



Why Pray (part II)
a sermon by Rev. Alan Taylor
March 21, 2010

My text for today comes from Coretta Scott King, from the forward she wrote for "Standing in the Need of Prayer: A Celebration of Black Prayer"

For my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. prayer was a daily source of courage and strength that gave him the ability to carry on in even the darkest hours of our struggle. I remember one very difficult day when he came home bone-weary from the stress that came with his leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the middle of that night, he was awakened by a threatening and abusive phone call, one of many we received throughout the movement. On this particular occasion, however, Martin had had enough.

After the call, he got up from bed and made himself some coffee. He began to worry about his family, his baby sleeping in her room, and all of the burdens that came with our movement weighed heavily on his soul. With his head in his hands, Martin bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud to God: "Lord, I am taking a stand for what I believe is right. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone. Later he told me, "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear a voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth; and God will be at our side forever.'" When Martin stood up from the table, he was imbued with a new sense of confidence, and he was ready to face anything.

Sermon

This morning I want to talk with you about prayer. This is the second of two sermons on why I believe prayer is important. Now I am not one that believes that prayer can change the laws of the universe. Prayer doesn't change god, it changes ourselves. That was the message of that last weeks sermon when I shared two things. First I shared my own journey from being a typical Unitarian Universalist for whom prayer was awkward and irrelevant to discovering prayer as a rich spiritual practice. I also shared why I pray

in the worship service in the way I do, with God language and sometimes with active verbs, as if I have a personal relationship with God, even though I have no adequate intellectual concept for what God could be. Spiritually, emotionally I feel compelled to behave as if there is a God. All that was in last week's sermon!

This week, I want to challenge you. I want to challenge you to consider whether you are willing to engage in the kind of prayer that transforms people, people like you and me, to be a force for goodness, justice, and healing. For today, I want to explore further the nature of prayer and present you my conviction that prayer may not change the world, but prayer changes people and people change the world.

Gandhi, one of the most significant influences on Martin Luther King, Jr. taught that prayer is not an old woman's idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, prayer is the most potent instrument of action. Gandhi got at my understanding of prayer when he often said, Prayer is not asking. it is a longing of the soul. He also often said, Be the change you want to see in the world. What change do you really want? What we really want and what we are called to stand for gets clarified in prayer as we discern the true longing of our souls.

I know that many Unitarian Universalists don't have an active prayer practice. When I visit members in the hospital and ask if they want to pray, some politely decline, and, honestly, I don't take offense. I understand, prayer seems silly, at least the kinds of prayer many of us were raised with. And the prayers uttered by many of today's religious leaders sound so self-serving and often image God is deeply disturbing ways. Prayer can't but get a bad name by the way it is abused. But as recently elected Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales puts it, In our haste to reject all prayer as superstitious and self-deceptive, we throw out something vitally important. ... Prayer can be a kind of meditation, a time when you and I open our hearts, open our awareness. Prayer can be a time to reaffirm our concern for other people. Prayer can be a time when we connect with what we hold sacred, a time when we remind ourselves of what is truly important, what really matters to us. Prayer can be a time when we remind our selves of our highest aspirations and a time when we confront, in all humility and honesty, how we have fallen short of what we strive to be. Prayer can be a time when we quietly rededicate our selves to becoming what we hope to be."

I have long sought to redefine prayer as the practice of opening our hearts to possibility. As Abraham Heschel is quoted in our hymnal: Prayer invites God to be present in our spirits and in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

It may sound like authentic prayer ought to be easy. It's not. There is so much pain and suffering and injustice in the world, that the default way so many people move through the world is with tremendously closed hearts, and remain so if their prayers are simply rote and don't come from a place deep within. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the greatest Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, is who I turn to most

when seeking to re-cast my own prayer life. Heschel knew great despair. He lost two sisters and his parents in the Holocaust. Early in his work, he wrote The predicament of prayer is twofold: "Not only do we not know how to pray; we do not know what to pray for. We have lost the ability to be shocked... Should we not pray for the ability to be shocked at atrocities committed by man, for the capacity to be dismayed at our inability to be dismayed? ... Prayer must never be a citadel for selfish concerns, but rather a place for deepening concern over other people's plight... Prayer is meaningless unless it is in part subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods."

All authentic prayer begins with the deep longing within, or as Heschel once said: prayer is the song the universe sings to itself through us. But I would add that this song isn't always cheerful, it often does not bring us serenity, we don't always feel happy after a genuine encounter with the divine. Sometimes we are disturbed--and those times we ought to be disturbed. It's certainly true of the Jewish prophets of old. Their communing with God led them to screaming out all the injustices, the profoundly inhospitable practices, the unrighteousness they saw. It is an interesting way of looking at prayer. Prayer isn't supposed to make us feel comfortable, it is to discern how to respond to the world in which we participate. For this reason, genuine prayer can be deeply disturbing, for if we listen to the divine voice within, the still small voice within may be calling us to make significant changes in our lives. For we human beings are the ears and eyes and hands of God. Prayer doesn't change god. prayer doesn't even change the world. Prayer changes people and people change the world.

But it is possible to engage in hypocritical prayer. If in my prayer, I feel compassion towards the people of Haiti or the people of Chili after the devastating earthquakes and then I don't do anything, my prayer has not touched me. When prayer is used by the publicly pious who don't follow their moral sentiments with some kind of thoughtful action, even if it is a small action, then the prayers ring hollow. If I pray that our grandchildren and their grandchildren will flourish and do nothing to help create a sustainable world, If I pray for justice but never work for it, my prayers are vain, fleeting hopes, and I am a hypocrite, out of right relationship with others, with God, with myself.

It was not an accident that we sang the hymn, A Fierce Unrest just before today's sermon. Last week we sang Kum Ba Yah in that spot, a lovely African American spiritual that quietly and reflectively asks Come by here my Lord, come by here. Someone's praying lord, come by here. Oh lord come by here. Now Kum Ba Yah provides a vitally important way of approaching prayer, it just isn't the only one. There's hardly a more opposite hymn in tone than A Fierce Unrest. A fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things. Wherever pyramids of callousness exist, wherever injustice reigns, wherever fear and hatred and deception prevent us from leading our lives from a place of love, a fierce unrest will continue to disturb us and call us to respond.

I have come to believe with Abraham Heschel that in the face of all the ugliness of human existence, gratitude remains at the heart of all honest prayer, that true gratitude overthrows the pyramids of callousness. In his words, "To pray is to take notice of the

wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. ... Only one response can maintain us; gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great."

Every Sunday, we assert in our covenant, "Service is our prayer." And in my understanding, true prayer manifests in service. And for me, a worship service without a prayer lacks a significant way for communal self-reflection. How does a community transform itself to better care for those in need? to support everyone to care for themselves in the ways they can? to work for peace and justice? to grow beyond our complacency? I believe the first step is joining together in communal prayer.

In a Unitarian Universalist congregation, for those who pray, everyone prays differently. I ask you to not get hung up with the wording of my prayers but instead I hope you will respond to the invitation to open yourself up to being vulnerable, to allow the deepest longings within to surface, to discern that still small voice within, to be transformed. Enter into the prayer each week, no matter what you believe about god, with a willingness to be disturbed by what is awful in the world, to be touched by the deep resources within and about you, to acknowledge where you are in need of healing.

While honest prayer is prelude, it is also preparation. Pure prayer prompts persistence. Prayer prompts persistence in people

Everyone of us, at points along our lives, must face questions of our core identity. Who are we? What do we stand for? How will we move through the world? Everyone one of us, at various times, struggles with these questions. We wake up in the middle of the night, just like Martin Luther King, maybe not awakened by a hostile phone call that makes a threat on our life, but awakened by an inner call, a call from our deepest longing that our lives are not in line with our values, not in line with what we truly value and believe is important. When awakened by such questions that threaten spiritual death. What will we do? Will we be willing to open our hearts to possibility? Will we open ourselves to change for the sake of something larger than ourselves? Or will we allow a voice from within to well up and say, this is what you stand for, and then, in the days ahead put that clarity into practice.

Forty five years ago today, on March 21, 1965, more than 3,000 civil rights demonstrators led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. began their march from Selma to Montgomery Alabama. The vast majority of these demonstrators, including the some hundred Unitarian ministers, were there because of their faith, because they dared to imagine that the world could be different and they prayed feverishly that could be so.

Martin Luther King claims that without prayer, he would never have been able to lead as he did. Rabbi Abraham Heschel recognized this in King and enthusiastically accepted King's invitation to join him in Selma. Heschel marched in the very front row, interlocking arms with the leaders of the civil rights movement.

Rabbi Heschel described the march in these words: "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was both protest and prayer. Legs are not lips, and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

Prayer changes people and people change the world. May this be our work.

Blessed be. Amen.