are, you will keep saying again and again, ‘This is certainly not like we thought it was!’”²

And so I think prayer is a way of reaching out to that *something* which none of us really understands, reaching out with the tools we have—our words, our thoughts, the energy of our hearts—to say what is welling up within us, whatever it is, and in my experience it is good to do that.

It helps.

It clarifies.

Often it comforts.

It shows us a way forward.

I don’t think there’s a right or a wrong way to pray.

Rumi has the words for what I’m trying to say:

“Ways of worshipping are not to be ranked as better or worse than one another. . . .

It’s all praise, and it’s all right. . . .”

But I’d like to tell you a little about how I personally pray these days, not because I think it’s the *right* way, but mostly because we Unitarian Universalists tend to be shy about these things, and I think we can really help one another by being open about our spiritual lives.

So here’s what I do.

² Jelaluddin Rumi, “Moses and the Shepherd,” from *This Longing*, trans. C. Barks and J. Moyne, available online at <http://home.datacomm.ch/rezamusic/rumi.html>.

Sometimes I'll find myself confused or troubled
about something I have the power to do something about.
This seems to happen a lot, actually!
And when it happens, I try to put the problem into words,
really honest words, as best I can—
to name the problem really clearly and fairly,
and for me this seems to help me draw on whatever wisdom I have.
Writing it out helps me.
And sometimes I pray for qualities I need to draw on
to work with whatever it is that's happening.
I use Buddhist metta meditation a lot:
“May I be filled with loving-kindness....”
Sometimes I sing—I'll get a hymn stuck in my head
and use it as a sort of mantra, and I like that too
because it's a way of using other people's words
to work with what's happening in my life,
remembering that all this human stuff
is something I share with so many other people.

And I still do pray when I or someone or something I care about
is in some kind of trouble, and I'm sad or afraid,
and I can't do anything practical to fix it.
I've often heard it said that Unitarian Universalists don't do
petitionary prayer—asking for stuff for ourselves.
But, honestly, I do, because it's the one thing I *can* do
when every other resource is exhausted.
I don't think we can magically fix stuff in the outside world
with our prayers. But I love what Abraham Heschel says:

Prayer cannot bring water to parched land,
nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city,
but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart,
and rebuild a weakened will.³

³ *Singing the Living Tradition* #497.

Or here's another way of saying it:

Prayer doesn't change things—
prayer changes people and people change things.⁴

And I want you to know I often say little prayers for you all.
If I drive by your home,
I'll say a quick little "May so-and-so be well."
If I know one of you is having surgery,
I'll spend a few minutes thinking of you, holding you in my mind,
sending out a wish that everything will go well
and you'll come through just fine.
Again, I have no idea if it "works" in any material sense.
Some people think it does.
I do it because I care about you
and I *do* believe it gives us strength
to know other people are wishing us well.
This is something any of us can do for each other,
and anyone we love, anyone we're concerned about.

I learned another little prayer practice from a friend I worked with at a hospital one summer. My friend Jacquie told me whenever she hears an ambulance or a fire truck or a police car go by with their sirens on, she does what she calls a "flash prayer"—just a quick "Everybody be well and safe." So I do that too, or when I hear about something sad that's happened in our city, or anywhere in the world, really. A little reminder that we are connected and it's good to support one another with our loving thoughts.

And, finally, my very favorite way of praying is to say "Thank you."
Some mornings I get up and just think about all the good things
and all the beauty around me.
You can really get into a groove,

⁴ Rev. Lon Ray Call, quoted in Wayne Arnason & Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists* (Skinner House, 2008), p. 81.

saying, “Thank you, trees! Thank you, sun! Thank you, grass and birds and pond and rocks, and kitty playing with my pencil, and wind, and breakfast—thanks for that too!”

I find it’s actually kind of hard to stop once you get going.

But stop we must, at least for now,
because this is the time we like to stop
and sing a little bit more together
and then go back out into the day.

So. It’s been a joy to share these thoughts with you.

I’d love to hear what *you* think.

And I wish you abundantly well today
and throughout this beautiful holiday month of December.

May everyone all around the world be well.

Amen.