

How Do UUs Pray?
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It was the Summer of 2010, I was in the midst of my Hospital Chaplain training. I had been visiting patients pretty regularly and had enough positive experiences under my belt to feel confident in my ability to be a presence for each person I met. I also clearly understood the idea that is my job to meet each person where they were. Not where I wanted them to be or thought they should be, but exactly where they were in their lives. This meant I put my own beliefs aside and I listened as well as assisted each person I met in their own set of beliefs.

I was making rounds on the floors I was assigned, when I went into a patient's room. The patient had family gathered around and all were in the midst of contemplation. I did the usual check in with the patient to see how they were doing. As I was getting ready to leave, I asked, "Some people like me to pray with them, would you like to pray?" They all answered yes. I then asked, "Do you have a specific prayer or something you would like to pray?" They all said, "The Lord's Prayer." Now, I want to remind you that I did not grow up going to church. I had very little exposure to church. This request caught me off guard, because I did not know what Lord's Prayer they were talking about. After a pause of panic, my brain kicked in and I asked them to start. The family looked at me strangely at first and then, they said, "Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come..." I almost did a face palm right there in the middle of us praying. I knew that prayer, but did not know it as the Lord's Prayer.

I start with this story because I think it captures sometimes the bumbling relationship Unitarian Universalists can have with prayer. We either have a wounded relationship with the religion we grew up with and have denied ourselves the comfort of prayer. Or we grew up without a religious tradition and do not know how to pray. I know there are some of us who have a very active prayer life and embrace it completely. And there are plenty who are in between all these scenarios. Wherever you are in this spectrum, I ask that you suspend your judgment of prayer for this morning and step into a place of curiosity.

UU Minister, Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom in his book, 'Simply Pray,' suggests there are four types of prayer. He states they are, "Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving. Naming the many ways that the holy and the sacred move in our lives and in the wider world; Knowing ourselves fully, both our strengths and weaknesses; Listening to that 'voice of quiet stillness' that resides in each of us; and reaching out in Loving concern to the world around us."

The first form of prayer I knew was Naming. I remember spending endless nights as a teenager looking up into the starry sky in awe. I would simultaneously feel how insignificant I was and how blessed I was. Those stars allowed me to encounter mystery and awe. I did not know or recognize any God or really understand that what I was doing was prayer. I knew it was a special time and that it brought me peace.

Wikstrom reminds us, "prayer does not require a Sacred Other; instead, it can allow an opportunity to lift up all for which you are thankful at this moment, all the blessings and miracles in your life, all the joy in your living."

A Naming Prayer can be as simple as taking a walk in nature and naming all the plants you see or catching your breath when a beautiful sunset happens.

A Naming Prayer can be listing all the blessings you have in your life or all you are grateful for.

We can also use a naming prayer to call the holy into our lives. I am reminded of this reading by Nancy Shaffer

Because she wanted everyone to feel included in her prayer,
she said right at the beginning
several names for the Holy:
Spirit, she said, Holy One, Mystery, God

but then thinking these weren't enough ways of addressing
that which cannot be fully addressed, she added
particularities, saying Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love,
Ancient Holy One, Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know,
Gracious God and also Spirit of this Earth,
God of Sarah, Gaia, Thou

and then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming
superlatives as well: Most Creative One,
Greatest Source, Closest Hope -
even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her
probably redundant, but then she couldn't stop:

God Who Made the Stars, she said, although she knew
technically a number of those present didn't believe
the stars had been made by anyone or thing
but just luckily happened.

One who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion,
she said, and no one laughed.

That Which Has Been Present Before the Beginning,
she said, and the room went silent.

Then, although she hadn't imagined it this way,
Others began to offer names:

Peace, said one.

One My Mother Knew, said another.

Ancestor, said a third.

Wind.

Rain.

Breath, said one near the back.

Refuge.

That Which Holds All.

A child said, Water.

Someone said, Kuan Yin.

Then: Womb.

Witness.

Great Kindness.

Eternal Stillness

And then, there wasn't any need to say the things
she'd thought would be important to say,
and everyone sat hushed, until someone said

Amen.

A Naming Prayer allows us to pause and take notice of ourselves and our world
around us. It does not require us to have a relationship with the sacred or divine.
If we choose, it can be a prayer to recognize the holy in our lives.

I often end my days asking myself, Where have I seen the holy today?

A Knowing Prayer, says Wikstrom encourages us to look unblinkingly at the
wounded and broken places in ourselves, seeing the ways these wounds
continue to hobble us and may continue wounding others.

This type of prayer calls us into authenticity. It gives us the opportunity to look at our actions and behaviors with understanding of how they have shaped us and shaped how the world has responded to us.

As UUs, we can take our seven principles and each day ask ourselves did I keep my promise to uphold these principles? Where we succeeded, we can pat ourselves on the back and hope we can do it again tomorrow. Where we fell short, we can look at those places to see how we could have done something differently and forgive ourselves, promising to try again tomorrow.

This is not meant to be a prayer of shaming instead it is meant to give us a space to truly accept ourselves for who we are.

A Knowing Prayer that illustrates this quite beautifully is the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr:

You can say it with God or without:

Dear God,

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

I use this prayer often to ground myself in my ministry. It allows for a quick inventory of what you can or cannot do in a situation. I have used it in my concerns about loved ones, the world, and this congregation. I have used it many times when I have been on a plane as it gets ready to take off or land. In that situation, the only thing I have control of is my reaction, so I stop worrying and be calm.

Knowing Prayer invites you into a deeper understanding of who you are and gives you an opportunity take an honest inventory of how you want to be in the world. Again, this can be done with the sacred or without.

We all are aware of the Listening Prayer. In fact, we do this every week when we gather. It is our time for meditation. A time to listen for the still small voice in each of us; A time to pause and remember to breathe; A time to center ourselves.

This type of prayer is probably the one most UUs are familiar with, because it does not require anything of us, only stillness and quiet. However, it does require something of us and something we are not too familiar with these days. It requires us to just be. Not think of dinner or the conversation you had with your sister the other day or even that you are sitting in a room full of people. Listening Prayer requires us to just be, without any reflection or grasping of the world around us.

When I am in a place of chaos and feel ungrounded, this is the prayer I turn to. I stop what I am doing, find a place to be alone, sit and breathe. It takes time to settle my brain down from going in all the different directions, but at some point, I get to a place where it is just me and my breathe and I feel re-centered. Sometimes I can glimpse the holy and sometimes it is just me and my breathe.

Take a moment to center yourself in your chair and get comfortable. If you want close your eyes or soften them by looking down. Take a deep breathe in and then let it go. Keep breathing and try to stay noticing your breathe. I am going to watch the clock for three minutes. Just keep breathing and noticing.

Pause for three minutes.

Okay, bring yourself back by taking one more deep breathe and letting it out, then lift your eyes. How many of you stayed with your breathe the entire time? It's difficult and that is what some find discouraging with this type of prayer. Because it can feel you are doing it wrong, when in actuality, you are doing just fine and perfection is not point. The point is to find a way to not push those things popping up in your mind away, but instead gently acknowledge them and then let them go, returning to your breathe until the next item pops up. This is not a prayer to have one more thing for you to beat yourself up over, instead it helps to ease that critic by looking at things without a critical eye. It is why many who practice this type of prayer acknowledge part of the practice is encountering the monkey brain, where everything is trying to pop up.

Some find a connection to Oneness or Divinity and others find a sense of being centered and calm.

The fourth form of prayer is Loving. The prayer recognizes and holds up our interdependent relationship with others. It calls us to pause and call to mind those we love; those we know are suffering; those we want to remember.

This to me is the most sacred prayer. It reminds us we are not alone and we are responsible for others. It is in this prayer I hold each of you in my heart. Because it is not about asking for someone to be healed or someone to change, instead it is a prayer of relationship. It is a prayer to remind us to reach out in love and let others know they are loved and not alone.

As Mother Teresa says it:

Love cannot remain by itself – it has no meaning.
Love has to be put into action and that action is service.
Whatever form we are,
able or disabled,
rich or poor,
it is not how much we do,
but how much love we put in the doing;
a lifelong sharing of love with others.

I believe God is in the relationship of the loving prayer. It is the process of reaching out and connecting with others. This is why I often start prayers, with Spirit of Love, because I believe it is the most powerful of forces, we each have the ability to harness.

This type of prayer can also be called a Loving-Kindness Meditation:
Where you send love to yourself,
send love to family and friends,
send love to someone who has irritated you,
send love to those on your block, in your city, in your state, in your country, in the world, and in the universe and beyond.

It reminds us regularly to begin each day in love and gives us the foundation to live out our principles.

These four types of prayers do not need to be separated into single types of prayers, but can be incorporated into one prayer.

Such as this one from Monica Cummings:

Dear Unknown, Unknowable, Yet Known by Many Names,

Keep us mindful that we are all related. That when one of us is ignored and treated with dis-ease, we all suffer.

Today let each of us commit to welcome the stranger.

Let us move beyond our comfort zones and connect with people labeled different and pushed to the edge of society.

We can make a difference.

We can transform lives.

We can bring harmony and healing to the places and spaces where we live, work and play.

Let us keep our hearts and minds open and receptive to the still, small voice that calls us to stand witness for those who cannot stand, to speak the truth for justice for those without a voice and to lead the way on the journey toward wholeness for those without sight.

For the spirit of love, compassion and community, let it be done. Amen.

Or this one, that does not invoke the holy, by L. Anne Foerster

The ringing of a bell calls us to worship.

The pounding of a drum calls us to war.

The popping of a cork calls us to celebration.

What is the sound that calls us to hear one another?

Listen...listen carefully...

It is here in the silence...listen deeply...

The beating of our own hearts calls us to ourselves,
calls us to be our true selves,
calls us to be our best selves,
calls us to be what we might become.

Listen...there is another sound...

The breathe of our neighbor calls us outside ourselves,
calls us to be companions,
calls us to be allies,
calls us to be partners.

Listen...we must heed the call of our own hearts,
where love and truth, caring and justice, are born.
Listen...we must heed the call of others...
to gather together for some great purpose,
where passion and fidelity, compassion and equity,
are nourished.

The hammering silence calls us together
that we may do the work we cannot do alone.
Let us heed the calls that come in the silence,
that we may be well,
and do good,
in this world together. Amen.

Prayer is a practice open for anyone theist and atheist. It is meant to be a way to stop and intentionally reconnect to yourself, others, and the world. It is a time to pause and remember to love. As Meister Eckhart, 13th C. mystic once said, "If in your lifetime you can pray only one prayer and it is 'Thank you,' it will be sufficient."