

**“Prayer: An Evolution”**  
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On a brilliant, sunny day last March, I put a prayer in the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The wall is divided into men's and women's sections, like most public religious places in Israel, and there is a teetering plywood divider holding the sections apart. (I had been fooled once, seeing a sign with a female stick figure, and thought I was heading into the ladies' room.) I noted with some irritation that the men's section was twice as large as the women's, with much fewer devotees. But once I got to my section, I warmed up to the experience. There were women of all shapes and sizes, ages and nationalities. Many were Orthodox Jewish women in modest dress (long sleeved shirts and ankle-length skirts). The Orthodox women held small prayer books up close to their faces and davened, a kind of prayer where you bob forwards and backwards. There were Italian ladies in black, crossing themselves. There were shy-looking Chinese women wearing kerchiefs and tiny gold crosses. There were bold pairs of girlfriends from New York taking pictures of one another in prayer. And there was a line for the available spots at the wall, so you needed to go about your prayer business quickly.

I jotted a note: *Help me and help everyone work toward compassion and peace*, and then I looked for a secure spot, so that my prayer wouldn't fall out. A silly idea – because when I looked down, I saw a fluffy little pile of fallen papers that ran the entire length of the wall. If the keepers of this sacred space didn't do something about them, I realized, the little piles would soon fill up the entire square. They probably had to sweep them up daily. What did they do with these prayers? I hoped there was some kind of ceremony, where they were burned and released. I hoped it wasn't just the wastebasket, but there didn't seem to be anyone around to ask.

Our tour guide was quite testy with me for not meeting him on time for our next group tour. It was part of the itinerary – *Ok, did it, prayed, let's go*. But I didn't mind. It was one of the few times in this place famous for its religious beauty and history that I experienced a personal moment of devotion. This was probably my most exotic experience of prayer, but it was not entirely different from the others. Prayer for me has become a very natural, ordinary part of the day. Sometimes it's hurried and I'm already worried about making my next meeting. Other times it is leisurely and nourishing. There are prayers that I share with other people, such as at bedsides and in worship, and prayers that are entirely private. Its forms are arbitrary – stand at this wall and not that one, use these words and not those – and its essence is the strength it can impart to millions of people in facing this painful, difficult life.

What is prayer? And why talk about it in mixed company, like a Unitarian Universalist congregation? When Josh and I set out to offer sermons on spiritual disciplines, prayer was the one that came most quickly to mind. It is my most prized spiritual practice in my personal toolkit, and has gotten me through many a rough patch. It helps order and center my day. It opens my heart. And yet I know that for some of you, prayer does seem absurd, like little pieces of paper that fall, unheard, going nowhere. Others of you have been “burned” by prayer. You prayed that your child would live, and he died. You prayed that God would help your marriage stay together, and you are divorced. For some of you, that's why you're here at a Unitarian Universalist church. You are seeking refuge from this disappointing and heartbreaking business of prayer.

My goal in this sermon is not to make prayer enthusiasts of everyone here. For those who are curious about prayer, I hope to offer you some new ways to think about it, and some more options

besides the traditional ones that have fallen flat for so many of us. For the skeptics, I have a different sort of goal. I'm reminded of comparative religion scholar Huston Smith's introduction to his classic book, *The World's Religions*. He said that in presenting these beliefs and practices, his goal was not to get the reader to become a Hindu or a Muslim. Smith himself never converted his own beliefs, in response to any of the religions he studied. Rather, he hoped that the reader would come away thinking, "I can see how an intelligent person might think that." So my hope this morning is that you might understand how an intelligent person might pray. I don't claim to know, by the way, which of you are the skeptics and which are the spiritual seekers. I suspect there is some of both in all of us.

My idea of prayer and my experience of prayer are now quite different from what they were when I was a child. Back then, it was what you might expect: down on your knees, hands folded, asking for things from an imaginary bigger, smarter, stronger person. This kind of God resembles Santa Claus, down to the white beard and geographic residence vaguely described as "North." Good old Santa – the child's last, best hope when Mom and Dad have said no.

It's practically impossible for the modern, educated adult to pray if this Santa God is the only option. Yet the image is so pervasive in our culture, it's hard to shake. I think there are things that need to happen before we can. One is to hear from other people who have found something else. Probably the first big crack in this image of God as an old man in the sky came for me from a woman I used to work with at the bank, years ago in Minneapolis. We were standing at the copier and she said something about God. I said, "I don't believe in that. I am spiritual in other ways, but I don't believe in God." She smiled and said, "What you mean when you say spiritual, and what I mean when I say God are probably not as different as you think." That was really all it took to make me curious.

Then I was asked to be present at a Pagan ritual at the Congregational church where I worked. The church had agreed to rent the basement to Starhawk, a nationally famous author and self-proclaimed witch. The paper did a big story about this, and the church was bombarded with calls. The ministers, I am proud to say, staunchly defended the group and stuck with their decision to rent to them. But just in case – they thought it might be good to have a staff person on hand to see what it was about. I was fascinated. And quite moved. We celebrated the spring equinox and honored Persephone, the goddess of spring. We chanted and danced our prayers. We felt the beauty and magic of the earth. That shook things up some more.

Probably the biggest movement for me was my experience in 12-step groups, in overcoming addiction to food, which I have shared with you before. There I met people who not only overcame their compulsion, but were some of the most loving, sane, spiritually mature people I have ever known. And they were asking me to form some idea of a higher power to help me with my problems. William Pietsch, a psychotherapist who has worked extensively with people in addiction, talks about God as an "empowering presence" that people experience through prayer. (William Pietsch, *The Serenity Prayer*) Alcoholics Anonymous refer to it as the higher power, and AAs are free to form their own understanding of this. You can even have more than one understanding. I once went to Chris Ravndal, the Quaker teacher that translated our reading of First Corinthians 13 this morning, and I said, "Chris, I think of God as the web of all existence – I don't want to anthropomorphize God into a person, but I can't shake this idea that God loves me." He shrugged and said, "Why can't you have more than one idea about God?" That's so brilliant! It's all metaphor anyway – we're not going to *nail* it, we're not going to get God on DVD. That's part of the genius of religions like Islam and Judaism that forbid images of God in their temples and mosques. It defies our human arrogance that we've got a lock on the ineffable. *Neti, neti*, is a well-loved Sanskrit word for God – not this, not this. And yet still present.

Scholar Rita Nakashima Brock says, “This is how I can speak of God: a presence gradually unfolded by life in its richness and tragedies, its devastating losses and its abundance: a power calling us into a fullness of living, a passion for life, for good and ill: an unquenchable fire at the core of life, glimpsed in light and shadows.” Not a puppeteer, not a granter of wishes or a giver of punishments, but a force, an empowering, life-giving presence.

Another thing that we need in order to get rid of the Santa God is to actually have some experiences of prayer. You may think that you need a clearly defined idea of God when you start to pray, but that's not really possible. Prayer itself is what shapes your idea of who or what God is. “To paraphrase Episcopal priest Martin Bell, 'You cannot engage the sacred and then commit; commitment is the one and only way of engaging the sacred.' To use another example, you cannot find out what 'wet' feels like unless you get into the water.” (Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Simply Pray*)

You come to understand who or what God is only through that experience. Otherwise it's just dogma, it's just taking somebody else's word for it. And it doesn't have to be perfectly formed in order to begin. There's an old joke that goes, *To whom do Unitarian Universalists pray? To whom it may concern.* As a theist, I've been known to get a little grouchy about that joke, but it's really not a bad starting point for prayer. The only thing you need to start with is a *vague* notion that there *might* be someone, there might be something. Those of us who pray have the audacity to think we can experience this vague something, and that a relationship might form. Like any relationship, we have to spend time getting to know God.

Another thing that unglued me to my notion of God as Santa was the notion that prayer is not meant to change God, and it's not meant to change the universe. Sad as it may be to think, prayer is not a way for me to get what I want – even the noblest things that I want. When we have exhausted the ordinary means of getting what we want, when our very best efforts have failed, we ask God for it. And then what happens? When the person we love dies, when we find ourselves alone, where was God? For that matter, where was God when the Holocaust happened, or the genocides in Rwanda or Kosovo or DarFur? Where did all those prayers go?

William Pietsch writes that people's most common mistake about prayer is that we confuse it with things that require thought and action on our part. He describes the most universal (and universally disappointing) prayer as being, “God, please alter all the laws of the universe to meet my particular needs at this time.” If it's not that, what is it?

UU minister Erik Walker Wikstrom in his book, *Simply Pray*, describes prayer as “connecting and reconnecting to the source of our lives, to that sacred mystery 'in which we live, move, and have our being.’” Prayer is a doing, it's not simply a mindset or an attitude – it requires time set apart for it. Wikstrom breaks it into four actions. First, he says, is **naming**. We name God, we name the source however we think of it. Actually the very desire to pray is a kind of naming, because it usually begins with a sense of longing. We sense that there is more to life, and we long to connect to it. Prayer is a way to name that longing and give it a home.

Another part to naming is to name the goodness in life - to offer gratitude, to give thanks. I usually begin my spoken prayers each day with “Thank you for my life.” If I can say that and really mean it, I figure I'm ahead. Sometimes I say it in order to mean it. Also good. In our tradition, we call this an affirmation. Our unison affirmation and the one we say to light our chalice are kinds of naming prayers.

We also name our struggles in prayer. In so doing, I have found tremendous strength to deal with them. The one prayer I have always felt has been answered is “God help me through this.” I am here as a witness that the answer to this prayer has always been ‘yes’.

The second category of prayer according to Wikstrom is **knowing**. We seek to be our most completely honest with ourselves about ourselves. I purchased a Russian icon of Jesus because of the look in his eyes. They were deeply compassionate, and they also said, “Don't kid yourself, Sister.” It's on my altar at home to remind me. Life is full of opportunities to kid ourselves. I don't care if you ever pray. Some practice where you work to deliberately shed your self-delusions is a sound idea.

Dave Goetz, in his humble and honest book, *Death by Suburb* tells this story. “Just the other day,” he writes, “I humiliated my oldest minutes before driving to O'Hare for a business trip. He had gotten an average grade. He called it 'medium.' He said it with tears in his eyes. 'Medium?' I said. 'Medium isn't good enough in this family!'”

Goetz instantly recognized how damaging this was for his son, and felt horribly guilty, but he wasn't able to stick around without missing his plane. He writes, “I gave myself a thousand tongue-lashings while I drove to the airport.

“The hard truth,” he says, “is that medium isn't good enough because I feel medium. I loathe medium.” He is tempted to try to shake it off, to say the now cliched words, “Don't beat yourself up”. But there is an important moment when you must let yourself feel what you've done. “Let it hurt,” a friend told him. “And there's a future for you.” This is the knowing aspect of prayer. Not to say we are sinful, awful people or to beg cosmic forgiveness. If you believe that God is love, and I do, it makes no sense to ask God for forgiveness – God has already forgiven us. What part of unconditional love do you not understand? You pray for help in forgiving yourself. Prayer can help us to have the strength to face the parts of us that shock ourselves. We pray to have the guts to go to someone we have hurt and put things right.

The next kind of prayer is simply called **Listening**. Listening involves becoming available to receiving wisdom and strength. Thomas Keating, one of the founders of the contemplative prayer movement, suggests saying, “I willingly consent to your activity and presence within me.” I think of prayer as a form of opening ourselves, of becoming more receptive to life. Prayer is like a sinking down, like putting your roots into the earth – no matter how big or grand a tree you are, you still need the soil for strength and nourishment. But it's slow stuff. In this way, it's like Mary Oliver's dream, in which she goes down and sits very still and waits for the two deer. It requires patience and practice to experience something other than the usual monkey mind that Josh described so well for us last week.

There is something powerful in the listening. When I ask for God's wisdom, I don't expect to hear voices right then and there. The answer, when I am asking for guidance, usually comes in much subtler forms. A friend will say something that I had never considered before. I will have new patience to work on something. I'll be more willing to try something I have been resisting. Nothing very zippy, I'm afraid. But there's definitely a difference. I find that the asking and the silence clears a little spot in my head to receive more information.

Mother Teresa once said in an interview that in her prayers sometimes all she does is listen to God. And what does God say, asked the interviewer. He listens to me, she said. Given the sensation of her published letters last year, in which she described the spiritual desert she lived in for so much of her life, these words are all the more poignant. Listening simply means that you acknowledge you don't

have all the answers, that you can lay down your master of the universe card for a minute and see if somebody else knows something.

The last category of prayer Wikstrom describes is **Loving**. Loving includes the prayers for other people. You know the classic children's prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Well after this fatalistic and let's face it kind of scary prayer (who could sleep after that?) - after that comes a series of "God blesses". God bless Mommy, God bless Daddy... And if they go on a bit too long, the parent starts to suspect stalling. I actually think the "God blesses" is one of the most important parts of prayer. It means that my spirituality isn't just about me – my problems and my dreams. Carl Scovel once wrote, "The quest for self-fulfillment bumps into the hard surface of the reflecting mirror; we thought we'd find the truth and we're still looking at ourselves. Some of us find this less inspiring than we used to." (Carl Scovel, "Prayer: Coming out of the Closet" the 1992 Philofest essay)

Prayer for other people means that I am consciously taking other people into the center of my thoughts. I pray for you when I know you are having a hard time. Sometimes when I say this, UUs will look at me warily, and wonder if I actually think I'm asking for divine intervention on their behalf. *Well, she's a minister, they think, maybe she has some pull.* What I'm doing is this: I light a candle and I say your name. There's a lovely Quaker expression, "to hold someone in the light." I say, "I pray for so and so." That's pretty much it. And the purpose is not to try to alter the universe on your behalf – though you know I would if I could. But it is to remind me that you are struggling, and hold you in my heart. It's what we do during the "prayers of the people" part of our worship. Even if you cannot say aloud the name that comes to you, it's still a powerful experience to call them to mind in this spiritual community.

Prayer is meant to change us. I have found strength to handle things I didn't think I could, and wisdom that seemed to come from nowhere – simply because I opened my heart to God in prayer. I would say this as well. If your prayer – or any spiritual discipline you do – does not help make you a more compassionate person, if it does not give you joy, if it does not help you face life with more maturity, if it does not help you be of greater service, then put it away. Try something else. "Whether I speak in a human tongue or the tongue of an angel, if I don't have love, I am just an earsplitting gong or a clanging cymbal." Love is the whole point. Let us commit ourselves once more to do whatever it takes to be loving human beings. Amen.