

Wish Lists and Other Prayers

Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

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Reading - What Keeps You From Prayer? By Kate Braestrup - Read by Barbara

What keeps you from prayer?

Ask that in a roomful of people who don't pray, and you will get a raft of answers: Oh, I'm too busy. I'm uncomfortable. All the people I know who pray are real jerks, and I don't want to be one of them. I have bad memories of abusive religious figures. I wouldn't know who I was praying to. I don't want to be false, or foolish. I don't know what to say.

Here and there one comes across the true rarity, a person who is wholly neutral when it comes to prayer, but most people have strong opinions, at least about when, how, and to whom we would rather not pray.

We don't want to be forced to pray in the forms and words of a religion we don't subscribe to, or to a God we don't believe in. So we don't pray at all, and life moves along in its busy, mindless, distracted way until an eighteen-wheeler is veering over the double line into our land and life is suddenly very simple.

I don't claim that prayer can get you a new car, or find the lover of your dreams. It won't help you gain status, assert your dominance, or otherwise please your ego. It won't even make life easier. What it can do - what prayer, at its best and at our best - has always done - is to help us live consciously, honorably, and compassionately.

Because I am not stronger, more self-sufficient, smarter, braver, or any less mortal than my forebears or my neighbors, I need this help. As long as prayer helps me to be more loving, then I need prayer. As long as prayer serves as a potent means of sharing my love with others, I need prayer.

In My Own Words – by Sean Jeung

Some of you may be aware that this past June I completed classes as part of my journey toward certification as a chaplain. Each year, for four years, I was asked to identify my learning goals. Each year my primary goal was around becoming more comfortable, more relaxed and more adept at spontaneous prayer. As a chaplain, it seems only fitting that I be able to pray. But as one clearly still unfolding in her spiritual life I struggled with the expectation that my prayers would sound like the prayers I remember hearing growing up in the Lutheran church. You're probably familiar with the "Dear God", "Heavenly Fathers", and in "Jesus' name we pray"

dialogue of prayer. But that didn't feel true to me. And experiences had led me to an understanding that even the word God felt overused, vague and indiscernible.

Studying chaplaincy quickly brought me to an awareness of the necessity of prayer as a way to center, to grounding and to garner strength. Pastoral Care is, most often, about coming alongside fellow travelers in their hour of darkness, despair, fear and spiritual hunger. There are those times as well when we are blessed by the riches of joy and celebration such as weddings and births but for the most part my experience has been, and certainly as a hospice chaplain my experiences have been centered more around emotions that for many people can be difficult ones to align with on a daily basis. Because of this, I believe my own life as a chaplain must be centered, grounded and strong if I am to do this work with the grace and presence it deserves and not suffer what is commonly known as compassion burn out. In the 1970's when I was in my early 20's I cultivated a discipline of meditation. The practice of going inward felt comforting and sacred and in the process of exploring inwardly I discovered something inside myself that felt very God-connected. For me, feeling connected to something unseen as co-creator of my destiny allows me to stand strong and peaceful in the face of questioning and know that the answers to all the great questioning will not come in this lifetime but *that they will come*. It allows me to be in the presence of illness, death, pain, angst, fear, disappointment, anger and incredible sorrow and be okay.

I *have* to pray. My personal prayers are more about release and gratitude than about asking *for* things, although in my work as a chaplain I am called on to offer invocation to Spirit to be present to certain events or ceremonies and I am certainly able to do this with a level of comfort I did not have four years ago. In those circumstances I just ask what the need is, what is it we need to pray for. That always makes the praying easier. The hard part for me was learning what words to use to begin. A dear friend and fellow journeywoman begins her prayers with "Mother, Father, God, Goddess.....". This about covers it in my book but in certain circumstances and within certain circles, that invocation might not be received well. And in circumstances where others are involved and we are offering the prayer in an effort to bring comfort, it's important that the words we use are words they will receive. I often begin prayers with, "Dear God of many names, Creator of all Things Good and Giver of Life...." And I would then go on to speak to what it is we are gathered to do. If it is at the bedside of one who is dying I might say "God of Love, we open our hearts to this unknown mystery and ask that we find some peace in the chaos of

this struggle, some comfort in the pain of what's coming, some hope in the darkness of the unknown.”

One of my teachers once said that we do not need to think about *what* we will pray, we need only to remain open. If we anticipate too much, if we are thinking ahead and trying to plan what we will say, we miss the gift that waits silently in the moment.

As far as my personal prayer practice, I have slowly found my way to what can be best described as a not-quite-conscious, walking mantra of Yes and Thank You. Living in prayerful awareness of where I am. I stopped believing a long time ago in accidents or coincidence. But I do believe in God.....and the God I worship is much greater than any one religion. The God I know is visibly evident in a 1,000 ways every day. The more in the moment I am around Yes and Thank You, the more evidence there is. The effect this has had on my life is astounding. I am more peaceful. I am more present to those around me. I am more present to the miracles occurring in a million ways around me every day. I love better than I ever have in my life.

As my husband Greg would readily tell you, the word “should” is a trigger for me. I would love to be able to stand up here today and say that I do not assume to know what someone else needs to do. Ever. But I can't. Because I know I am guilty of having made assumptions about what I think someone else needs to do. It's one of the many things I work on. I am not up here this morning to say that anyone *needs to* or *should do* anything at all. I was asked to share in my own words what prayer means to me, what my personal prayer practice is and what effect I feel prayer brings to life and I hope I have done that. I'd like to conclude with the thought that prayer is simply conversation with the Divine. Maybe it's the Divine that lives within us, maybe it's the Divine that rules the Universe.

In my opinion, there is no difference.

Thank you. (written and read by Sean Jeung)

Sermon - Wish Lists and Other Prayers

My kids have plenty of everything they could ever need. And mostly, I think they know it. But get them watching the commercials on cable TV - especially around this time of year – and suddenly, they're telling an entirely different story. It goes like this.

My two kids. Sitting on the couch. And a commercial break begins. Usually my daughter starts. I want Zhu Zhu pets. She yells. And then Josef repeats: I want Zhu Zhu Pets. The commercial ends. And then, Gracie: I want Simon Flash. And then Josef: I want Simon Fash. I might say "OK" after each of these outbursts. I might not even have heard. No matter, they're already on to the next. Gracie: I want transformers. Josef: I want "franceformers." Oh! I want the gravity ball. Yeah, gav-ee ball. Gracie has told me repeatedly she thinks we need Clorox Clean up - it gets the counters really clean! And Josef has pointed at the neon logo for the channel they are watching and said- I want that.

It's terrible, and depressing. Depressing because it reminds me how easily humans are seduced into moving from a feeling of being and having enough, to feeling as if they are incomplete, how quickly we move from Thanksgiving to the Wish Lists of Christmas, how easily our expressions of gratitude for what we are and have, become wishing for something we wish we were, or wish we had.

It helps a little to remember that the root of these impulses is the same. Both giving thanks and articulating a desire for more come from a yearning to give voice to that space inside us that seeks real fulfillment, that hunger humans have for feedback, for interaction, for relationship.

This is the hunger that brings us to prayer, the feelings that prompt our calling out, whether with petition or thanksgiving.

For a long time, I refused this word – prayer. I'd say, "I'll keep you in my thoughts," if I'd say anything at all. Sometimes, I still hesitate – and not just with the word, but with the practice.

Which can be very problematic when it's your *job* to pray. Not just privately, but outloud, and often.

I share this with you because I want you to know, I understand why someone might count themselves among the non-prayers. I understand that the whole idea of prayer can be confusing, and even alienating. We've been inundated in our culture with modern-day equivalents of the Pharisees acting all showy in the temple, what with Presidential candidates holding "prayer rallies," and worse.

It's no wonder most of us want to keep our distance from anything that might be called prayer.

And so I hope our service this morning offers us all the opportunity to explore the *practice* my experience tells me is a universal human need – that is, the *practice* of giving voice to our deepest needs, our fears and insecurities, the *practice* of giving voice to our concern and support for others, and the *practice* of offering thanks for our greatest blessings – and to let us all choose for ourselves whether or not we call that need *prayer*.

Regardless of what we call it, I think we can all agree that the hardest part is the beginning. The salutation.

Like that old joke about Unitarians starting their prayers: *To whom it may concern*.

To whom it may concern, I need some help. Things aren't going quite as I'd hope. So: S.O.S. Amen.

Especially when I'm really feeling those feelings that prompt prayer, the address totally stumps me, prevents me from getting *any* words out.

Tom Owen-Towle tells the story of a time he was so overcome with the feelings that precede prayer he too missed the opening. He was "driving from San Diego to Los Angeles, mere hours after [his] father died, to be with [his] mother, spilling forth unchecked tears, memories, and song fragments, sodden in a cascade of emotions that [his] father's life and death evoked in [his] heart." He says he doesn't remember whether or not he said words aloud, but definitely he made "no formal prayer. [And definitely no "Dear God" or even "Spirit of Life." He] was just swimming in an ocean of the feelings that prompt prayer."

Other times, the opening itself becomes the prayer.

My dad loves to tell the story of the dinner party we hosted for my childhood priest. My parents' best friends had joined us, and my dad was cooking steaks. The conversation was lively, with everyone carrying on while my dad was finishing up dinner preparation. Then, suddenly, a burst of flames came from the stove top where the steaks were broiling on the jenn-air, big flames, looking like they might just take us all out. And as the flames rose, my mom jumped back and shouted out – *Jesus Christ!*

The flames died down just then, and there was a quiet as everyone looked nervously at the priest. My parents' friend broke the ice: *Mary was just saying a little prayer, Father.*

The priest smiled, and everyone laughed, and acknowledged that actually, the prayer worked.

I grew up saying lots of memorized words we called prayer. Our Father, Hail Mary, grace before meals, Glory Be's. At least in public, the act of prayer was not spontaneous, or creative, and it really didn't have anything to do with responding to inner feelings. It was scripted and routine, and a lot closer to the practice of reciting multiplication tables and words for the upcoming spelling bee than it was to an authentic expression of my heart.

Our dinner party laughed at the thought that my mom's accidental expletive in the presence of a holy man could be considered a prayer – but over the years, I've come to realize, no joke, that's just what it was. Maybe even more so than many of our Glory Be's, because it came from a truly authentic place, ever so acutely aware of just how risky it is to be a human.

Whether scripted and multi-millenia old, or spontaneous and verging on blasphemy, real prayer has a lot less to do with what words we say – whether in the opening, or in the prayer itself, than it does with those feelings which prompt us to try to put language around that which is beyond words.

Emerson was talking about preaching when he said – it must come out of life, “passed through the fire of thought” – but I'm confident he would also apply it to prayer. It starts with life, life that must be given voice – I think he was saying. Life that burns so brightly and fully it must be spoken. And yet as those words are formed, I think Emerson was saying, don't forget to keep it real.

By the time I served as a hospital chaplain, two summers ago – I already had a sense that regardless of whether or not people pray, all of us have within us those feelings Emerson so desperately wished the preachers and prayers of his day would get real about.

People everywhere – regardless of their theological orientation – especially when they find themselves or their loved ones unexpectedly in a hospital bed in the middle of a cold night – share these really, real feelings that yearn to be articulated.

A feeling of being lost, of wanting to hold on forever to what we know is impermanent, a confusion at the ways of life, a helplessness and a sense of total dependence – which ironically often prompts profound gratitude even in the midst of anger, and grief, and fear. In the middle of the night, my pager would go off and I'd rush to the Emergency Department. And I knew as I headed there, in one way or another, it was my job to pray. No time to think or consider

theological nuances. Just pray. I'd find them there, the wives and the adult children, the partners and the best friends, looking confused, stunned. I'd say, shall we pray? With tears in their eyes, they'd hold out their hands and nod, and I'd go for it. All summer, twelve weeks, again and again. Although sometimes I'd ask people about their preferred way of praying first, just as often, I'd just begin.

God Whose Name is Love, Hear Our Prayer. We're scared. We don't know what's happening. We need help. We love this life. And we're grateful. Be with us. Amen.

Kate Braestrup's list doesn't include the feeling that prayer doesn't "work," but I know that's one I hear a lot too from people who don't pray, one I've said myself – that prayer doesn't really *do* anything – and so praying can feel foolish and false. And I think that's right if you imagine prayer is something other than a way of aligning yourself with the really real, with your own deepest values, something other than a way of connecting the person who is praying and all who would hear her prayers with what we know and what we don't know about life, something other than changing the ones offering the prayer by letting themselves admit, for one small moment, just how vulnerable we all really are.

When we pray create together our Pastoral Prayer each Sunday, I have this real sense of this shared vulnerability. I have this tangible feeling of the ways we all are just doing the best we can, facing innumerable challenges and trying our best to be loving and brave, to keep on finding joy - in the face of all of life's twists and turns. I love hearing the names we offer into the air, the ways that in an instant we all hear how we aren't isolated individuals, but instead invested and tied up with many others, people whose stories impact our own, and whose lives give our lives more meaning.

At the end of the Pastoral Prayer, after we've said these names, I always offer a prayer that I write uniquely for each Sunday, but one that follows exactly a formula I was so grateful to learn from the Rev. Mike Morran, the minister at the First Unitarian Society of Denver. I was grateful, because although I've gotten a lot more comfortable with this practice of prayer, and certainly done a lot of it, even publicly, and out loud, before he taught it to me, I still struggled – especially with that darn opening.

And so I want to end my sermon today by teaching you the form he taught me. It's a 5 step form.

The first: you name what you understand as the Big Reality. So often I'll say, something like "The universe is larger and more complex and interdependent than we can even comprehend." It's a great way to address the whole big reality without *personifying* the address. After that, you place yourself in that Big Reality. So, "I know my part is small, but it's important." The

third part, you move to a request, a petition, or an intention. “May we have the courage and strength to do what we can with the time we have.” In the fourth step, you give thanks. “I am grateful for this life and all its blessings.” “I am thankful for my health and for my family.”

And finally, the last step, you let it all go. “It” being whatever is getting in the way of you experiencing all the truths you’ve just named. In the form Mike taught me, this fifth part was brief. But in my version, it’s often the longest part. Because I find that for us to let things go, even momentarily, we need to take our time. My prayers usually go something like “Into this circle we place our expectations, and our attachments.” “We place our fears and our desire to control.” I try to list things that are both positive and negative, knowing ultimately that like our breath, *all* things come in, and then go out. And that any attachment to these things gets in the way of our full experience of life’s greater goodness, life’s greater purpose – that is, abundant love.

I always end the prayers in the same way, every week. It turns out having some repetition lets things sink in, gives our bodies clues that our sub-conscious brains connect with. In, and then out, I say. And after having done this with you for 8 of the last 16 Sundays, right as I say it – I feel the whole room, breathing slowly, deeply, in, and then out like we’re all letting at least some stuff go - though I don’t even say, “breathe.” It’s kind of awesome.

One last note - remember what Emerson said about keeping it real. The more specific you can be in all of these elements, the better. What is the Big Reality to you right now? And what do you really see as your place in it? What do you need, and what are you thankful for? Keep it real.

For *all of us* who share these human feelings that prompt prayer, and yet who struggle as I do to give these feelings voice, may this form be a gift to you as it was to me.

1. Name the Big Reality.
2. Place yourself in it.
3. Petition or set intention.
4. Give thanks.
5. Let it go.

For those who have the feelings, but not the words, may this form be a way you can keep trying to put words around that which is beyond words. And whether through this form, or some other prayer practice, may we all keep finding ways to honor the precious reality of this gift of

life – life passed through fire, life that just keeps on with its blessings and heartbreaks, life that just keeps giving us grace. For real.

May it be so, and Namaste.