

Prayer and the Pray-er

Feb. 3, 2008

Deborah Mero

UFWC

In most houses of worship, prayer is a central part of the worship service if not *the* central focus of worship. It is interesting to ponder how and why worship in Unitarian Universalist churches often intentionally leaves out prayer altogether. I noticed that the order of service before I came here did not include a time for prayer. We have become the brunt of jokes among many others who consider themselves religious and us anything but. The story that most comes to mind is the one about the man who is looking for the right clergy person to say a blessing over his new car. He first approaches a Catholic Priest and says to him, "Please Father, I have just acquired a new Lambourghini, and I was hoping you would say a blessing over it." to which the priest replies, "What's a Lambourghini?" Not being the answer the man was looking for, he went to a rabbi and asked the same thing, "Please Rabbi, I have just acquired a new Lambourghini, and I was hoping you would say a blessing over it." The rabbi replied, "What's a Lambourghini?" He then approached a Unitarian Universalist minister and said to him, "Please Reverend, I have just acquired a new Lambourghini, and I was hoping you would say a blessing over it." to which the minister replied, "What's a blessing?"

The reading from Rev. Donald Harrington is somewhat telling. Dr. Harrington felt that to pray in public or even in private to be a provocation to many in the congregation that he served, the Community Church of New York. He served that church from 1944 until his retirement in 1982, a span of 38 years that encompassed a time in our movement when many of our churches and ministers embraced the Humanist philosophy and turned away from any kind of religious expression that included God. Indeed, the Community Church in New York was one of the leading churches in the American Unitarian Association, later the Unitarian Universalist Association, in promoting a more scientific and philosophical understanding of the Universe. It has been mainly in the last decade that words like "prayer," "grace," "worship," and "spirit" have re-entered the active vocabulary in many of our churches. Yet, I know that some still have trouble with the concept of prayer. Perhaps it is the word itself, perhaps it is our understanding—or misunderstanding of what it is or could be.

We in our liberal Unitarian Universalist faith are not alone in being tentative about pursuing this subject with depth. Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, in their book, The Feminine Face of God, wrote:

"We seem to be much more comfortable talking about our sex lives than we are about sharing information with each other about how we pray. Perhaps this is because praying may be the most personal and intimate thing we do." ¹

I would like you all to take a moment to think of your earliest memories of prayer as it touched your lives. Perhaps you were taught a prayer to say at bedtime when you were little. Perhaps your family was in the habit of saying grace before meals. Many of you were raised in traditions that weren't Unitarian or Universalist. What was the form of prayer that today remains in your minds from your earliest worship experiences? Did you memorize certain prayers? Can you recall the words today? Did you understand what you were saying then? Does it make any sense to you now? Are there times in your current lives that you find yourself in prayer? What is significant about those times? These are all questions and thoughts that I have pondered frequently over the last two decades. I would imagine that some of you may have asked yourself similar questions. Even more basic than that, do we even have a common understanding of what prayer is?

Brother David Steindl- Rast wrote the following:

"May we presume that everyone knows what prayer is? From one point of view the answer is "yes." Every human being knows prayer from experience. Have we not all experienced moments

in which our thirsting heart found itself with surprise drinking at a fountain of meaning? Much of our life may be a wandering in desert lands, but we do find springs of water. If what is called "God" means in the language of experience the ultimate Source of Meaning, then those moments that quench the thirst of the heart are moments of prayer. They are moments when we communicate with God, and that is, after all, the essence of prayer."²

They are moments of communication with something beyond ourselves, call it God, or the Ultimate Source of Being, or even one another. I would imagine that my childhood encounters with prayer were not very dissimilar to what many of you experienced. When my father, my brother, and I went to the synagogue, most of the praying was done in Hebrew, a language that I did not understand. Those of you brought up Catholic may remember when the Mass was only said in Latin. You may have had the same feelings of being in a large room surrounded by adults who knew the words by heart and recited them automatically. You knew when to stand up, when to sit down, when to kneel, and what to say. After Vatican II, when the Mass was translated into the language of the people, the words changed, but the actions and reactions usually remained the same. We learned how to go through the motions.

Sr. Joan Chittister once told a story of a new priest, just recently ordained, about to say his first Mass. He was very nervous and had not done all of his preparation work including a sound equipment check. As he came out to the alter to begin, he turned the microphone on, but heard no sound. Thinking that it was not working, the first words out of his mouth were, "Something is wrong with this microphone." To which the congregation, doing what they always did, replied, "And also with you." We are creatures of habit and ritual.

In my early questioning years, those of young adulthood, I found myself wondering what my father and his contemporaries could possibly have gotten out of going through the same motions week after week, reciting the same words week after week, at a speed that was beyond my ability to follow, let alone comprehend. I knew that they were reciting prayers, but the significance of the prayers escaped me. I knew the translation of one or two short passages, like the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, The Lord is One." I imagine that there are some among you who could say your "Hail Mary's" and "Our Father's" in your sleep without thinking about the words at all—they just come with no prompting. How, I wondered, how could that be meaningful? It wasn't until I really began my spiritual quest in earnest, that I began to understand how many traditions employ repetition and concentration as a way of freeing the mind to communicate with the Holy. Eastern traditions make use of the mantra, a short phrase repeated over and over again for long periods of time as an aid to meditation. Monastics of both Eastern and Western traditions use chant to open the mind and heart to the Spirit. The repetition of sounds and words is almost intoxicating, sending one into a trance-like condition that can be totally freeing. At this point, the mind and spirit come together and become one. I can understand how that can work and be enlightening. My prayers, however involve a more thoughtful and verbal process. There are times when I find the Psalms a place to turn to express the glory of or to question the workings of the universe. They are a form of poetry, but more. Stephen Mitchell wrote in his preface to his own translation of a book of psalms:

"The Psalms speak as both poetry and prayer. Some of them are very great poems. But as prayer, even the greatest poems are inadequate. Pure prayer begins at the threshold of silence. It says nothing, asks for nothing. It is a kind of listening. The deeper the listening, the less we listen for, until silence itself becomes the voice of God."³

Monastics recognize this quality as they follow the daily office, praying at the appointed hours and reciting the psalms day after day, year after year. The psalms can lead to praise. The psalms can lead to understanding. The psalms can lead to identification with what it is to be human in a world where little

makes sense. All are forms of prayer. The Rule of St. Benedict addresses the subject of prayer in Chapter 20 saying:

"Whenever we want to ask a favor of someone powerful, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the God of all with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace."⁴

Sister Joan Chittister, in her interpretation of the Rule goes on to say:

"The function of prayer is not to establish a routine; it is to establish a relationship with the God who is in relationship with us always. The function of times of prayer, then, is not to have us say prayers; it is to enable our lives to become a prayer outside of prayer, to become "pure of heart," one with God, centered in the truth that is Truth and the power that is Power and the love that is Love.

The function of prayer is to bring us in touch with ourselves, as well. To the ancients, 'tears of compunction' were the sign of a soul that knew its limits, faced its sins, accepted its needs and lived in hope."⁵

This understanding of prayer is reinforced in my own experience from my many years in Twelve Step programs when, at step meetings, we took one step at a time and discussed them at length. Step 11 says:

"Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we *understood God*, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out." (AA Big Book, etc.)

We talked a lot in meetings about the difference between prayer and meditation and mostly decided that prayer is "talking" and meditation is "listening"—not necessarily talking or listening to someone or something. The act of prayer, in essence is one of opening up our senses in order that we may be able to see what lies before us. It is not one of asking for something and then, since we had prayed for it, expecting to get it. It is too easy to blame a god for our own shortcomings when we believe that our prayers have not been answered. It is not the prayer that is important, it is the act of opening up, of being a prayer, of being a human being acknowledging that something else is going on in the universe over which we do not have power. And by being open to a wider universe, we then find hope for a future that we can not see immediately before us. As members of a faith tradition that holds up hope and the goodness of humankind, how can we not express our faith through prayer? If we are to truly face our humanity with all of its faults and foibles, we must make room for expressions of hope, and traditionally those expressions of hope are given voice in prayer. For those among us who are looking to deepen that part of our lives that involves the spirit, prayer is essential—however it manifests itself.

For those among us who are not, shall I say, "spiritually inclined," the subject of prayer remains just as relevant. I think I could safely say that within the hearts and minds of everyone here, there is undoubtedly a concern for the health and well-being of our society. There are many among us who firmly believe that the ills of our society are within human control. There is no god that makes things happen. Human potential is all that we have to work with if we want to effect change. I maintain that even for the humanists and atheists in our fold there is a place for prayer. One of the great leaders of this century, a man who brought profound change to a continent, and beyond, Mohandus Gandhi once said, "Prayer is not an old woman's idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action."⁶ It was in the 1960's that men and women of courage made the long trips to

Selma and to Montgomery Alabama to join with others and "pray with their feet" as they called it, marching for civil rights.

We all pray, one way or another, whether we know it or not, whether it is intentional or not whether it is directed at someone or something. Author Mary Gordon in the Bill Moyers Faith and Reason series said that "Prayer was having something to say and someone to say it to."

"In Primary Speech, a book on the psychology of prayer, scholars of religion, Ann and Barry Ulanov write, 'Everybody prays. People pray whether or not they call it prayer. We pray every time we ask for help, understanding or strength, in or out of religion. Then, who and what we are speak out of us, whether we know it or not. Our movements, our stillness, the expressions on our faces, our tone of voice, our actions, what we dream and daydream, as well as what we actually put into words say who and what we are.' " 7

We often find ourselves in a struggle between matters of the head and matters of the heart. It is prayer that can help us to relieve that struggle between head and heart. When we have the mindfulness to lift up our praises, our thanksgivings, our concerns, our fears and address them to a Creator, or cast them into the universe, we are then able to more fully embrace the matters of the heart which sustain us. Whether we chant one word, one sound repeatedly to clear our minds and open our hearts; whether we immerse ourselves in long prayers or rituals; whether we blurt out one short "thank you;" whether we pray with our feet for a good cause, our prayer is complete and worthy. Our prayers help us along on our journey of life. Gregory Grace wrote,

"You do not rise to prayer. You stumble and fall into prayer. Prayer is the stumbling upon a great joy that redirects your journey. Prayer is the art of learning how and where to stumble." 8

In the midst of our self-reliant lives, may we stumble mindfully on our path of growth. May our prayers, whatever form they take, aid and sustain us through the joys and challenges in our lives. And may we hear the love and prayers that each of us has to offer to each other. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts find a resting place that gives us peace.

1 Maggio, Rosalie, Quotations by Women (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) p. 544

2 David Steindl-Rast, Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer, (New York, Paulist Press, 1984) p. 211

3 Mitchell, Stephen, A Book of Psalms (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) p. XV

4 Chittister, Joan, OSB, The Rule of Benedict, (New York: Crossroad, 1996, p. 90

5 *ibid.*

6 Gandhi, M. K., Non-Violence in Peace and War, (1948) found in Dictionary of Spiritual and Religious Quotations, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) p. 86

7 Slesin, Suzanne, & Gwathmey, Emily, Amen, (New York Viking Studio Books, 1995) introduction.

8 Grace, Gregory, A Sacrifice of Fire (Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Books, 1986) p. 87`