



Why Pray? (part I)
a sermon by Rev. Alan C. Taylor
delivered March 14, 2010

First Reading: "On Prayer" by Czeslaw Milosz (translated by Robert Hass)

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
They will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

Second Reading from Wishful Thinking, a Seeker's ABC by Frederick Beuchner

We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad. The ah-h-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of us as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the skyrocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds we use for sighing with over our own lives. These are all prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world.

Whatever else it may or may not be, prayer is at least talking to yourself, and that's in itself not always a bad idea. Talk to yourself about your own life, about what you've done and what you've failed to do, and about who you are and who you wish you were and who the people you love are and the people you don't love too. Talk to yourself about what matters most to you, because if you don't, you may forget what matters most to you.

Sermon

This morning I want to talk about prayer. The first sermon I gave on prayer was the first Sunday I ascended this pulpit, nearly seven years ago. I chose prayer as the very first theme to explore with you because I noticed there hadn't been a pastoral prayer in the service during the tenure of my predecessor--and prayer is a significant part of worship for me. I shared how I envisioned my unfolding ministry among you as gathering the prayers of the people, to listen for your responses to what is on your hearts? What do you long for from your deepest places? What is truly important to you? and then to shape our worship and pastoral life together from these responses.

This still is how I strive to serve you. The best worship themes emerge from conversations about what is on your hearts. I appreciate the thoughtfulness and honesty of members here who recently brought to my attention their struggle with prayer. When I pray on Sunday mornings, they don't feel at home. Their buttons are pushed by the use of God language, and especially when the prayer engages active verbs like 'help us,' 'show us,' 'remind us, or 'cultivate in us.' The ensuing conversation inspired today's sermon and I share their hope that the wider community will reflect on questions about what is prayer, what are we praying to? Why pray? Because these questions are so important to the spiritual life, this will be the first of two sermons. This morning I will share what I have learned from my own struggle with prayer and why I pray the way I do here among you. Next week, I will explore how prayer can change the world by transforming the hearts of those who learn how to live beyond the apparent limits of their lives.

I wasn't taught how to pray when I grew up--which may have been a good thing. There are many different ways to pray that are life-affirming, as shared in today's story, including singing, walking, and gardening. And yet a lot of people are raised to pray in pretty horrible ways. Because my father knew of these horrible ways, I was raised to relish the definition of prayer found in the Devil's Dictionary by Ambrose Bierce: "Pray, a verb. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy." Prayer seemed nothing more to me than sending up personal wishes up into the rafters and believing that something then magically happened. So prayer long seemed to me rather silly.

The first time prayer was meaningful in my life was at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland. There, my ministers prayed during the worship service immediately following a time when people could speak the names of those on their hearts. The prayers were often extemporaneous and they sometimes went deep. It was a time of being still, listening openly within, and touched in me a place of deep vulnerability. Often my eyes welled up with tears. Always it was an opportunity to orient myself towards my most cherished values and to do so within a community. From this experience I came to believe, a worship service without prayer lacked a significant way to open up the heart.

As a rationalist, I struggled to understand the value of prayer. Grace happens in the strangest of places. It was in a movie theater that I had a significant breakthrough. The

film was *Shadowlands*, a wonderful film about the life of CS Lewis, an English theologian of the past century better known as the fantasy writer who penned the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and known by his friends as simply Jack. Like many British theologians and many of us Unitarian Universalists, Jack was prone to discussing issues of love and suffering only at a distance and struggled when caught up within them himself. When the love of his life, a woman named Joy, finally got through his emotionally tough exterior, she fell ill with terminal cancer. Late in her illness, at the college, the president approaches Jack and says, I know how hard it must be. You've been praying and now God is answering. Jack responds, "I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because I can't help it. The need flows out of me all the time waking and sleeping. Praying doesn't change God. It changes me." When Joy has died, Jack sat down next to Joy's nine-year-old son. The boy said, "I thought if I prayed and believed enough, she wouldn't die. It didn't work."

We all suffer the pain of losing something or somebody we dearly love. We all face situations where we would do anything to change them. It is completely normal that we would pray feverishly to make it otherwise. No matter how much we pray, there are many things we cannot change. What an insight CS Lewis comes to in his moment of crisis: Prayer doesn't change God. Prayer changes ourselves. Prayer doesn't change things that can't be changed. Prayer helps to give us the strength and insight to change things that can, like our hearts, or even our own lives. Prayer can transform how we relate with others and how we move through the world.

Like most Unitarian Universalists who enter seminary, I was uneasy with praying. I didn't want to do it unless it felt authentic and usually it seemed awkward. A turning point occurred when I was working as a chaplain at San Francisco General Hospital, on the AIDS and oncology floor as well as in the emergency room of this public hospital that was the region's trauma center. and I was in a bind. It was a big part of my job to pray with and for others. I knew that unless I could pray for myself, my prayers with others and on behalf of others would be flat. I began praying to learn how to pray, but that wasn't the turning point. As the work quickly intensified, I got overwhelmed fast. What could I offer these people who suffered so dearly?

I'd go home at night exhausted, unable to sleep, grieving for the people I met, confounded by what I was supposed to do. I began to think that I wouldn't be able to go on. In the middle of one of those sleepless nights, suddenly a prayer welled up from deep within, and it was this, "Dear God, I feel helpless in the face of all this suffering. I can't fix it. I don't know what to say. What am I suppose to do here?" (This was the first time I found myself using the word God.) And then I prayed, "I need to know you are holding all of this suffering. I need to give it to you. I can't do this all by myself." Today, when I remember those words, tears fill my eyes, but at the time my breath suddenly deepened. A clarity poured through my body, and I knew that I had to let go of my expectation that I was in control, that instead I had to trust something larger than myself to hold all that suffering, and that as a chaplain I was there to provide--I didn't know what to call other than the love of God--by simply being present to people, to be real with them, and to let them know as I could feel in my bones that love is at the heart of the universe."

After this experience, praying sometimes came more naturally. But it never has become something easy to do, for prayer requires diligent attentiveness, and this takes work. It takes practice.

When I meet with people in their homes after enduring a significant trauma, I typically ask if they would like to pray with me or whether they would like me to pray with them. Most times, people are grateful for this opportunity. When I pray, I simply seek to name what I have heard, lift up the deep longing, and honor it. Usually, more tears are shed during the prayer than during the rest of the visit. Prayer provides a focused medium to identify what really matters to us.

A mentor once told me. You don't really become a minister until you learn how to pray. I think he was saying you cannot effectively minister to others unless you can sit with them with a clear attentive presence and then be able to say a simple and thoughtful word appropriate to the moment that somehow names both the challenge and the deep longing of the other.

Rainer Maria Rilke puts it poetically:
*So now my prayer is this:
You, my own deep soul,
trust me. I will not betray you.
My blood is alive with many voices
telling me I am made of longing.
What mystery breaks over me now?
In its shadow I come into life.
For the first time I am alone with you -
you, my power to feel.*

I think that Rilke is suggesting that God is in our power to feel, perhaps that our power to feel is a spark of divinity to which we can pray.

Prayer is challenging for Unitarian Universalists, I think, because Praying is not a rational activity. It is a spiritual impulse, and one we need to be painfully honest about our own motivations. For the act of prayer can be grossly abused. Some kinds of prayer are profoundly distasteful. After a memorial service for a predominantly Catholic family, a woman told me how her son, a soldier, had escaped harm in Iraq when the vast majority of his platoon was either killed or severely hurt, she said that she knew it was because she had prayed faithfully everyday. I had to respond, "I am glad for you and your son, but Do you really believe the mothers of those soldiers who died weren't praying for their children just as faithfully?" It is this perspective on prayer that gives prayer a bad name--believing that prayer changes God. Prayer doesn't change God. It changes ourselves.

Here at Unity Temple during worship, the prayer follows the sharing of joys and sorrows and the book of gathering the prayers of the people. That is intentional. When a deep trauma or significant event is shared that causes a sudden acknowledgment that we are

not fully in control, the pastoral prayer provides the opportunity to name our humanity. From my perspective, the prayer is the most vulnerable and potentially the most sacred moment of the service. I don't typically prepare my prayers. I have uttered prayers that have been deeply genuine and others that aren't. Truth be told, sometimes I begin a prayer without knowing what I will say and let the spirit move me--or simply utter whatever words happen to come. But I persist with this practice because I believe in our capacity to be together, bound by the simple moment of listening deeply.

Why do I pray with the word God? This is a great question and the answer is complicated. I begin with the language of invocation, because I believe it is important that we acknowledge in our communal prayer that we aren't fully in control, that at times we are helpless, and that we exist in the context of something larger than us. Rationally, I struggle with the concept of God. Using purely intellectual arguments, I am not persuaded to believe in God. Emotionally, spiritually, however, I am compelled to behave as if there is a creative force at the center of the universe, a love at the heart of reality, some mystery beyond our comprehension that holds all of life. Now I don't think that this spirit of life, source of love has a personality or literally intervenes in our life, but I do believe we sense the calling of this creative force, this mystery, this love. And I don't know what to call this ineffable ground of all being other than God, Spirit of Life, Source of all love.

Because, we human beings are not fully in control, because we sometimes do things we honestly regret, because we are capable of losing sight of what is most important to us, I personally favor prayers that make use of active verbs such as "help us," "challenge us," "console us." It may not seem rational, given my perspective on God, but prayer is not a rational activity. And that's okay. Love is not rational. Suffering is not rational. Life is not rational nor its abundant mysteries.

I often use active language when praying, because I find it so compelling. It isn't because I believe in a supernatural deity who actively responds to my prayers, no not at all, instead it is orienting myself towards the sacred in a relational way. It is appealing to the spark of the divine within each of us. I understand that such language sounds as if God is supposed to respond. But if you are like me, and rationally don't believe in God, consider my prayers as appealing to what is most human within you. When I say the word God, understand that it is a placeholder for the mystery of life, that the language is metaphorical.

As for praying with active verbs that sound like supplication, I invite you to turn your hearts to prayer. Listen to this prayer Ted Loder wrote from his collection *Guerillas for Grace* (slightly adapted):

*O ever restless God,
Thank you for all we forget are gifts, not rights.
Forgive us for all the grievances we remember too well.
Save us from the self pity, the self-seeking, the fat-heartedness, which is true poverty.*

Guide us, if we're willing (drive us if we are not) into the hard ways of sacrifice which are just and loving.

Make us wide-eyed for beauty, and for our neighbor's need and goodness; wide-willed for peace-making, and for the confronting power with the call to compassion; wide-hearted for love and for the unloved, who are the hardest to touch and need it the most.

Dull the envy in us which criticizes and complains life into a thousand ugly bits.

Keep us honest and tender enough to heal, tough enough to be healed of our hypocrisies.

Match our appetite for privilege with the stomach for commitment.

Teach us the great cost of paying attention that we may know we are always on holy ground.

Breath into us the restlessness and courage to make something new, something saving, and something true, that we may understand what it is to rejoice. Amen.

I find this kind of prayer extraordinarily uplifting. it calls us to be persistent in our self-reflection, to orient ourselves to the best within us, and to be actively engaged with the brokenness in the world. It does so as if talking to a deity, but I would argue that the god he is praying to is ultimately the god within the humanity of us human beings. Now that I have brought you a prayer that I find uplifting I invite you to bring to me prayers that you find uplifting.

I don't know how to say this, but I want to know whether I am adequately supporting your prayer lives--let me know what is most helpful to you. And know you are always welcome to share with me your own personal prayers. From my perspective, that is why I am here, to gather the prayers of the people and to find ways to respond to them so that we all may grow our souls.

Why pray? For the sake of staying awake and paying attention to our lives.

Why pray? for the sake of not letting our lives go in one eye and out the other, to get through life, as we are all inclined to do, on autopilot not noticing much of anything.

Why pray? to get in touch with the inner resources of love when fear and deceit threaten to erect walls around and within us.

Why pray? for the sake of persistently noticing how we can bend our lives towards our most cherished ideals.

May this be our work. Blessed be. Amen.