

Theme for December - Prayer:
The Practice of Listening

I often have difficulty believing that prayer really changes anything except my own receptivity to grace. I can agree, however, that my new receptivity changes my actions, shaping a more Spirit-filled world. ~ Sheila Keane in "Prayer: Beginning Again"

Do you know that our covenant formerly read "...and Service its Prayer..." instead of "Service its Law"? Does it speak to our history of beliefs about prayer that we changed it? Would our Sunday ritual of stating our covenant together be considered a form of prayer?

Many would categorize prayer into those of request, gratitude, or blessing. Maybe we pray in response to some of the same longing that brings us to our church community: connection, to feel we're not alone, to ask for help, to celebrate together in thanks, and to bless one another. Maybe we pray for how it feels; does it reduce our fear or feelings of helplessness? Maybe we pray in search of the experience of really being listened to, understood. Maybe we pray for the sheer joy and relief of gratitude....

***Questions for Discussion and Discernment on your own, around the table,
or with each other:***

1. If you do, why do you pray?
2. Can a person not believe in a personal God and still pray?
3. If the word 'prayer' doesn't work for you what other word do you use?
4. To whom or to what do you pray? Do you do more talking or listening?
5. When do you pray? Is it something you do when you can't do anything else?
6. Do you go into a state of prayer that differs from other states? Is it a state of doing or being?
7. Does silence help you listen better?
8. Do you pray during our Sunday worship services? Do you think of yourself as being in prayer the whole time or just when it is silent?

Etymology refers to the word "prayer" to mean "to ask or to entreat" but also "to say" or "to wish well or ill to any one". Some etymological suggestions also reference "to ask" as in asking a question. All of these are active and imply a dialogue or connection of (at least) two. Are we praying in communion with all, conversing with ourselves to work through something, or entreating an omnipotent being?

Readings

Below – by Nick Page - is an excerpt of [Unitarian Universalist Views on Prayer](#) from the UUA web site. (Click on the underlined blue link to view the whole pamphlet.) In this pamphlet, eight Unitarian Universalists respond to the questions "How do you pray?" "Why do you pray?" and "What role does prayer play in your life?" These questions, of course, assume an affirmative response to the previous question, "Do you pray?" Some Unitarian Universalists would simply respond, "No."

Growing up in the Unitarian Universalist faith has been a wonderful evolution for me. The words from Psalm 42 have become very meaningful: "As the deer longs for the stream, so my soul longs for Thee, O God." My longing is for the elation of compassionate connectedness—that incredible feeling of being a part of all actions—God or Creation as a verb—a self-organized interdependent event. I composed the "Healing Prayer," not because I believe in a higher power, but because I believe in a living universe with energies both powerful and subtle—all mysterious. At the end of "Healing Prayer," members of the congregation may offer the names of those in need of healing. It is a powerful moment—an emotional moment—a spiritual moment. We touch that which we long for—the living spirit of Creation. ~ Nick Page

Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods and I'd look up into the sky—up—up—up—into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer.

~L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gable*

The wise man in the storm prays God not for safety from danger but for deliverance from fear. ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

The primary purpose of prayer is not to make requests. The primary purpose is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song. Prayer may not save us. But prayer may make us worthy of being saved.

~ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*

Prayer is not an old woman's idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action.

~Mahatma Gandhi

I have noticed that the distinction between other and self becomes blurred as I approach the unitive experience of prayer. Being with others in prayer often gathers us into an unspoken and profound unity. I feel a welling up of love and patience; a sense of being family. Perhaps it is this unitive experience that allows me to hope that our prayer joins with the original prayer of creation; that, along with all souls and throughout all time, we become co-creators with the God who is large enough to have a deep and personal connection with every one of us.

~ Sheila Keane from *Prayer: Beginning Again*

PRAY, v. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.

~Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

i thank You God for most this amazing day - e.e. cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;
and for everything
which is natural
which is infinite
which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;
this is the birth day
of life and of love
of wings:
and a gay great happening illimitably earth)

how should
tasting touching
hearing seeing
breathing
any
--lifted from the no of all nothing-
human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake
and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods. So the best service I can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher. Most of us, so carefully schooled in our need to be actively helpful to people, are very surprised to discover the healing power of this kind of listening.

Parker Palmer in *A Hidden Wholeness*

Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing.

Rachel Naomi Remen in *My Grandfather's Blessing*:

Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with your appearance, or with impressing the other, or are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or are debating about whether what is being said is true or relevant or agreeable. Such matters have their place, but only after listening to the word as the word is being uttered.

~William Stringfellow