

On Prayer: To Its Cultured Despisers

Prayer is one of those words - one of those trip wire words - that some of us Unitarian Universalists have a difficult time embracing. I still have a reaction to the word. I find it challenging, unsettling and sometimes off-putting. But the mind can become hardened around such words, limiting possibilities. And if the word is too difficult, the practice is impossible and we have once again cut off our nose to spite our face.

I hope today to begin the redemption of prayer for those who currently despise it and, perhaps, to put a new spin on it for those who make it a practice.

Allow me to suggest the purpose of prayer is to enhance our focus while highlighting that our reality is one of relationships and that our attitude toward these relationships is cooperative. Prayer acknowledges relationship. It leans into intersubjectivity; that is, a state of being where subjectivity - which is something akin to personhood - is granted to more than just you, more than just humans. Intersubjectivity is interdependence with attitude. Literally.

This does lead us to the theological associations and implications of prayer. But I tell you that we need not consider our prayer dedicated to an addressee or in the name of some esteemed character to be meaningful. Yet, I also acknowledge that such addresses and dedications, when filled with honesty, are powerful invocations. And any prayer filled with honesty is powerful.

Powerful in what way? Well, let's return to what prayer does.

As you may know, I attended a Christian seminary as a UU. There it seemed like my new classmates prayed at the beginning of everything; every class, every meal, every test, every school function, bathroom breaks, everything. Okay, maybe not the bathroom. But there were prayers to open a class. These were often led by students who were called on, volunteer style or surprise attack style, at the hour's beginning. "Who shall lead us in a prayer today?" At which point I started praying like hell that they wouldn't call on me!

And they never asked me. See, prayer works! I jest.

At the time, I was put off by the regularity and even mundane object of most of the praying. I thought the whole thing, patently for the birds.

I guess, with regards to prayer in those first days of seminary, you could have labeled me a cultured despiser: someone who had thought about it and rejected the practice. I imagine there are some equally cultured despisers with us this morning. I hear you. I understand.

That turn of phrase – cultured despiser - is brought to us by one of the West's great theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher. He delivered a treatise titled, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. It remains a seminal work addressed to a world that, even then, in the late 1700's, was turning away from intentional religion as a world ordering enterprise.

His thoughts fit easily into present day Unitarian Universalist thinking. In fact, the American Transcendentalist movement, which has influenced the Unitarian aspect of our tradition so strongly, can trace some of its roots to Schleiermacher. In a nutshell, he proposed that religion was a feeling rather than an act of intellect or will. Religiousness was not necessarily intellectually sensible, but was, in essence, emotionally and psychologically *sensual*; a feeling.

Prayer is a doorway into this feeling. It's not the only doorway. Meditation works. Ritual works. Songs work. Saying, "hello," might even work. All of these things have the potential to open the door to that feeling - that feeling that expands your sense of connection and brings you into a state of harmony.

But to have harmony, there must be more than one note. And this is why I like prayer. Indeed, "more than one note," is the fundamental assumption that prayer makes and is how prayer works. It is also what separates prayer from meditation and ritual.

Similar to meditation and ritual, prayer orders the world. All these practices establish focus. Our world is that upon which we focus. That is the dynamic that I witnessed at seminary, where a crowd of excited or sleepy or distracted learners were all quickly and peaceably attuned to one another, and to the teacher and to the subject of the class, and to our larger purpose, by the act of prayer.

Ritual and meditation may also do this, may also evoke the sensation of harmony. But, prayer directly implies, "more than one note." As to that note: earlier, I said that prayer need not be addressed to any deity or name or quality. I do not believe that leaving out the, "Dear God," or, "Holy Earth," or "Light of life," compromises the power of the prayer. Nor does it compromise the conversational aspect of the act. In other words, I don't think it matters whether or not you address your prayer to something or someone.

What matters is that in honest prayer you are automatically reaching out beyond yourself. For, in the reaching out is the acknowledgement that there is more going on here than just you and that

what happens in life is not all up to you alone. This does *not* imply that it is up to deity, just that you aren't deity.

Prayer puts relationship at the center. And because relationship is (at least) a two way street, that means that we depend significantly on something outside of us to make us us. And so in prayer, in the heart of it, is an increase in our sensitivity through a practice that requires our vulnerability.

That is so important. Prayer is a moment of vulnerability. If your guard is up or you are stuck in your individualistic shell, it's like plugging your ears. If you live with your hands over your ears, it can be scary to take them off and listen. But it is through that vulnerability that one may encounter that feeling that expands your sense of connection and brings you into a state of harmony, that feeling of being held.

Now, do keep in mind that if prayer is conversational, then a fair bit of it involves you just keeping quiet and listening – again, not necessarily to a god but perhaps to the ineffable, unnamable parts - and sum of those parts - whose confluence is the great flow and rhythm of your life and life in general, or perhaps to an imagined or culturally inherited inner spirit guide that embodies the best or most useful of all of that. To this you may pray. Which means, to this we must also listen.

There's a good story about Mother Theresa where a reporter asked her, "What do you say when you pray?" "I listen," she said. After pausing a moment, the reporter asked, "Then what does God say?" and she replied, "He listens." I find that beautiful.

So not only is prayer a reaching out beyond yourself in hope, it is an *openness* oriented beyond the self and into the relationships that conspire to create your reality. It is asking. It is shouting. It is singing. It is dancing. It is service. It is listening.

Sometimes it is wrestling. Sometimes, like Janette proves with Tam Lin, an encounter with the other world requires both faith and tenacity. The other world or underworld might sometimes be the spirit world. But it is always the world that you are otherwise not attuned to; which could be subtle flows and eddies of energy, or the trees, the birds, your kids, or even your own heart.

Prayer, then, is almost a skill. It requires practice. But, because prayer is a spiritually oriented conversation, highlighting our interdependence, it releases us from the burden of total control, invites a vulnerability through which we win both harmony and connection.

By putting relationship at the center of an earnest act of the spirit, prayer has the ability to increase our sense of the subtle and beautiful world around us. This enriches our experience of our lives.

Story of Cora and the trees wherein she prays for Thanks and for **More**.

She wasn't thanking me. I mean, I was a part of what she was thanking, but she did not say it to me. She said it to the snow and trees and hill and sky and temperature and light and love and more that were as far beyond her to name in their diversity and complexity as what I pray to is. It wasn't god. She had no concept of god. So she wasn't asking god for more. But that was a prayer. And that is what I invite you to when I say, "Let's pray."