

## **Finding Prayer**

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I remember having trouble with prayer almost from the start. Grace at mealtimes wasn't too far out, though. It was just weird. We'd say, "God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food." What struck me as odd was that this was different language from anything else we ever said. The first part was straightforward enough, "God is great. God is good," but it seemed strange that we were saying it when we didn't say it at any other time. And I didn't quite get why this led to our saying, "Let us thank him for our food." I mean, we weren't even actually thanking God. We were asking permission to thank him, "Let us thank him." That really got me. We never used the phrase, "let us," in any other context than prayer. I used to imagine the prayer we might say to alleviate a tragic salad shortage: "Let us have lettuce."

You may also notice that my preoccupation with language began quite early in life. I wondered what things meant and what it meant to say things in the particular ways we said them.

Take bedtime, for example. This was a bit more troubling. I was taught to say, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take." OK – the first part, again, is straightforward, albeit with a strange twist of language. We said, "Now I lay me down to sleep," instead of "Now I'm going to bed," like we would actually say. But then we said, "I pray the Lord my soul to keep." I didn't have much of an idea as to what I was asking for there, but it seemed benign compared to what came next. "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Not only was I expected to contemplate my own impending sudden death, I seemed to be asking for my soul to be taken! I wasn't at all sure I thought either one was a good idea.

It's a pretty scary prayer for a little kid, but it didn't seem to bother my two older sisters, so I thought my concerns were just weird and kept them to myself.

My sisters and I had different issues with prayer. Vicki, my oldest sister, took to prayer as a duty and never seemed to question anything about it. My other sister, Kathy, had different issues with prayer. When I was seven and she was nine, I can remember looking around at church while we were saying the “Lord’s Prayer” and noticing that people were distracted, reciting the words automatically and without any sign of real belief or conviction. We’d been taught to take religion seriously, so I couldn’t understand what good it was doing to pray with your mouth but not your mind and heart. This was the beginning of my disillusionment with the practice of religion, what appeared to be its emphasis on appearance over integrity.

Kathy noticed the same thing, but she responded differently. She decided that she wanted to feel the meanings of the words more deeply. So she would practice at home, dramatically emphasizing the phrases, trying to feel the emotional depth that she thought she should have. I found this slightly embarrassing. Play-acting deep feelings just didn’t seem sincere to me.

Today, Kathy is a deeply committed evangelical Christian, while I’m a Unitarian Universalist minister. And we’re both still involved with prayer. Prayer was always more a matter of the heart for Kathy, and she’s always found it natural to pray to a personal God. But for me, the issues around prayer were more about intellectual integrity, and I was perplexed by the logical problems the Trinitarian God presented.

We’ve both grown in depth, wisdom, and love over the years, and we get along very well, despite our differences of approach and opinion. There are a lot of ways to approach prayer. Each denomination has its own special version. Some are more personal and private, while others more public, with long pastoral prayers from the pulpit. I’ve known Unitarian Universalist congregations that were quite comfortable with this kind of prayer. Some pray to express a longing for change in their outer circumstances, while others pray for inner wisdom and peace.

There are probably as many ways to pray as there are people. The Buddha observed and emphasized this when he said that there were 84,000 dharma gates, 84,000 pathways to the truth. That’s an interesting number. It’s high

enough to be essentially infinite from the perspective of any single person, but still low enough to make the point that there is still a finite set of choices that can be made that will lead to wisdom and fulfillment. Despite pointing toward a vast range of choices, it stops just short of saying that anything goes.

The Buddha lived in a Hindu culture where spiritual practice, or prayer, was called yoga. Yoga means unity, joining one's heart and mind and body together without inner conflict. I think this is useful to think about prayer as a kind of yoga – the expression of our longing for unity, our longing for our inner experience to be in harmony with our outer experience, for our hearts and minds to coexist without conflict.

There are five different types of yoga, each appropriate to a different disposition, or personality type. The first is called “Hatha Yoga,” and is what most people think of as yoga. It is body-based, using breath and postures to bring about a unity of body and mind.

“Bhakti Yoga” is the yoga of love. My sister, Kathy, was attracted to this kind of prayer, which finds it natural to focus one's heart upon a personal god like Krishna in Hinduism, or Jesus in Christianity. I first experimented with Bhakti Yoga years ago when I sang with devotees of Hari Krishna on street corners. Since then I have enjoyed the Hindu practice of Kirtan, opening one's heart through musical chanting in a group.

“Karma Yoga” is the yoga of service. This is the kind of prayer with which most Unitarian Universalists are most comfortable. They agree with Saadi, the thirteenth century Moslem poet who said, “To worship is nothing other than to serve the people. It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes. All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence. If fate brings suffering to one member, the others cannot stay at rest.”

“Jnana Yoga” follows the wisdom of the intellect. It is the path to which my seven-year-old self was first attracted. It uses the mind to analyze and understand experience and, ultimately, the self. Akin to humanistic psychology, it uses questions like, “Who am I?” to go beyond the intellect and transcend the mind's own limitations.

“Raja Yoga” attempts to combine these approaches, uniting body, heart, mind, and action to achieve harmony and ultimately attain full enlightenment.

Each of us has an inner need, something calling us toward wholeness, whether the five yogas of Hinduism, or Buddhism’s 84,000 dharma gates. What do you long for with your whole being? I don’t mean want or desire – those words refer to the cravings of parts of ourselves – I mean what do you long for with all of the parts of your whole being? Ultimately, I think it’s more than any thing or feeling or event, I think we all have a deep longing for wholeness, to be at peace and in harmony within ourselves.

There are a lot of definitions of “spirit,” but one I like refers to that which calls us towards wholeness. Despite the critical view many Unitarian Universalists have regarding to prayer, our hymnal and readings are full of prayers. One of our most popular hymns, “Spirit of Life,” is a prayer of gentle longing. We sing, “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.”

I think that we can feel the spirit, Holy Spirit, Spirit of Life, the breath that animates all things, as the still, small voice within. The ability to be comfortable with stillness is essential to the prayer of longing. This takes some effort to cultivate, but it’s well worth it.

A few years ago I attended a continuing education class for clergy that was called “Systems Theory and Spirituality.” It approached spirituality in a non-theological way. There were about 20 ministers and priests of different faiths represented there, and as we spoke about our own experiences, we discovered something amazing. Even though our various faith traditions had very divergent approaches to the practice of prayer in their congregational life, we ministers were in almost full agreement about what we did when we were alone. Despite the variety of theologies, our spiritual practices were all very much like what has been called “Centering Prayer.”

Centering Prayer is an interfaith practice that holds a lot of promise for Unitarian Universalists because it permits of a wide variety of belief and non-

belief. All it requires is a sincere longing for wholeness and a willingness to make space for enough inner silence to let the spirit speak, whatever that may mean to us.

I'd like to invite you to explore this gentle kind of prayer with me this morning. I know that some of you may feel uncomfortable with anything called "prayer," but I ask you to bear with me on this. If you'd prefer, you may just sit quietly instead.

We'll begin by choosing phrase that expresses our intention to be open to the experience of wholeness. I'm going to suggest that we use a phrase from the round we sang together at the beginning of this morning's service: "Spirit, come near."

I invite you to close your eyes and sit, and repeat to yourself the phrase, "Spirit, come near," as your breath rises and falls. You don't have to think too hard about what it means beyond your longing for wholeness, for that rare but wholesome purity we feel when our minds, hearts and bodies are entirely free of conflict. Spirit is that which calls us to integrity and wholeness – we long to be filled with the spirit of wholeness: "Spirit, come near."

When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the phrase, "Spirit, come near." Thoughts are a normal part of this practice. We don't try to suppress or ignore our thoughts, we just notice them and return to the phrase. I invite you to do this together this morning for a few minutes. The normal minimum time for this practice would be 20 minutes, so we're just going to have a very brief introduction to what is called Centering Prayer, or Contemplative Prayer. Let's just sit quietly, enjoying our breath, saying, "Spirit, come near."

Prayer may take many forms: emotions, words, actions – but it is always an expression of our longing for integrity and wholeness. Some Unitarian Universalist congregations have groups that meet regularly to explore this practice. I'd be more than happy to work with any of you who were interested in taking this further.

Centering prayer doesn't require any belief in god. What it does require, though, is the cultivation of a bit of inner quiet, enough so that we can hear that still, small voice within. It may be our inner wisdom, it may be our true self, it may be the wisdom of the ages, it may even be God Almighty. Whatever we call it, it is a pathway to peace and fulfillment. I invite you all onto this path. Walk it in peace; walk it in gratitude; walk it in joy; sometimes you may even walk it in struggle and tears. But whatever your path, may you hear that still, small voice within, and may you feel the spirit that calls you to pray.

May it be so.