

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY: WHY DON'T WE PRAY?

A Sermon Given to

The Unitarian Society of Menomonie, WI

November 18, 2007

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I'm almost embarrassed to admit it surprised me. Every class I've taken part in at seminary begins with a prayer. The teacher enters the classroom, says a few words to students, and then sits down or stands at a podium and says, "Let us pray."

At first, I thought this was only the norm at the beginning of the first meetings of classes. It made sense, calling on god at the opening of a new course in, say, Older Testament or Theology. But I've experienced this as well with my class on American Religious History.

I'm not a person who prays, or at least who doesn't pray the same way I see it done by others. I don't bow my head or close my eyes, so whenever someone leads a prayer I use the opportunity to look around at what everyone else is doing. In my seminary classes, even the people who are diehard Unitarian Universalist humanists and who probably don't pray in their congregations, bow their heads and fold their hands and close their eyes. This is the way we've come to be expected to pray, and my compromise, since I don't believe in a god who would expect me to abase myself before her, is to set both feet on the floor and observe silent observation.

For many of the people I've observed, this seems perfunctory. It is expected at a church service or even a seminary class that the authority will ask us to bow our heads in prayer, and the correct thing to do is to assume the position. But every once in a while, on the faces of some of these people, I glimpse something very like what I'd identify as transcendence. There is, if only for a moment, a hint that something, or someone, has touched them very, very deeply.

I'm reminded of my father, who really isn't a praying man, but who puts his all into it when he's asked to do it. It's as if he's Jacob wrestling with some aspect of a physical god, and it's getting the better of him. His eyes screw up, as if it was his life if he opened them, and the veins stand out on his forehead and his neck, and he grimaces. His hands are welded to one another as if each was in a wrestling contest with the other. His shoulders, which are already frail and narrow, become blades. This is the type of prayer I associate with his forebears, Kentucky Appalachian holy rollers who were only a step away from taking up snakes.

But he isn't that. In fact, my father and my mother are still seventh-Day Adventists and they take seriously the admonition in Matthew not to pray in public like the hypocrites do, but behind closed doors. When I was a child, I don't remember many instances of public prayer at our church services, and I remember asking my mother, who was a teacher, about whether it was right for me to pray every morning before the Pledge of Allegiance with the rest of the kids, like it was expected of us to do. Many of you are my age or older: I'm sure you remember having to pray before reciting the Pledge in school. Her answer was to the effect that, "if this is all they ask you for, give it to them."

Older now, and capable of my own decisions, I haven't prayed, if prayer is like that, for decades. There are, of course, other ways to pray. Orthodox Jews sing their prayers. American

Indians and some Sufis dance. Some Buddhists and most Muslims chant their prayers. I've bowed my head and gotten down on my knees and clasped my hands or clasped hands with another person, and I've directed comments to a disembodied "other" who may or may not be listening, but I've done those things because I've been asked to, not because I've believed in their efficacy or their benediction.

I suspect it's like that for most of us. We were probably taught to pray, forced to pray, when younger, when in the clutches of another faith, and now that we've found one that's comfortable or that's got something we want, we don't want to muddy the water with fairy tales and silly requests for a pony or curing someone's cancer. That's all prayer is, isn't it? Asking for things? Maybe not for yourself, but it is all about the asking, isn't it?

Maybe it's all about the hearer, or the not-hearer as the case may be. After all, if we don't believe in a god or a goddess or an ultimate reality or a hearer of some sort, there's no point speaking to what's not there. "Prayer," we need to remember is one of those words, like "love" or "god," whose meaning depends on how the person saying it defines it. "Work" is a similar word: when I say something about "my work," you might hear me saying something about my ministerial duties, but I might as easily be talking about my teaching responsibilities or my responsibilities to my wife or my family or I might even be talking about the chores I do around the house. So let me define, for the exigencies of this sermon, what "prayer" means.

Like those other words that can get us into trouble, we all think we know where the word "prayer" originates—it was always associated with religion. But like with everything else we know, it ain't necessarily so. It entered Middle English around 1290, admittedly in a book of services called *The Early South-English Legendary*, where it appeared as *preyen*, *prayen* and

preien, and it meant simply to ask earnestly of someone. It entered through the existence of the Old French *preier* “to request,” which itself first appeared around 880. Prior to this appearance, we are less certain: it is etymologically related to Latin of course through the French, which has *precor*, *precari*, *prex* and the prefix *prec-*, all of which mean “to entreat,” “to wish well or ill,” “to request” and “to address another with a wish.” None of these had a religious or worshipful tone to them. They simply referred to a strong request of someone.

There are three ways, by the way, of emphasizing my subtitle. The first is a simple question: “Why *don't* we pray?” Why don't Unitarian Universalists, this congregation, this denomination, this faith, pray? We are, after all, oriented to it. On both sides of the aisle, Unitarian and Universalist, we started out as Christian sects centuries ago, and while we've dropped off the trappings of most of that history, we still carry some. We continue to meet on Sunday morning. We continue to have a minister. We continue to have rituals and symbolism, from the lighting of the chalice to Child Dedications. Why don't we get down on our knees or put our hands together or at the very least close our eyes and pray to god? This is often called intercessory prayer, in which we ask god or Jesus or Mary or some other intercessor to step into our lives and problems and give the solution we ask for. For every one of these in which the intercessor seems to respond positively, there are thousands of examples in which this same intercessor would seem to have had his mind elsewhere. What else are we to make of the deaths caused by the cyclone in Bangladesh yesterday, the thousands killed in the tsunami the morning after Christmas a few years ago, or the death of my friend Alex at age 26 from stomach cancer two years ago. Any number of people prayed for help and a positive end to those situations, and none of them will be written up for the “Prayer at Work” section of *Guidepost* magazine.

That last one is a flub, by the way. Alex was in so much pain even I stepped into the Basilica in Minneapolis and lit a candle, asking that she die quickly and in as little pain as possible. I can't see it was answered except that she did die eventually, although it was weeks later.

We see the answer to this one quickly: Unitarian Universalists aren't asking anything of anyone. Not for forgiveness, not for world peace, not for understanding, not for a pony. We know none of those things will be given to us. We have to earn them, and even then there is a question whether we will ever really "get" them. Except maybe the pony. You open your eyes and a pony's there, you got the pony.

Margaret Guenther Cowley reminds us that our "prayer makes a difference in who we are and who we become." There's another way to read "prayer" and that's as a form of communication rather than a supplication. This is the way it's often used by Jews and Muslims: you do this in a group—in Judaism it takes a *minyan*, ten adult men, to make it official, although women can join the prayer, and in Islam it can be as few as two people—and the larger the group, the louder the prayer. The prayer in these traditions doesn't "ask" for anything, they are done several times daily as simple recognition of god's existence and praise and appreciation for all she's done. Talmudic scholars have said god created people so he'd have someone to talk to, and it's this that this type of prayer ascribes to. You are in conversation with god, although admittedly it's pretty one-sided—god is not expected to answer, at least not in the way god's been addressed. This prayer can often take the form of application—"god, please do these things"—but more often it's viewed as a way of saying, "hey, god, nice going, good to see things happening, just wanted to say 'hey'." This is the sort of prayer we should all practice with our

elected officials. “Hey, good bill, keep it up.” This is often called an experiential approach. Through this prayer we catch a glimpse or a sense of god or the divine or ultimate reality. It’s similar to an educational form of prayer in which we become more aware of the universe’s being by concentrating on the myriad tiny ways it works through its inhabitants.

Thus, the second way of saying my subtitle: “why don’t *we pray?*” This is not so easy to answer, since UUism is so composed of many, many ways of seeing that which is outside ourselves. Some say god, some goddess, some divine or holy, some ultimate nature. Some say there is nothing outside us at all. Davidson Loehr uses this as an example of how we are destined to fail as a denomination for the simple fact we can never get everyone on the same page the way, say, Catholics can—although if you know your Catholicism you know they’re never all on the same page either, although often they’re in the same chapter. In contrast, we’re rarely holding the same books. I’ve addressed Loehr’s contention before and this isn’t the place to do so now except to note that it’s because we ascribe to separate beliefs that we can end up more or less in the same section of the library.

This is by the way a roundabout way of saying that actually, we do pray this way. When we meditate as a group, when we gather together and direct our thoughts in the same direction by listening to the sermon or poem or singing the same song, we pray. Some of us might take exception to that idea—“I’m listening, I’m not praying”—and I respect that exception. I can’t do much more than suggest that maybe, in some small, conversational, educational way, when we sing “Spirit of Life” together or we announce “Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law,” we’re praying in exactly this way. If there is something bigger than all of us, this is something that might be heard. Kind of like in *Horton Hears a Who*, in which Jo-Jo, the tiniest

Who of them all, provides the necessary volume lift to make their combined voices heard. After all, “a person’s a person no matter how small.”

This is slightly different although related to the way prayer is treated in Buddhism where it is a support to meditation and study. You’re meant to contemplate what you have learned while in silence or by chanting a mantra. One form of this is popularly known as the prayer of the Bodhisattva: “Sentient beings are numberless, I will save them all. Delusions are inexhaustible, I will put an end to them. The Dharma is endless, I will master it. The Buddha Way is unobtainable, I will obtain it.” You aren’t asking the universe for anything in particular, other than the enlightenment of all beings, but you’re mulling over, conversing with the universe as it were, the things you’ve found and looking for insight into them.

My mentor, reverend Eleanor Rice, asked me one afternoon in response to some problems I’d laid out for her, “how’s your prayer life?” I was taken aback, partly because Eleanor of course is a UU and UUs don’t pray, and partly because it seems like a remarkably personal question, like asking someone when his last bowel movement was. Although, now that I think about it, that one seems a little less personal than the prayer question. I stammered something to the effect that I don’t have one, expecting that to be the end of that line of questioning. But Eleanor wouldn’t let me off that easy—part of the reason she was a good mentor to me—and kept probing and questioning. “Isn’t there,” she asked, “a time when you feel peaceful, at one with your surroundings and your spirit, and content? Do you meditate?” I said I hadn’t meditated as such in years, not since enforced practice at Dharmapada, the monastery I visited in the late 80s, although I have done a form of walking meditation for decades.

She said, “That’s not quite it. Isn’t there a time when you’re totally concentrated on something other than yourself but you feel in touch with both it and yourself?”

I thought about it. I could count on one hand the number of times I’ve purposely called on something outside myself for answers or help. They haven’t been spectacular successes. When I’m asked to say grace at family gatherings, as I am at times, I usually say something along the lines of, “It’s good that we’re all here and we’re healthy and happy. We’re fortunate to have food to eat and family to be with, and we’re grateful for that.” No one says “amen” after that, although I think that’s a mighty profound statement.

But then I twigged into what Eleanor was getting at. There is a time when I feel at peace, at one with the world and the people in it, in communion with something larger than myself. That’s when I am laying on my back deep in the recesses of solving a difficult crossword puzzle.

I offered that to her and explained that, when I’m working on a puzzle, I’m not me, I’m not a teacher or a preacher or a student or a man or a husband or a father to dogs. I’m simply not. Or perhaps the way to say it is that I’m all things, all those things and other things I can’t even think of. I lose my sense of self as I’m solving a puzzle and it doesn’t matter what’s going on outside the puzzle or even in the puzzle. If I don’t answer it, I don’t answer it, but if I do, that’s a *mitzvah*. A good thing.

I used to spend time with a group called Direct Centering back in the 80s and they were a bit of a scam operation but they were also onto something with their notion that one should detach from situations. Their rationale was that by detaching you would be okay with any result of the situation, and I think that led more to a sense of helplessness or powerlessness than I’d

like, but I think what they were really getting at was this sense of being separate from the result, in the Buddhist sense. That is, knowing you have done all you could to bring a satisfactory answer to the situation, and now that you've done so, you will be satisfied with the result. It may be life, it may be death. It may be a pony. You have done everything you could and you are secure in what you've done as, not necessarily the right thing, but the thing you've done. There may be room for correction. There may not. This is why, I suppose, I do crosswords in pen. There is no disgrace in writing over something.

Eleanor said, "That's your form of prayer."

The third way of reading my subtitle is as an invitation. "*Why don't we pray?*" In a recent article Kimberly French calls "Spirit of Life," which is number 123 of our hymnal, our Doxology, our "Amazing Grace." It's become so prevalent in UU services and circles almost everyone knows it by heart. Carolyn McDade, the author of the song, says of its composition, "I [felt] like a piece of dried cardboard that [had lain] in the attic for years. Just open wide the door and I'll be dust.' ...I walked through the house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out. It was not written but prayed...I thought of it as a living prayer..." Will you join me now in standing as you're able and speaking or singing the words to the prayer "Spirit of Life?"

"Spirit of life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. Blow in the wind, rise in the sea, move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice. Roots hold me close, wings set me free. Spirit of life, come to me. Come to me."

Thank you.

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