

**Only When The Plane Is Landing:
A Unitarian Universalist Reflection On Prayer**

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This morning, I want to focus on the spiritual practice of prayer...which is – without doubt – the most universal spiritual practice known to religion and humanity. I am unaware of any significant world religion which does not regard prayer (in some form or another) as an essential, everyday practice of human faith and being. And yet – that said – it must be acknowledged that many Unitarian Universalists are about the practice of prayer in their own spiritual lives. Indeed some UU's reject the whole idea of prayer out of hand, and at best are willing to meditate now and again in their spiritual lives.

Years ago -- as I was preparing to preach an earlier sermon on prayer from a Unitarian Universalist perspective -- I asked the entire choir of the church I was then serving in New Jersey if they personally prayed (which was my way of asking if, as individuals, they had a spiritual practice of prayer in their lives). One of the sopranos, a wonderful woman named Sally, was the first to speak up, and teasingly said "Only when the plane is landing!"

Now...everyone in the choir laughed, of course...as many of you did -- for who hasn't muttered at least some sort of urgent prayer for deliverance on a turbulent or scary airplane trip? But the truth is that for many Unitarian Universalists, prayer (at least as it is traditionally understood in our culture) is not a spiritual practice they regularly or intentionally engage in. Perhaps the first and foremost reason for this hesitation about prayer is that many Unitarian Universalists (I am assuming a majority of us here this morning) do not believe in a personal God to whom one can address personal concerns and supplications and requests. Prayer (again, as it traditionally understood in our culture) is something that happens when human beings purposefully focus their attentions to talk to (or communicate with or make requests of) their God. The old joke about us is that when Unitarian Universalists pray, they address their supplications "To Whom It May Concern." But it is even more than that. For most Unitarian Universalists, the idea that there is a transcendent or supernatural being to whom they can address their deepest life concerns (or even further, ask for something concrete to change or miraculously happen in their individual lives) is simply one that does not make spiritual sense to us.

But if you, like me, occasionally sneak a peek at those Sunday worship services telecast from the Christian "megachurches," you know that this is exactly how many (if not a majority in our culture) believe prayer works. On those broadcasts you can watch people fervently clasping their hands together, closing their eyes, and silently asking God to do something specific in or for their lives – to save their marriage, to cure their spouse's cancer, to help their teenage son get off of drugs, to help them stick to their diets, to find them a new job, bring rain to the drought-stricken landscape (Governor Perry recently implored all the people of Texas to pray), or end the conflict in the Middle East. You name it...God is asked by faithful people to change the way life is going, for particular people, in particular situations. Now...let me be very clear

about this...while I have absolutely have no intention (this morning) of telling someone else that their understanding or practice of prayer is wrong or silly or misguided, I must tell you that this kind of prayer (where God or some other supernatural force, presence or being is asked to intercede and change the course of natural, earthly events in accordance with our personal, human needs or desires) makes absolutely no spiritual sense to me as a Unitarian Universalist.

Surely you all remember the media coverage about the so called "Miracle on the Hudson" -- when a highly skilled U.S. Airways pilot by the name of Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger safely landed a passenger jet that had fatally collided with a flock of geese onto the surface of the Hudson River, thereby saving all 155 passengers and crew members on board. A few days after that heroic event, The Washington Post ran a fascinating article (on the Saturday religion page) about what the harrowing experience had spiritually meant to some of the survivors. The gist of the article was that many of the passengers -- who had apparently prayed fervently to God as the plane was going down -- now believe that God directly responded to (and directly answered) their personal prayers that day, and had no doubt that God had (in particular...on a personal, purposeful basis!) saved them from otherwise perishing, because (these survivors had concluded) God had some future purpose in mind for them. The belief expressed by most of the survivors interviewed for this article is that the God of this creation can be counted on to supernaturally answer personal prayers when human beings find themselves in dire situations.

Now...I must honestly tell you that whenever I encounter this kind of spiritual thinking, I wonder about the prayers of those, on other doomed airliners that are not as lucky as the passengers on U.S. Airways flight 1549. My inquiring mind wants to know, if God saved those faithful U.S. Airways passengers in response to their prayers (for some larger cosmic purpose), why not other passengers on other doomed airliners -- who (as good and well-meaning people) undoubtedly prayed just as earnestly and hard? This understanding of prayer -- when a person asks a "higher, supernatural power" for specific, personal wishes to be granted...when we asks God to "intercede" on our personal behalf -- has (at least for me) a huge spiritual problem attached to it! Because if these wishes are not granted (for example if the pilot does not quite succeed in safely landing the plane onto the river so all can escape) it is (by logic) either God's fault (for not being powerful or loving or wise enough to bring about the results we seek) or our fault for apparently not praying right or long enough (or persuading God that we deserve a favorable outcome). This understanding of prayer (and how it might work) is antithetical to everything -- absolutely everything -- I believe about prayer (and the way life on this planet actually works!).

First and foremost, for me as Unitarian Universalist -- as I have already said -- prayer is categorically not the process of "lifting up" some personal desire of mine to some supra or extra natural force or being for intervention, alleviation, correction remedy or solution. I don't believe it is spiritually wise or realistic to ask some mysterious, transcendent force (whether you call it God or something else) to miraculously "cure my friend's cancer," or "make my spouse stop hitting me" or even "help my favorite football team win the super bowl," or "bring the rains we need to Lake Okeechobee." We may desperately want such things to occur, but I do not believe this is the way the universe works. In my more than 60 years of living, I never once experienced (what I understood or observed to be) a divine suspension of the natural laws of

the universe in ways that are personally beneficial to me...not once...and so I will not waste any spiritually time praying for such in my own life. As Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen bluntly put it, "The prayer of little faith is filled with wishes that beg for immediate fulfillment. The person of little faith prays like a child who wants a present from Santa Claus."

Now again, please again hear me...people are (of course) free to pray howsoever, to whomsoever, and for whatsoever they wish. If, for example, Governor Perry really believes that the prayers of the people of Texas will actually bring rain, he is free to ask for it. All I am saying is that for me (as one, faithful Unitarian Universalist) prayer and prayerfulness looks and works and means something profoundly different than what it seems to mean to most people in our culture...profoundly different.

So...all that said...what is an understanding of prayer (and prayerfulness) that is useful to me -- and might perhaps also be useful to you as a Unitarian Universalist? Again...the answer I will be giving this morning is fiercely my own...knowing full well that others of you have you own understandings and practices of prayer (which, incidentally, I would love to hear about from you, either in conversation or by e-mail response...for in a spiritually diverse Unitarian Universalist congregation like this one, I am sure that there are many differing -- and appropriate and useful -- concepts and practices of prayer...so let me hear from you if you have a prayer practice that differs from that which I am about to describe).

Alright...To me: 1) "prayer" (the noun...the thing I might do with my heart and mind and attentions), and, 2) the condition of "prayerfulness" (the process...the verb that can happen in our spiritual lives in many forms, moments and venues of our daily living)...is simply caring intentional, focused, mindful connection (depth relation, if you will) with self...other persons...and the wider world.

Prayer (which can happen when you are sit quietly in a great, hushed European cathedral...or when you are driving in a mini-van full of giddy children to a soccer match...or when you are having a quiet morning alone with coffee and your own thoughts...or when you are quietly walking the beach with a spouse of friend on a beautiful Summer day...or when you wake up in the middle of the night and think about a dear old friend a thousand miles away who is struggling with an illness) prayer is bringing yourself fully (in connection, communion and caring) to what is truly at hand...it's a state of keenly paying attention so that your life can be lived in the depths of connection and caring it was intended for. 20th Century British poet W. H. Auden affirms in his famous poem Christmas Oratorio, that prayer is "paying attention to something other than yourself." And Creation Centered Theologian Matthew Fox puts it, "The stuff for prayer is life itself...pray is a growing in awareness of life and its mysteries."

Now...some prayer in our lives surely happens in the way we tend to first think of prayer...when a solitary person sets aside some quiet, meditative time to close the eyes, shut out the external activity and noise of the world, and focus in upon the deep concerns on their heart and mind. Henri Nouwen says of prayer, "Being calm and quiet all by yourself is the freedom to stroll in your own yard, to rake up the leaves and clear the paths so you can easily find your way. Through prayer, we recapture our own life afresh, we once again become masters over our own houses." And Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly reminds us: "Our lives grow too complex and

overcrowded. Before we know it, we are bowed down with burdens, crushed under committees, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments. We are too busy to be good wives or husbands, good companions to our children, good friends to our friends, and with no time at all to be friends to the friendless. We are weary and breathless, and we know that our life is slipping away, without having tasted so little of the peace, joy, and serenity we seek. The times for the deeps of the silences of the heart seem so few. Yet from over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by..." Humanist meditator Lawrence LeShan says virtually the same thing in a different language: "We meditate to find, recover, and come back to something of ourselves we once dimly and unknowingly had and have lost without knowing what it was or where or when we lost it. We may call it access to more of our human potential or being closer to ourselves and reality, or to more of our capacity for love and zest and enthusiasm, or our knowledge that we are a part of the universe and can never be alienated or separated from it, or our ability to see and function in reality more effectively."

Perhaps some of you have a personal prayer (or meditation) discipline of setting aside some focused, prayerful moments each day. There are several kinds of meaningful, enriching prayer one can do quietly with oneself.

1) First, there are (ever and always) prayers of gratitude...prayers when you pause in your life to name what you are grateful for. Roman Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart once said, if you manage only one prayer in your life, and that prayer is simple "thank you", it will be sufficient." Perhaps you are grateful for the intricacies of nature...or grateful for those special persons who love you (and whom you love in return)...or grateful for the great blessing and mystery of life itself -- whatever you are thankful for it can be deeply rewarding to give that voice deep within the silence of the self...gratitude spoken within the heart empowers us to live life with greater vibrancy and depth.

2) Secondly, there are prayers of confession, when you acknowledge to yourself the ways in which you have fallen shy of your best self - and constructively resolve in your heart to do better, and live more finely in the future. I believe it can do us (and those around us) a world of good when we pause to take a critical look at our actions, our errors, and our shortcomings...for only when we acknowledge (full and unafraid) the ways in which we have "missed the mark" in life, does our aim (and intention) become better.

3) Third – and this is the kind of prayer that is most meaningful to me and I assume many of you -- there are prayers of connection, contemplation and focus...when you set aside time and your spiritual attentions to reflect upon your life, your loved ones, your world and that which you call God (or *ultimacy*) so that you can know and cherish yourself (and the realities that give shape to your existence) more deeply. Often prayers of connection and contemplation take the shape of a direct prayer for another person... when you lift up in your consciousness loved ones, friends, co-workers, even strangers whom you know to be in pain or distress (as I did for so many months with my gravely ill friend Paul) – again not (for most Unitarian Universalists) to ask God (or some other supernatural force) to miraculously suspend the laws of nature to alleviate the problem, but -- as my colleague Erik Wikstrom writes in his chapter on prayer in my book on

Everyday Spiritual Practice “To hold them in your consciousness, bring them to your awareness” -- so that you will (in the days and years to come) care for them and do for them whatever you are able.

I make the assumption that it is (generally speaking) this kind of prayer of connection, contemplation and focus that you all practice when you come forward (during Community Connections time in our service each Sunday) and lovingly place a stone in the water of our receptacle of community concerns for someone or something you are concerned about. This act of bothering to quietly coming forward in our worship is, as W.H. Auden implored, the holy process of “paying attention to something other than” ourselves.

Such physical prayer became very meaningful to me personally every Sunday when my friend Paul was dying. At the church I then served in Washington DC, we lit candles of joy, sorrow and prayer each and every Sunday, and for months on end, I used (and relied upon) that weekly occasion to call to heart and mind my dear friend and his family. Each Sunday When I quietly lit my candle (calling his face and voice to mind) I want to again emphasize that I was not asking for a medical miracle to reverse his irreversible cancer -- as much as I would have liked to dream one was somehow possible. But rather I was lifting up my consciousness, concern and love for a family and an individual I was carrying deep in my heart. Such prayers are the life-giving process of mindfully bringing ourselves to those relationships and realities that bless our lives and give them meaning at the deepest levels. We can, of course, in any kind of prayer pray for things to change -- in our own interior lives...in our families...in the lives of others...in our culture or the wider world – but not change by magical hocus-pocus or some sort of fantastic, supernatural intervention– but change by our efforts, our commitments, our compassions and faith.

In any case, lighting a candle...dropping a stone -- or otherwise physically focusing your attentions on someone or something you care about -- is a pathway of prayer...an act of prayerfulness...because it is creating in your life an intentional, focused mindful, connection with self, other persons, and the wider world...connection with the deep relationships in life that really matter...connections that have the power to make a difference in the way we live...and love.

And let me say one more thing about another kind of prayer we regularly share in here at UUFVB on Sunday mornings. When we give voice (in our time of sharing joys and concerns out loud with one another) to specific prayers for others --when one of us stands up and asks that “We send our thoughts, we send our love and prayers” out to someone they love facing a life difficulty – again I would like to think we are not (as a congregation of Unitarian Universalists) do so believing that our prayers will work in some sort of magical (or supernatural) way that will be able to reverse someone’s heart disease, or take away their pain of losing a child, or somehow otherwise suddenly transform the difficulties they face. As I have already said, as a religious tradition, we don’t believe in that kind of supernatural, magical, or extra-sensory prayer (where the predictable, natural laws of creation are somehow suspended or changed by some sort of extra-natural spiritual energy). The way I believe prayers we have for others “work” (and the reason I believe such prayers are valuable and efficacious, and make room for them on Sunday) is that when we focus our love and hope and concerns on others who are struggling in

life we express the community, caring and connection we feel for others – and that does two things:

1) It can lead the one who prays to do something concrete and caring (to go that afternoon and visit your sick friend...or to write the letter of condolence that is on your heart...or to offer myself to the one in need, or even -- if your prayer is for peace in Gaza and Israel -- to write that letter for congressional action, or go to a meeting and join with others working for peace in that region)...and

2) Such prayer (when we communicate to the one for whom we have been praying that we have focused our attentions and love on them), tells them they are cared for in human community.

Again...I don't believe in supernatural magic and miracles – and as a Unitarian Universalist never have -- but I do believe that our love and caring (when expressed through prayer or other actions) have a magical effect on those who receive it. I believe prayer has amazing healing power...not like the slick faith healers on TV who allege to suddenly take away someone's paralysis or cancer in hysterical public prayer...prayer heals (rather) by reminding the one prayed for that they are a part of a community of human caring and connection...prayer reassures them they are not alone, it promises them that they will always be held in the reliable arms of love of those who care for them...and what could be more healing than that?

There is one more important thing I must reaffirm about prayer and prayerfulness for Unitarian Universalists this morning...and that is that prayer (and the state of prayerfulness) can happen (and can make a healing, calming, connecting difference in our lives) right here...in the midst of all our busy and cluttered daily lives. For example, I often pray while out on one of my daily bike rides...what a perfect time (with the wind in my face, and the sun at my back, and my heart beating in rhythm with my legs) to lift up people and things I care deeply about in prayer. We need not retreat to some remote, peaceful monastery to learn how to pray in our daily lives. In my book on Everyday Spiritual Practice, my colleague Kathleen McTigue tells the old Christian folk tale about: "The saintly Brother Bruno, who was at prayer one night when he found his concentration interrupted by the loud croaking of a bullfrog. He kept trying to ignore the noise, but the harder he tried to concentrate the more annoying the sound became. Finally, he leaned out [the monastery] window and shouted, 'Quiet! I'm at my prayers!' Instantly there was complete silence, as the bullfrog and every other creature obeyed his command. Brother Bruno settled back into prayer, but now he found himself even more deeply disturbed by a nagging doubt: Why would God create the bullfrog and its rasping voice unless there was something pleasing in the sound? Could it be that Bruno's own prayer sounded, to God's ears, like the arrogant croaking of another sort of frog? Bruno could not push away his uneasiness, and so he finally leaned out his window again and gave the command, 'Sing!' The throaty croak of the bullfrog again filled the air, along with all the other creatures that had fallen silent. Brother Bruno listened carefully to the sound, and to his amazement he discovered that it was beautiful. Once he no longer resisted it as noise, the joyful concert actually enriched the peacefulness of the night. With that discovery [Kathleen writes] Brother Bruno understood for the first time in his life what it really meant to pray."

My colleague's point is as simple as it is profound. While a few of us might (from time to time) manage to steal ourselves away from life here in the hubbub of life here on the Treasure Coast for a get-a-way weekend of silent prayer and focused retreat – and thus have the opportunity to practice some pure discipline of prayerful contemplation and meditation – for most of us if we are to find a meaningful prayer life it will be right here, in little moments snatched out of the whirl of work, children, and other forms of daily chaos and clutter that we find ourselves in. As Rev. McTigue puts it: “Since my spiritual life is not framed by silence and contemplation, where can I find that life within the noise and activity that surround me? How can I find the moment that came to Brother Bruno, the moment in which, by really listening to the language of my world, I discover the deeper and truer prayer?”

This is the great spiritual question I would have us all ask ourselves this morning. How do we develop the (within our often busy and distracted hearts) the ability to really listen to the holy, healing language of our lives and worlds? The good news is that there are so many everyday pathways, methodologies, and venues available to us for create mature and meaningful prayer...there are so many ways and places to find that intentional, focused, mindful, caring connection with self, other persons, and the wider world. Maybe you will commit to setting aside a few moments (first thing each morning...or last thing each evening) to quietly focus on those deep and loving relationships you have with the life within and around you. Perhaps you will learn to slip into prayer when walking, driving, riding bike, doing dishes, or quietly savoring your first cup of morning coffee. Prayer happens whenever we tune out the extraneous noise of living to focus on loved ones far away...or the beloved world right at your fingertips. Perhaps you will create a simple home altar (in the corner of some quiet room in your house) consisting of a few sacred objects from your life (a pebble from the beach of your childhood...a simple gift from a dear old friend...a few photographs of loved ones both living and dead) and spend a few moments each day in silent contemplation and connection there with those simple, sacred communions of the heart. Yes, you can (if you are particularly disciplined) go to pray in a monastery or trudge your way high up on some pure, contemplative mountaintop...but the good spiritual news you can also pray right here...right now...in the everyday clutter of stimulation, movement, and busyness that is your life. If you develop an ear for the “language of your life” and take a few moments each day to focus on what you've already got...Life itself can thus become a prayer.

So I pray you, dear friends...find some time and energy each and every day to enter into an attitude of prayerfulness – to be mindful...to be focused...to remember loved ones...to seek caring correction...to be grateful...to connect deeply with the world that is so precious at hand. Take time each day to quietly focus your mind and heart on life's deep and holy places...touch them in prayer...and be blessed.

Amen.