

“Re-imagining Prayer”
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Unitarian Church of Montpellier
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First Reading “On Prayer” by Czeslaw Milosz

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.
That bridge leads to the shore of Reversal
Where everything is just the opposite and the word 'is'
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.
Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh
And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

Second Reading from *Simply Pray* by Erik Walker Wikstrom

“If you long to connect with the Sacred, if you desire to live a life that is more in touch with the Holy, stop listening for something and start simply listening. If you have given up on an anthropomorphic deity—the old white guy with the long white beard, or any of his stand-ins—yet can’t figure out what to put in its place, stop looking for something and start simply looking around you. Notice those places in your life where you have felt yourself in the presence of the Holy, remember those experiences in which you have heard your connectedness; seek in your own life—your own feelings, your own moments—those places where you have encountered, or are encountering, the Sacred. In other words, simply pray. Pray without any preconceived notion of what you’re doing or why. Simply do it, and see what happens.”

All this month we have been exploring what it means to be people of imagination. A few weeks ago the Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar shared her thoughts with you about the importance of words and how we might more imaginatively engage with traditional religious words.

She made the point that engaging with words like faith, salvation, and grace asks us to re-imagine the meanings of those words because of the negative emotions shaped by previous experiences we might bring to our relationship with those phrases.

“Prayer” is a word that can similarly elicit strong reactions. These words can make us shut down or can send us running in the other direction. Yet, as Rev. Nieuwejaar pointed out we need this language to be able to speak of and access the oftentimes ineffable and holy dimensions of life. And, we need practices in our daily lives to similarly connect us with the holy.

Can we imagine or re-imagine prayer to be one of these practices?

Engaging in prayer as Unitarian Universalists is a process fraught with mixed emotions. I want to acknowledge that none of us here relates to prayer in the same way. Some of us may have decided long ago that prayer has no place in our lives at all. Others may have more recent wounds that have caused us to push prayer away as a spiritual practice. And still others may simply be curious. May be wondering how you might still find meaning in prayer.

Our attitudes towards prayer have a lot to do with the religious tradition of our upbringing, if there was one, and our personal spiritual journeys that led us here, to this sanctuary today.

As I have shared in the past, I was raised Roman Catholic and then chose Unitarian Universalism as a young adult. And, my spiritual journey has included a process of sorting through the beliefs and traditions I was raised

with to determine what I might reject outright and what might still hold meaning for me today.

In this process I have grown wary and suspicious of the ways I was taught to pray and the ways I observed others engage in prayer. The obligatory recital of memorized lines. The unreflective, seemingly irrational, invocations of some higher power that might change the course of my life. I, like many of you, have rejected that image of an anthropomorphic deity, “the old white guy with the long white beard” that Erik Walker Wikstrom refers to in our reading.

I have shaped my life in such a manner that I am no longer surrounded by these modes of prayer and these images of the divine, but there are still occasional reminders.

A few times a year, I receive an email from a family member or a friend whose subject is something along the lines of “DO NOT DELETE” and “RESPOND IMMEDIATELY” written out in capital letters. Usually, I can tell what type of email this is right away. It is a chain prayer.

If you’ve never received a chain prayer in your email box before, perhaps you are more familiar with the old-fashioned chain letter. Like a chain letter, a chain prayer is meant to be sent along to more and more recipients. If you do not break the chain, something good will happen to you. The emails don’t usually describe what will happen if you do break the chain, but you can trust that these are consequences to be avoided.

When I receive such an email, I generally read about half of it, thank the person who sent it for thinking of me and do nothing more.

A couple years ago, I received one of these chain emails from a friend rather unexpectedly. She is not a particularly religious person and so it surprised me to receive such an email from her. The instructions were to send the letter on

to eight women who have touched my life. Like other emails of this sort that I had received in the past, I was ready to hit the delete button. But, I scrolled down and read the prayer, and it gave me pause. It read:

"May today there be peace within. May you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others. May you use the gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you. May you be content with yourself just the way you are. Let this knowledge settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each and every one of us."

Instead of hitting delete, I chose eight women who have touched my life to share this message with and I hit send.

In that moment, I imagined my friend, sitting at her computer all the way across the country and choosing to send that message to me. And I was reminded that I am cared for by others. I was reminded that I wish others all that is good in life and that goodness is available to all of us. This anonymous prayer spoke to that part of me that desires to connect, to reach outside myself to those I love, to that something greater of which we are all a part.

This prayer had nothing to do with those old images of a supernatural deity. Its purpose was not to pray to "someone who is not." Instead, it constructed for me "a velvet bridge" to another shore. A place distinct from the current realities that might imprison me in my own narrow preoccupations, that distance me from the needs of the world, and that make it difficult to have hope.

I believe that prayer is a way for us as spiritual beings to reach beyond ourselves. To feel that sense of connection we began our church year talking about.

Prayer can help us to live into the reality that we are not alone, that we are connected to a larger human family, that we are connected to a larger web of all existence, and yes, that we are connected to that deep, abiding mystery of life, that has many names and for which no name is adequate.

And because it can be so easy to forget the reality of our connectedness, I believe it is crucial that we identify those spiritual practices that can continually draw us back into that truth of who and whose we are.

One of these practices for me is prayer.

From the title of this sermon, you should be able to gather that I'd like to invite each of us to re-imagine what this word means and to do so with a spirit of openness and discovery. Re-imagining prayer doesn't just mean coming up with new ways of conceptualizing or defining this word. Prayer isn't just an abstract concept - it is a practice, an activity. And so we don't just re-imagine prayer through the intellect. We re-imagine through our ways of being and doing.

As I have come along on my own spiritual journey, I have learned to approach prayer as an intention of the heart. In the Christian practice of centering prayer, one sits in silence, clearing the mind, and placing one's intent on God. The key to me in this practice is the intention. First it is the attention to that place of stillness within and then a focus on the intentions I hold: for deep peace, for the well-being of all, for love of the world.

One need not sit in silence to turn towards these intentions of the heart. Prayer can take many forms.

Writing out a prayer may be meaningful to you, whether a private prayer or one to be shared with others. Your prayer might be spoken aloud. Saying

thank you before a meal. Or, naming the people in your life that you are concerned about. Or, acknowledging the awesome beauty of an October sunset. Some prayers are not meant to be spoken aloud at all. In many eastern countries, prayer flags are put up to share blessings and to spread good will and compassion into the world. Prayer for you might be engaging in an activity that opens your heart to others – serving meals at our community lunch, tutoring at a local school, or walking a labyrinth.

There are many ways to pray especially if we begin with an openness to those intentions of our hearts.

As Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom writes:

“Notice those places in your life where you have felt yourself in the presence of the Holy, remember those experiences in which you have heard your connectedness; seek in your own life—your own feelings, your own moments—those places where you have encountered, or are encountering, the Sacred. In other words, simply pray.”

Simply pray.

You may be wondering whether it really is that simple:

What should I be praying for?

Who am I addressing these prayers to?

As we engage in this exploration, Wikstrom has a second recommendation for us: to pray without any preconceived notion of what you’re doing or why.

I’ll admit that this little piece of advice provides a great deal of challenge for me. My quest to use my analytical mind is probably in part what led me to Unitarian Universalism...and, indeed, we are a religious community that prides itself on the strength of our intellect and critical thinking capabilities.

So, how might we set aside all those questions and simply notice where we are encountering the sacred and see what happens?

Two summers ago, I served as a chaplain in a hospital just outside Chicago. The thing that brought me the most anxiety as a chaplain was praying with patients and their families. My mind would race with the questions of how to begin and what words to use.

Throughout the summer, we were each assigned five or six overnight on-call shifts. For most of the summer, my shifts were fairly tame. No major crises. I even got a bit of sleep. This was not the case, however, for my final overnight shift.

In the children's wing of the Emergency Department, an infant, just a few months old, had been admitted. I learned that her body was covered in bruises and one of her arms was broken. She had arrived with her mother, a young woman not more than 20 years old. And her mother later joined us. The young woman had picked up the child from the baby's father who had been taking care of her at his home the last couple of days. The infant had been wailing when her mother picked her up and so the young woman had brought her to the hospital sensing that something was terribly wrong.

I had often felt like I was walking on holy ground as I offered my presence to patients and their families. But this night, the sacred tragedy of the situation was all too apparent. There lay this little child, helpless, vulnerable, impossibly small in the hospital crib under the fluorescent lights surrounded by the nurses and doctors whose hearts were breaking witnessing her brokenness.

I spent most of the night with the baby's mother and grandmother. Listening to them tell and tell again the story of what had happened. Sharing their

anger and shock. Wondering aloud what to do next. As the early hours of morning arrived, there was nothing left to say or to do. Yet, the intentions of our hearts were too strong to ignore. And so we prayed.

Without any preconceived notion of what we were doing or why. The questions about prayer that had previously tormented me no longer mattered. I don't remember the words we spoke. What words would have been adequate? I know we joined hands. I know we cried.

That night I encountered the sacred in its frailty and in its fierce love. Witnessing the brokenness of an infant. Witnessing the rage of the medical staff. Witnessing the despair of a mother.

I breathed in.
I breathed out.

And I continued to simply pray.

Through prayer, we travel that velvet bridge to what is holy.
The holiness that is painful and tragic.
The holiness that is joyful and awe-inspiring.
The holiness that is beautifully ordinary.

My prayer, the intention I hold in my heart for all of us, is that we might keep our hearts open to all that is sacred that we might live into the truth of our connectedness, that we might simply pray.