

Oops! Wow! Thanks! Gimmee!

Rev. Carolyn Lackey, Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Helena, Montana

Adapted by Chaplain Robert Keim

19 November 2017

Almost every day I drive past a little business by the Lyndale viaduct sporting a sign that says, “God Answers Prayers.” I can’t just ignore that sign. My mind rebels against it. I sit at the next stoplight arguing with it.

My mind argues because I don’t believe any of those three words. Clearly the business owner believes them — so strongly that instead of advertising his business, he is willing to use his one and only business sign to express this belief. I have to respect that fervent faith. And I do. I don’t understand it. I recognize that sane, serious, admirable people all over the world believe it without question. I don’t know how they can. They believe and they practice it and presumably are comforted by it. So why do I prickle at it?

When I was a little girl my Grandma Dottie taught me to say my prayers. And someone gave me the book we just read the children, “Prayer for a Child” which meant a lot to me when I was little. I can still recite most of it by memory — as I can the ‘Lord’s Prayer” and “Now I Lay me Down to Sleep” and the 23rd Psalm, as Grandma Dottie taught me to. I liked the book because the pictures looked as if a child like me had drawn them and I identified with the child in the book. I had a little painted chair. My father had been gone to WWII for four of my first five years and I wanted my father and mother to always be close to me. That prayer wrapped me in “sweet security.” It is good for children to learn, bred in the bone, so to speak – gratitude for all the big and little things in their lives. I had no problem with prayer then.

But my Grandma Dottie also taught me the passage from Matthew 6 – the one where Jesus tells people not to pray like the hypocrites do on the street corners for all to see, but to pray in the closet to the Father who is unseen. She stressed that to me. So, when I was in school and each day started with a prayer coming over the p.a. system in our homeroom I thought that was wrong. And in high school when before every football game a prayer blared over the loudspeakers while people bought hotdogs and talked, I thought that was very, very wrong. This was the hypocrisy the Bible story talked about. That opened the door to doubts in me about all the churchy stuff that is such a huge part of life in south Texas. In my case, the insistence on prayer in school, helped turn me away from the church.

I parted ways with Grandma Dottie’s efforts to make me into the devout Christian she was. I rejected heaven and hell and miracles and the Jesus myth and eventually God. Well, the personal god. The one in that favorite old hymn that “walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am His own.” It took a long time, though – decades – for me to say that I did not believe in God.

I kept looking for a way to believe and finally I came to the definition I could live with: God is what we send our prayers of thanks and awe and supplication to. Since it appears from archaeological evidence that people have been doing that from the dawn of man, it must be part of being human. We must be in some way hard-wired to pray. To me God is our word for the target of those primal prayers.

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But I guess I'm still not completely comfortable with it because I keep having to have this argument with the "God Answers Prayers" sign. I don't want to oppose the businessman. I imagine that he is a good and sincere man and I want us to come to some kind of agreement. But to me, God is not a being. Therefore God cannot answer anything. And certainly God does not answer individual prayers. No part of that sign is true. Not literally, anyway.

Yet, if God is what we pray to – if God is the transcendent power we sometimes can aspire to and can sometimes feel, and if through prayer, meaning meditation and deep thought about what concerns us, we are able to open ourselves to that transcendent power and find the insight that power gives us, perhaps we can say that God does answer our prayers. I can live with that. I don't think that is what the businessman has in mind but, ok. God Answers Prayers.

It is comforting to hold on to a bit of the mystical, miraculous, mythical magic we learned at our grandma's knee. Even here in our largely humanist, intellectual UU services we tell of our concerns and ask that the congregation hold our troubled loved ones in our hearts, to send them our light. No matter how we say it, yes, pray for one another.

But we UU's can have problems with the language of reverence. And prayer is such a word. So, can UU's truly pray?

It's a question that interests me. Last fall when we were visiting our son in Chicago, he left his apartment one Sunday morning and came back with the Sunday New York Times. Spending a Sunday morning with coffee and bagels and The New York Times can be wonderful. The Sunday Magazine had an article about prayer that, I knew as soon as I read it, would be the subject of a service for me.

The article, "The Right Way to Pray," is by Zev Chafets, an agnostic Jew who has never been able to pray. He gives some statistics: 75% of Americans say they pray at least once a week, but only 39% attend church regularly. This gap, according to the editor-in-chief of Beliefnet.com, means that America is becoming detached from traditional denominations and "prayer has become its own religion in this society."

Chafets visited a well-known New York City rabbi who was somewhat disheartened by the tepid spiritual atmosphere in suburban Jewish temples. He said, "People come to temple to identify with other Jews, or socialize. The old ways of worship in temple – the use of Hebrew, prayers chanted rhythmically, wrapping in the prayer shawl – have fallen into disfavor. While he rues these changes, saying the old techniques can make a difference in the quality of religious experience, he admits that "When you come right down to it, there are only four basic prayers: Gimme! Thanks! Oops! and Wow!

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“Wow! are prayers of praise and wonder at the creation. Oops! is asking for forgiveness. Gimme! is a request or a petition. Thanks! is expressing gratitude” He suggests that people who want to learn to pray start with prayers of Thanks – or what Christians call grace. And if the person doesn’t believe in God, then thank who or what seems appropriate.

Meanwhile, prayer practices changed in the Catholic Church with Vatican II in the 60’s when the laity became more involved in church services, when Latin mass and prayer ended and when lay people were exposed to *lectio divina*, a daily Bible study with careful reading, contemplation and dialogue with God. It is private and personal and practiced primarily by Catholic women – particularly at retreats where people are trained in contemplation and prayer. These days more people do more contemplative prayer and less confession. Oops! has been replaced by Wow!

People today are doing more mixing and matching of religious practices in their search for spiritual experience. Retreats of all faiths use a potpourri of spiritual techniques such as Buddhist meditation and Hindu yoga.

Chafets finished up his article with his visit to an Assembly of God church in West Virginia where he talked to a group of children who told him proudly of their successes in praying for ailing family members and friends. They didn’t need the techniques and mantras of the Tabernacle. Their weren’t suburban Jewish prayers offered up to whom it may concern. They didn’t pray to get centered, find transcendence and progress on their spiritual journey. They prayed straight up Gimme! to a God with whom they were on a first name basis and with the unquestioned belief that their prayer had the power to help people they loved.

He ended by saying that he didn’t think he would ever be a praying man, but if he did he hoped he would pray like them.

Which brings us back to the question, “Does God Answer Prayers?” Many studies have been done in recent years to find out if prayer really does heal. At this point it looks as if when people are sick and pray for recovery their prayer really does help them. The act of praying and meditation does create physiological changes in the brain which lowers blood pressure and calms and reduces stress and creates uplifting feelings of oneness with the cosmos. Sick people who pray do recover somewhat better than those who do not.

But the studies done to see if people can be healed by the prayers of others show that these prayers are not effective. In one prominent Harvard study, patients were divided into three groups: one group was prayed for without knowing it, another group knew that they were being prayed for and the third were not prayed for at all. The doctors did not know who was in which group.

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The prayer did not help the patients. In fact, the group that knew they were being prayed for did significantly worse in recovery. Perhaps they thought since the hospital was asking people to pray for them, they must be sicker than they thought and that had a negative impact on them.

It would be nice if our prayer really could help others, but so far science says no. Of course, the scientific method cannot be used reliably on matters of faith. There is no way of measuring the quality and quantity of prayer. And when patients say they pray for themselves, that can skew the experiments. So, believe what you wish.

I think we should still continue to hold our loved ones in our hearts and send them our light and keep them in our prayers. It couldn't hurt.

So, how do we UU's pray?

This can be a subject for jokes. Nathan Woodliff-Stanley, Minister of Social Responsibility at Jefferson Unitarian Church in a Thanksgiving service imagined someone who is agnostic trying as honestly as possible to say grace. "Dear God, if there is one, we thank you for this food, to whatever extent you were responsible for it. We ask for your blessings upon us, if that isn't too presumptuous and if you really do specially bless people, and all this we pray in your holy name, whatever that might be."

No matter how delicate, hesitant and uncomfortable we may feel about words of reverence – God, blessings, prayer, faith, spirituality, etc., each Sunday we do find ways to express our individual feelings about them. Our services are actually filled with prayer. The lighting and extinguishing of the chalice, our readings and meditations, the songs we sing, the prayer for peace we wish each other in the last words of the sermon, the felt presence of hope and caring and of our loving connection to one another – all these are our prayers.

You can find many UU sermons about prayer on the internet. One of my favorites was by Rev. John Cullinan of the Unitarian Church of Los Alamos, NM, in which he tells about the Desert Fathers of the early church lived and worked in prayer in an effort to find the things of great meaning and value to bring back to their community. Their prayer, and ours, is the act of tending to the values and concerns of community: to name and hold in reverence our values and ultimate concerns. He closed his work with a prayer by L. Annie Foerster.

"Let us create a prayer together.

At the center of the gathered community dwells the Holy. We are the prayer, each and all.

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One by one, we come to this place – whole and broken, commencing and concluding, laughing and weeping. And soul by soul the prayer begins. “Spirit of Life and Love...”

Two by two, we greet one another – smiling, nodding, speaking, embracing. And in relationship, the prayer continues.

“Spirit of Life and Love, where we meet is a sacred space...”

Moment by moment the circle builds, pulsing like a mass of heartbeats. We fill the circle with our breath: we inspire.

The circle fills us with wealth: we are inspirited. The prayer rises on our very breathing together,

“Spirit of Life and Love, where we meet is a sacred space and we are inspired by one another’s presence...”

This circle will not, cannot, go on forever, yet this circle will never die. What each of us finds here is what we are not. It makes us whole. It gives us strength to go out in the world beyond this holy community, beyond this sacred space, to begin yet another prayer: Let us pray:

Spirit of Life and Love, where we meet is sacred space and we are inspired by one another’s presence. At the center of the gathered community dwells the Holy. We are the prayer, each and all. We are the prayer, each and all.”

Amen and blessed be.