



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Versatility and Power of Prayer

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A few weeks ago, I was enjoying my bowl of cereal when I took notice of a story being reported on morning television. The story was about a woman in Indianapolis who was robbed at gunpoint. She worked at a check-cashing business and was the only other person in the building at the time of the robbery. The surveillance video was amazing to watch: she got down on her knees and began to pray and, after a while, the would-be-assailant joined her, removed the singular bullet from the gun and handed it to the clerk, prayed with her and confided in her for 40 minutes before leaving the store with \$20. He turned himself in shortly thereafter.

The woman's interview revealed what went on during that time. She said that, not knowing what to do, she began to pray for her life *and* the assailant's! She asked that her life be spared for the sake of her children and spouse, but then she also prayed that this young man not ruin his life with such an act of crime. Weeping, she prayed that he realize his worth and choose another path in life. She prayed that he see that it was not too late for him to decide to do so. After joining her in prayer, he confessed that he has a 2-year-old son to feed as well, has had no household income for a long time and, in desperation to feel some financial relief, made the bad decision to turn to crime. He assured her that he wouldn't hurt her, saying, "Talk to me. No one will talk to me. I have nobody." Prayer is powerful stuff.

Prayer has been on my mind for a while lately and this story helped in keeping it there a bit longer. Before beginning this internship, I served for twelve months as a chaplain intern at UCSF Medical Center, where I heard many patients and their families either swear by or swear off prayer. Not surprisingly, in times of sickness, I heard more of the former than the latter. I began to more fully recognize its usefulness in all of its many forms. In his novel, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, Roger Zelazny gives the prayer of a character who is an agnostic chaplain giving last rites to a dying man, here is his prayer:

Insofar as I may be heard by anything, which may or may not care what I say, I ask, if it matters, that you be forgiven for anything you may have done or failed to do which requires forgiveness. Conversely, if not forgiveness but something else may be required to insure any possible benefit for which you may be eligible after the destruction of your body, I ask that this, whatever it may be, be granted or withheld, as the case may be, in such a manner as to insure your receiving said benefit. I ask this in my capacity as your elected intermediary between yourself and that which may not be yourself, but which may have an interest in the matter of your receiving as much as it is possible for you to receive of this thing, and which may in some way be influenced by this ceremony. Amen.

I imagine *my* prayers were similar when I began my chaplaincy internship! To better serve the needs of the patients, I soon became comfortable praying in the style and the religious language of the patient's tradition. I spent a good portion of my days praying aloud with patients but had no answer when asked by a supervisor, "Do *you* pray?" I didn't really know the answer to that one. *Do* I pray? I hadn't made direct petitions of God since childhood, but I am learning that there is more to prayer than simply making requests of the Divine. The story of the clerk and the gunman reminds me that though it *does* build a relationship with the Sacred, prayer need not be about a person in the sky granting wishes, but can be powerful as a conduit of compassion; a way of connecting people to their shared humanity. That connection through compassion, in and of itself, is miraculous.

Petition prayers are often what we think of when we define prayer. Think about it: when we're stuck in traffic, "God, please don't let me be late for work!" But oftentimes, those who make petitions in prayer, as in the story, are doing more than asking for favors. This form of prayer can state our hopes and can also state our individual and communal intentions. For example, at a social justice rally, "May we continue to work for peace..."

Sometimes these prayers are simple yet from the heart, as in times of tragedy and at other times, through poetic language, such prayers use metaphor and imagery to make petitions known. We pray petition prayers such as these every Sunday. Many times they come in the form of hymns. Most Sundays we sing "Spirit of Life", in which we ask the

Divine to move our hearts to compassion and inspire our hands to work toward creating justice. I chose to mix it up a little bit this week and sing, "Spirit of Truth, of Life, of Power" instead, which is another prayer. In fact, all of our hymns this morning are prayers set to music, which is often the case with hymns. When we sing them, we pray them communally. This is why there's the old joke about why UU's can never sing together well: because we're always reading ahead to see whether or not we agree with the words!

UU ministers also often introduce prayer by asking the congregation to "join in the spirit of prayer and meditation". Are they different from one another? Prayer need not contain words. **Contemplative prayer**, or mysticism, has roots in every major world religion. The psalmist writes, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalms 46:10).

When we sit in quiet contemplation, we can come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of ourselves, of each other, and of the world around us. This can be prayer. We may use contemplative prayer to critically examine ourselves and connect with a deeper meaning and purpose in our lives. These are listening prayers. As humans, we all share a spiritual need for this sense of meaning and purpose. Prayer can help meet this need.

Another use for prayer is the **prayer to express wonder and awe**. This form of prayer may be either spoken or silent. Much of the Romantics' poetry reads as prayers of awe and wonder, as in William Wordsworth's *My Heart Leaps Up*:

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky. So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man; So be it when I grow old,
Or let me die! The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

I played the cello in grade school (although not very well) and have always been a great fan of Mozart. I used to love to listen to Mozart when I had a paper to write and sit right next to my stereo speakers with my book on my lap as a desk. I could concentrate better if it was booming, of course.

But, sometimes I would find myself setting down my paper and pen and closing my eyes and allow myself to be amazed as the subtleties of the soft flutes floating above me would give way to an explosion of the strings and tympani drums pounding on the ground. I would experience something not unlike Wordsworth and his rainbows! I have heard these prayers referred to as "praising God". I also call such prayers "prayers of humility", as they serve to remind us that we are each but a small part of an enormously wondrous universe. The strange thing is that, in doing so, they also remind us that *we are each a part* of an enormously wondrous universe! In other words, when we pray prayers of awe and wonder; prayers of humility, we gain an awareness of our interconnectedness.

A form of prayer that the revolutionary in us all resonates with is prayer as prophetic witness. These prayers serve to call attention to the stuff that most of us would rather not look at. **Prayers of prophetic witness** are often also known as prayers of lamentation, due to the sorrow present to those living in or bearing witness to injustice. This ancient form of prayer is hauntingly relevant today, as this excerpt from the Jewish Scripture, the Book of Lamentations, could be describing so many scenes of violence and hunger throughout the world:

*They cry to their mothers,
'Where is bread and wine?'
as they faint like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers' bosom. (Lamentations 2.12)*

The prayer that we may be most recently familiar with is the **prayer of thanksgiving**. This form of prayer may actually extend your life! Well, at least that claim has been made time and time again by several studies on the extended health benefits of gratitude. Regardless of whether or not these studies offer any legitimate scientific merit, being thankful certainly doesn't hurt. It is so easy to focus on the negative aspects of our lives and, in these hard times, it isn't difficult to remember the ways in which our lives could use improvement. The spiritual practice of being thankful through prayer is a viable means of retaining a spirit of hope and perseverance. As a child, I loved the simple nightly

mealtime prayer of thanksgiving used in the Madeline storybooks, "We love our bread, we love our butter, but most of all, we love each other!"

So, I am still asking myself the question: Do I pray? I believe that the answer is, "I am learning how." I laughed when a talk show host recently asked a little girl performing back flips on her show, "How did you ever learn to do all of that?!" and the girl responded, out of breath, "Practice." The same goes for prayer. You may have heard prayer referred to as a "spiritual discipline" or a "spiritual practice". I am learning that this is exactly what it is. Prayer takes both regular practice and discipline. Prayer is *intentional* spiritual reflection. Whether planned or spontaneous, communal or solitary, prayer always has a beginning and an end and a purpose. To many of us, it does not come naturally. I used to not pray because I became hung up on whether or not someone or something was receiving my prayer and would respond. Then, I came to understand that this is unnecessary- that the prayer *itself* was the response. Each form of prayer is reciprocal. They are each about giving and about receiving. In prayers of petition, we offer our hopes and receive hope in return. In prayers of contemplation, we give away our haughtiness and receive love and connection. In prayers of wonder and awe, we give our praise and receive beauty. In prayers of prophetic witness, we give our hearts and receive justice and solidarity. And, in prayers of thanksgiving, we give our gratitude and receive blessings. And so, my prayer today is simply: I pray that we continue to find ourselves engaged in prayer and that, in prayer, we continue to find ourselves, each other, our world, and our Sacred Truth.

Amen.