

Rhythms of Prayer

Rev. Roger Jones
Sunday, August 17, 2014
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Farewell Blessing Ritual

For 3 young adults departing for work or school

Hymns: #348: Guide My Feet, #391: Voice Still and Small, #163, For the Earth, Forever Turning

Sermon:

My life has no lack of stress and preoccupations. My to-do list never seems to shrink. I can feel both overwhelmed and aimless at the same time. In other words, I'm a mess. Or at least I can feel that way. The world feels like a mess too. As my mind scans the suffering globe, I experience sadness, helplessness, and a sense of outrage. I want to throw my hands in the air and surrender. Give up. Of course, for centuries a theme of prayer has been *surrender*. To me, that prayerful kind of surrender means not giving in, but recognizing all that I cannot control. It means that I seek the strength to go on caring, living and giving. This is why I have to pray.

What I do, is put my feet on the floor. In my stocking feet, or barefoot, I sit in a chair or stand on the floor. The solid floor is holding me up, and so is the earth below the building. This earth holds me, sustains me, and connects me. I pause to feel this connection. I may look out the window. Sometimes the leaves of the trees are stirring in the breeze, with sunlight peeking through. Or maybe the branches are still, with a gray sky behind them.

After noticing these things, I say something like this: "I give thanks for the gift of life and for this day, Sunday, the 17th day of this month of August, now more than half over. Help me to be present in the moments of this day. Spirit of Love, help me feel *your presence* as rest-giving, nourishing, and sheltering in a safe place. Help me to *show* your presence in my life, by my patience, my self-acceptance and acceptance of others, by my courage, and by my joy."

Then I call to mind a few of the places of heartbreak around the world: the Middle East and the suburb of Ferguson, Missouri, where another familiar story has emerged of an unarmed young

man of color being shot by a police officer. I ask for mercy. "Have mercy on us. Help us to have mercy on one another." When the burdens of the world feel heavy, I pray for the courage not to hide from doing what I can do.

I give thanks for blessings in my life. I pray for those close to me, bringing to mind people from this congregation who have asked me to keep them in my thoughts or prayers. I send them love, healing and joy. I call to mind our volunteers and staff at UUSS, working so hard, and I give thanks. I say the names of my brother and his wife, and my nephews, and my far-flung relatives--sometimes I name even the relatives to whom I am no longer speaking. I wish them well. I'm not sure praying for them will reunite us, but it might soften my heart. It might relieve me of my expectations that they will change.

Somewhere amid all these words of intention and prayer, the timer bell goes off, and I wrap it up. Amen, blessed be.

~~

Prayer is the most common practice of the religions of the world. It not only varies among the religions, prayer varies *within* religious traditions in meaning, words, and the motion of rituals. I'd like to speak about prayer as a practice for Unitarian Universalists, whether we call ourselves theists, atheists, or *not elsewhere classified*. Some have joked: Unitarians are the people who pray "to whom it may concern." But I think that can be a fine approach. Whether or not we think there is a God paying attention, it matters if our intentions are sincere. If at least WE are paying attention, and not flying on spiritual autopilot, THAT is what matters.

Definitions and expectations of prayer are diverse and countless. And some of these expectations are damaging. Prayer should not be an inquisition before a cruel judge. But if our contemplation is a time of honesty with ourselves, some regrets and mistakes may come to mind for us to learn to face. Prayer should not be an immersion into shame. However, in solitude we may become aware of painful emotions and harsh feelings. Perhaps we can try to observe such feelings without losing sight of our indwelling worth, our inherent worth. Prayer shouldn't be a *gift registry* for God's compliance (on time, no less). On the other hand,

it's good to recognize blessings received, speak about our hopes and wishes, and voice our true, deep longings.

If we have never known a practice of contemplation or prayer, it may feel challenging to begin. Perhaps the first thing to do is to try out a structure that suits you, and a language that speaks to you.

It also can be helpful to know a bit of the prayer traditions and the words that countless people have passed on to us. I'm reminded of a story from the autobiography of Huston Smith, a renowned scholar of world religions, who is now 95. He tells a story about his wife, Kendra Smith. While Houston was the child of conservative Methodist missionaries, and would for a short time be a preacher himself, Kendra was the daughter of a Unitarian philosopher, an academic theologian. Kendra did not grow up in a praying household. Early in their married life Huston had a job as a Methodist minister. When he was out of town, Kendra was invited by a church family to come to dinner. They asked her, the preacher's wife, to say grace for the meal. Kendra had never said a grace for a meal, but she put some words of thanks together, and got through it. But she couldn't remember how to conclude it. So she ended the prayer with "Goodbye."

When I was a child my baby sitter for a few nights was my mother's sister-in-law. In tucking me in, she wanted me to pray, just as she had her own son do. Since my family didn't have a practice, I had no ready words to say. She gave me two prayers to choose from. I took the Lord's Prayer, stumbling over words I didn't know as she recited for me to repeat, line by line. "Our father, who art in heaven... uh... *hallowed?* be thy name." The prayer I *didn't* choose was a short one: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I shall die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Brief, and easy to say, but its hint about not living through the night positively terrified me, as it must have many a child since its first publication by Puritans in the 1700s.

As a child I needed spiritual comfort. A prayer practice might have been a source of comfort, but not one that would put more fear into my fear-filled life. Perhaps, for a child, a more

compassion-based prayer could give a healthy shape and meaning to each day. It could provide a language for thinking about one's needs and fears, and an invitation to say thank you for ordinary blessings, and a way to cultivate joy in living.

Various people in this congregation have asked me to pray for them, pray *with* them, or just hold their hands while they pray. I get email requests to hold someone in my thoughts and prayers as they go through an ordeal or time of uncertainty. I'm happy to. I don't worry with definitions of the object of prayer, or if there is a Divine Listener. For me, it matters that I am listening, and taking time, and giving attention.

In anticipation of my sermon, one man said he thinks prayer is about relationship: "It's not about winning favor with God," he said, "it's about the energy we can feel between us and the world, and the connections among us as people." Another member sent an email, quoting a rock song: "'You Can't Always Get What You Want,' and sometimes you *don't even get* what you need," he said "but you are not alone."

A few years ago I led a class at UUSS about prayer. Among other activities, we wrote our names on index cards, and then each person took a name. We did not know who had which name. I asked them to look at the card a few times during the week, even once a day, and think of that person, hold that person in their mind and heart. Not any more specific instructions than that. Not everyone was well acquainted, but they knew whom they were praying for. The next week, I asked: "What did it feel like to be holding another person in your mind and heart?"

"I felt warm toward this person, though I didn't know them very well."

"I felt responsible to make sure I did it!"

"I felt connected."

We did this for three weeks, mixing up the cards with names. I reminded the people that someone was also praying for them during the week. How did it feel to know that?

One said: "In trying to remember to pray for another person, I forgot that somebody was thinking of me! It's good to be reminded."

Another member said: "I felt cared for."

One said, “I felt less alone.”

Every morning a man I know gets up early, turns on the coffee pot, and begins making steel cut oatmeal for his wife and himself and for any guests in the house. Steel-cut oats take a while to cook. As they simmer, he dices an apple, rinses blackberries and strawberries, toasts almond slivers, and pours the milk into pitchers. As he does all this, he calls to mind the people he cares about: siblings, children, friends, colleagues, and people in his congregation. This is one way that he prays. When he told me he did this, it felt good to know I was included in the circle of his ritual prayer.

~~

From 1903 to 1909, the Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale was chaplain of the United States Senate, giving prayers at legislative sessions. Someone asked him, “Do you pray for the senators?” He replied, “No, I look at the senators/ and pray for the country.” (Hewett, 419) Ten years ago, when I lived in San Jose, I was invited to give an invocation to open a meeting of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors. Unlike Hale, I did pray for the supervisors, as well as for the county workers, and for the people affected by what they all do, or what they leave undone. I’m not sure who took it seriously, but I did. I don’t know if God was listening, but I felt it was good for all of *us* to listen, to be reminded of the weight of the decisions made in that place.

I am not a person who thinks a prayer by me can change the weather, win God’s favor, bring peace to Somalia, or heal a sick friend. Yet I don’t stop asking. For me, to pray is to raise lamentations. It is to ask for direction and for help, so that I might not look away but have the courage to bear witness to the suffering, and have the discernment to see how I might help. The great Jewish philosopher and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said this: “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.”

California writer Anne Lamott has published a book on prayer, giving a structure for how she does it. The title is *Help. Thanks. Wow*. If you think you will *never warm* up to the word PRAYER, consider this as a structure for personal

reflection or contemplation. Consider it an outline for the simple practice of paying attention. First, HELP! We bring up what we worry over, what we’re feeling desperate about, and the people we’re concerned about; the healing, strength and serenity we need, and the justice and peace in the world for which we long. Perhaps you have thought of what would emerge in your contemplation under the category called HELP. If so, you are not alone.

Then comes, THANKS! We speak words of gratitude for the good things of life, the joys and celebrations, the people who make a difference, the accomplishments that satisfy. Perhaps you can say to yourself a couple of the blessings you could count if you were taking time to give thanks. Finally, WOW! We call to mind the ordinary miracles around us—the cool wind of a day after a heat wave passes, the smell of rosemary on a warm afternoon, drops of water glistening in the petals of a rose in morning, the sight the Perseid meteor showers overhead last week. Perhaps it’s the miracle of being relieved of an emotional burden you have carried for years.

Speaking our praise and thanks can raise our sights, help us enjoy life. This is how prayer sustains me, and I think the outline of HELP, THANKS, and WOW is pretty good.

At the very least, the time we spend in prayer or contemplation is time we are not getting ourselves into trouble. It keeps us occupied. And perhaps, at the end of our contemplation, we are more aware and mindful in our choices. Perhaps, after noting our reasons for gratitude and our longings, we can move ahead with more ease, and more hope. But perhaps we have to do this more than once, like a practice.

Last year, during the UU day camp we call Chalice Camp, I participated in a morning worship with our kids and their adult and youth mentors. I invited everyone to become still, and then I used these three words as a structure: help, thanks, wow. I introduced each category. The other adults and I spoke to get this exercise rolling. After each person spoke of a concern or a loss, together we’d say “May there be Help.” Then, we’d speak of reasons for gratitude, and each time, we’d say “We give Thanks.” The last category generated the most examples, and surely was the most fun: Wow!

That's all we'd say in response to an observation:
Wow.

Perhaps that prayer practice did not stay with those kids long after we sang the closing song at worship. But, as I noted, the time we spend in contemplation is a time we are not getting into trouble—whether it's restless kids needing to calm down or the adults among us, those with plenty of trouble already in our lives.

When we feel tossed about or torn in so many directions, this is when a regular practice can pay off. It's nothing more than settling down, noticing life breathing through us, giving voice to our concerns and pain, giving thanks where we can, and giving a shout to the ordinary miracles of life.

A structure for contemplation is only a tool, only an invitation. Help! What needs and hopes come up when we pause? Thanks! For what are we grateful? Wow! What is it that stirs our sense of wonder?

If you can't bring yourself to pray, trying just paying attention... to the people present with you or to the people you hold in your heart. Paying attention... to the beaming sun through the sky and the breeze on your skin, the beating of your own heart, and the breathing done by your body. Paying attention to the gift of your body, of this life, this day, this planet.

There are many ways to pray. Many ways to voice our longings and hopes. Many ways to give thanks and praise. May we find our ways, and follow them, to a life of more joy and purpose, and may we build a way to a world of peace. Amen.