

A UUs Take on Prayer

A service by Laurie Stuart

Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Welcome:

Welcome to the Upper Delaware Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. This morning we begin a month-long exploration of prayer and spiritual life. Interestingly enough, while many of us may or may not have a prayer practice, or one that we have identified as such, there is an awful lot written about prayer from a Unitarian Universalist perspective. Prayer, like God, almost, and who are you praying to anyway, is almost one of those uncomfortable subjects in UU circles. So this morning, I want to put forth the essential place of prayer in our daily lives and the need to explore and move along all those pieces of resistance to this tool. I want to put forth that as we are all part of an interconnected web, and with the growing science of a connected consciousness, that it is, indeed, our obligation to approach our lives with a consciousness that reverently connects us to an open mind, and loving heart and helping hands. It is my prayer that this service will be an exploration that prompts you to seek a greatest of spirit that is profoundly evident when our lives are lived in prayer.

Opening Reading:

Are you a Unitarian Universalist who wants to pray? Or do you know some UUs and find yourself curious about their religious practices? If so, read on.

1. Light a chalice. While a chalice in UU tradition is a candle in some kind of cup or holder, it doesn't need to be fancy; simply place a little tea candle in a candle holder and light it. Blow out the match, and look at the flame for a few seconds to bring yourself to the present moment. This step is optional, but it's highly recommended.

2. Close your eyes. Some people find it easier to calm themselves and concentrate on what's being said, without distractions, by closing their eyes.

3. Center yourself. Take a few moments to become centered within yourself. Imagine your soul or life spirit being active in all parts of your body, and then slowly calming and coming together at your heart. Some Unitarian Universalists may hit a gong and raise their hands. As the sound slowly drifts, they lower their hands. Consider doing this especially if you have trouble feeling centered.

4. Say a prayer. There are many many possibilities; here's a common example:

We light this chalice,
for the light of truth,
the warmth of love,
and the fire of commitment.
We light this symbol of our faith,
as we gather together.

5. Personalize the prayer. Add whatever wishes or concerns are on your heart and mind, either silently or aloud, for example, "I send my positive thoughts to Uncle Joe during his surgery and ask for a quick and full recovery." If you don't know who you're praying to, don't fret, you're in the same boat as many UUs. If the prayer is heard and answered by an external power, that is good. If the prayer just makes you feel more peaceful and connected to the life spirit of the universe, that's good too.

6. Extinguish the chalice. Unitarian Universalists often will not blow out a ritual candle, but rather will use a candle-extinguisher -- a bell-shaped, inverse metal cup that hangs down from a handle to cover the flame. But nobody's going to "get" you if you blow it out with a puff of breath! If someone recited the prayer with you, you may choose to blow out the candle together. Enjoy watching the drifting smoke.

If more than one person prays together, take turns lighting and extinguishing the candle.

You may pray at any time simply by saying positive wishes for yourself or others, either in your mind or aloud. Direct your prayers to whatever God you believe in, or to a beloved symbol from a world religion, such as Jesus, Gaia, or a saint.

Because Unitarian Universalism is a religion without proscribed rituals and beliefs, you may use prayers from any religion that are meaningful to you. You will see a wide variety of prayers, some borrowed from other faith traditions, used respectfully in UU congregations.

If you pray or meditate with your eyes closed, make sure the candle is safe from dripping, tipping, or combustible materials such as paper or fluttering curtains.

<http://www.wikihow.com/Say-a-Unitarian-Universalist-Prayer>

Announcements: Sharon, Pat, Stephen

Call to Worship: Responsive Reading #568

Chalice Lighting:

When the mind knows, we call it knowledge.

When the heart knows, we call it love.

When the Being knows, we call it prayer.

Opening Hymn: I've Got Peace Like a River, Hymn 100

Candles of Joy Concern and Sorrow

Story: The Agreement

Once upon a time, before there were any people walking around in this valley, there were bears. They had an agreement with the salmon

The salmon would come upriver every autumn, and the bears would acknowledge this and take what they needed. This is the way it was with everything. Ever one lived by certain agreements and courtesies. But the salmon and the bears had made no agreement with the river. It had been overlooked. No one thought it was even necessary.

Well, it was. One autumn, the river pulled itself back into the shore trees and wouldn't let the salmon enter from the ocean. Whatever they would try, the river would pull back and leave the salmon stranded on the beach. There was a long an argument, a lot of talk. Finally, the river let the salmon enter. But when the salmon got up into this country where the bears lived, the river began to run in two directions at once, north on one side, south on the other, roaring, heaving white water and rolling big boulders up on the banks. Then the river was suddenly still. The salmon were afraid to move. The bears were standing behind trees, looking out. The river said in the middle of all this silence that there had to be an agreement. No one could just do something, whatever thy wanted. You couldn't just take someone for granted.

So for several days, they spoke about it. The salmon said who they were and where they came from, and the bears spoke about what they did, what powers they had been given, and the river spoke about its agreement with the rain and the wind and the crayfish and so on. Everybody said that wthey needed and what they would give away. Then a very odd thing happened – the river said it loved the salmon. No one had ever said anything like this before. No one had taken this chance. It was an honesty that pleased everyone. It made for a very deep agreement among them.

Well, they were able to reach an understanding about their obligations to each other, and everyone went his way. This remains unchanged. Time had nothing to do with it. This is not a story. When you feel the river shuddering against your legs, you are feeling the presence of all these agreements.

The Agreement, by Barry Lopez, "One hundred Wisdom Stories from around the world," Edited by Margaret Silf.)

Offering: Guide my Feet #348

Unitarian Universalist Views of Prayer

Introduction: In a pamphlet edited by Catherine Bowers, eight Unitarian Universalists (UUs) respond to the questions "How do you pray?" "Why do you pray?" and "What role does prayer play in your life?" These questions, of course, assume an affirmative response to the previous question, "Do you pray?" Some Unitarian Universalists would simply respond, "No."

The responses in this pamphlet reflect the wide variety of approaches to prayer among Unitarian Universalists. We have within our congregations a rich diversity of opinion and belief about prayer and many other religious matters. We invite you to join with us and bring your own perspective to our ongoing dialogue.

—Catherine Bowers, Editor

Homily: Prayer, an agreement

In "Worship that Works," Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz write:

"Prayer can cut through our intellectual barriers and touch our hearts, enabling us to feel truly held and embraced by community and by love. ...

"The most meaningful prayers are not cleverly written but sincerely delivered.... The purpose of prayer is to put the mind and the heart together in a spirit of attentive, calm, and quiet awareness. When a prayer does not contain a shred of the person who offers it, it is a hollow echoing of words, regardless of its poetry, craft, or style. ...

"The purpose of prayer in transformative worship is to allow enough silent time in the worship for transformation to occur. When we sit together in silence, when we lift up in prayer the gamut of human experience and emotion, we create a time to reflect on these things. When we are invited to a period of meditation and can focus on our breath or a word or an image, the action has the ability to distill our thoughts. When we can listen fully and reflectively to the "still small voice" within, we may be surprised and encouraged by what emerges.

One of the ways that I access that "still small voice" is to write in a journal. Here's what I wrote on May 31.

"I breathe in.

I sink into the feeling of peace. I am content with my life. I understand that my traumas are ancient and that my soul will grow through discernment of my place in the world."

That entry was following a visit to Muir Woods, where I stopped to listen to a grove of redwood trees. "You are connected to the ancients," the wise redwoods told me.

My prayer for answers are always addressed to trees and answers are always heard.

I had a transcendent moment while praying at a co-workers mother's funeral. It was following communion and it was a second service I attended in that church that morning. Driving from some two hours away I arrived early enough to event Friday morning mass with the Catholic School at St. Gregory's in Bayside. It was following communion (something that I had never done before going to seminary) in the second service. (I did worry that the priest would think me breaking all the rules.) After having received the host, interestingly there was no wine at the funeral, and there had been at the Mass of the school, I made my way back to the pew and sat

down and prayed for all those around me. I don't know what was different; it's not like never get lost in prayer. But this time I was consumed in earnestly blessing people's lives. I vaguely recall running through a list of people and heartfully blessing their lives. It was not that I was blessing their gifts in my life. What I remember was an experience of total union with them. I can't remember who or any of the details. What I do remember is that I was totally present to the blessings of others. And in that moment of consciousness focused on the other, I experienced a greatness of spirit. It was not a still small voice, it was a greatness of spirit.

I touched it again while attending the last intensive weekend of my Graceful Leadership class. We did an exercise where we paired off and said to our partner: "In relationship to this conversation with me, I imagine you are feeling "xx". And because this was an exercise of identifying our own wants and desires in relation to the other, I said things like: "I imagine that you are experiencing contentment." I imagine that you are intellectually engaged in this conversation with me." It was amazing what a switch that happened when I owned our own needs and desires in relation to the other. In being totally transparent and focused on the other, I experienced a greatness of spirit.

Craig Hamilton in his Evolutionary Enlightenment class talks about his belief that all of our consciousnesses are connected. And how our small shifts benefit the whole. Science is beginning to have the capacity to measure in invisible connections of our consciousness.

And therefore I invite you to consider prayer an agreement of our humanity and our inherent existence in the world. It is an agreement that we make with the earth. It is our commitment to our spiritual growth and to each other.

Congregational Response.

I have a longing to return to our native place, to find reverence in our daily lives, a reverence that fuels a connection to everyone and everything. It is ancient, set in the post-modern world. It offers an opportunity to live a life of greatness of spirit.

I think we all get there on totally different paths. And we are fortunate that we will share those paths, have them become more well worn, celebrated and
in this religious community
in the days ahead.

Closing Words:

I pray to the birds.

I pray to the birds because I believe

They will carry the messages of my heart upward

I pray to them because I believe in their existence,
The way their songs begin and end each day
— the invocations and benedictions of earth.
— I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear.
— And at the end of my prayers,
— They teach me how to listen.
— Terry Tempest Williams, *Earth Prayers*, page 53.

Closing Hymn: For the Beauty of the Earth #21

Benediction: Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day"

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention,
how to fall down into the grass,
how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?