

WHY AM I PRAYING?"  
A sermon by the Reverend Dena McPhetres  
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This morning at home, I sat down to pray, which is something I haven't done in awhile. I got up early to do it, which is also something I haven't done in awhile. This morning I got up early and sat down to pray because . . . I'm supposed to, after all - I'm a minister! But mostly I did it because I strive to practice what I preach and this morning I want to talk about prayer and why it might be a useful word and a meaningful practice for us. I want to talk about prayer because it's one of those big scary words that we don't say much around here.

I think there are three groups of people in our congregation who might need to hear somebody talk about prayer from this pulpit. The first group is those of you who pray - I know you're out there and I suspect you are yearning to come out of the closet. The second group are those of you who consider prayer irrelevant at best and offensive at worst, and you just might benefit from having the word unpacked a little bit, if only to better understand your fellow members in the first group.

The third group is those of you who are curious about prayer - perhaps because you're feeling emptiness in your life that might be nourished by starting a spiritual practice. Or maybe because you've left behind the prayers and rituals of the religion you were raised in and don't know what to replace them with.

So, let me ask you this: how did you start the day this morning? Here's what I did. I stood facing the sun, and opened my arms out wide. I said out loud: "I open my arms and my self to the good in this day. Blessed be the good!"

Then I did part of the sun salutation from yoga - I put my palms together and reached up high, saying out loud, "I greet the sky." Then I followed my hands down to touch the floor and said out loud, "I greet the earth." Then I came back to standing position with my hands touching my heart center and said out loud, "I greet myself standing between sky and earth."

I stood there for awhile, feeling my feet firmly grounded and the top of my head open to the expanse of sky. I stood there for awhile, noticing my small self connected to it all -- the bigger, mysterious, yet natural forces going on all around me all the time.

This is a splendid world we live in -- infused with beauty, grace and abundance beyond imagining. This is a terribly flawed world we live in, riddled with suffering, pain and injustice beyond what we can bear. These two seemingly opposite conditions in which we live and move and have our being cry out for response. Prayer is one way to respond.

Someone said there are really only two kinds of prayer: THANKS and HELP! These two basic forms of prayer are twin responses to the world of beauty and suffering in which we live.

There's another way I like to start the day, when I don't manage to get up early and I need to multi-task. I take my dog for a gratitude walk. We go for a walk around the neighborhood and in my mind I am naming all the things I'm grateful for. It's refreshing to start the day with thanks instead of complaint. If I start my day with a practice of gratitude, then I find that I respond better to what I encounter in the world during the rest of the day. If I'm grounded in blessing and humbled by abundance, it's easier to respond to both beauty and suffering with an open heart.

This is why people pray: to change themselves. Because the purpose of prayer is not so much to influence the Mystery, but to be influenced by it. The purpose of prayer is not to manipulate situations, but to open oneself to transformation.

I used to think I didn't know how to pray, and I carried quite a bit of anxiety about that through much of my life. I grew up Unitarian Universalist in a small town full of Lutherans and Catholics. If a playmate invited me to stay to dinner, I held my breath hoping the parents wouldn't ask me to say grace. Because my family didn't say grace at meals and I wouldn't have a clue what to do.

When I was in my twenties, I remember talking with my Great Aunt Ella, a sweet and devout Christian. I was sad and distressed and didn't know what to do to relieve my pain. She told me, "Well, if I were in your situation, I would pray about it, but your family doesn't do that." That was the first time it dawned on me why people prayed.

When I was in my thirties, I entered seminary. I remember being shocked when the professor opened the first class with a prayer! Fortunately, I kept quiet while my brain remembered that the separation of church and state does not apply to a private religious educational institution! Everywhere I went at seminary, people were praying and none of their words spoke to me. Although I believe in a spirit that pervades the universe, I wasn't used to addressing God and I was frankly surprised at everything they were asking God to do. It was a bit confusing. I wondered if I could pray if I didn't believe in God with a capital G.

And that's the stumbling block many of us might have with prayer. If we don't believe in God, or if we don't believe in the kind of god who intervenes in human affairs, then who are we praying to? Like the song by the Roches says, "Who's gonna hear?" Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom cogently asks in his book, *Simply Pray*, "To whom do you pray when your god is a what? How do you have a conversation with an inanimate, or impersonal force?"

Wikstrom recommends that we pay attention to the form of prayer rather than the content – to the HOW rather than to WHOM. He has identified four types of traditional prayer that are found in many different religions and has re-named these forms in a way that makes them accessible to us. He calls them Naming, Knowing, Listening and Loving. "Naming how the spirit moves in our lives; Knowing ourselves fully, in both our strengths and weaknesses; Listening to that voice of quiet stillness that resides in each of us; and reaching out in Loving concern to the world around us."

So, let's unwrap this intriguing gift Wikstrom offers us. He writes about the first form, Naming: "It has been said that we cannot see what we don't look at, and Naming prayer encourages us to look at our lives to see where and how the sacred is present. Perhaps, in your life right now, you are experiencing the Divine as "Comforter." Or perhaps, for you right now, it is "the One who churns things up." Naming prayer calls on you to engage the ancient practice of giving a name to what you see. But Naming prayer does not require a Sacred Other; instead, it can allow an opportunity to lift up all for which you are thankful. The thirteenth century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, "If in your lifetime you can pray only one prayer and it is Thank You, it will be sufficient.""

Wikstrom continues by describing the Knowing form: "Know Thyself was the admonition inscribed over the portal to the Greek Oracle of Delphi. With prayers of Knowing, we have an opportunity to fully reflect on our life as it is today, and especially to recognize those places that call for reconciliation . . . this type of prayer allows us the opportunity to give voice to the broken, wounded, worried places in our souls. It is a chance to take a 'fearless moral inventory,' to use the language of the Twelve Step movement, and to give voice to what lurks in the shadows."

But, he says, "Praying about the broken and fragile places in our lives is not about seeking God's understanding or forgiveness – which the theology of grace in all of its forms assures us we already have – but about seeking our own. Can WE embrace our whole selves?" Can we admit that we have fallen short, and yet still accept and love ourselves?

The Listening form of prayer is just what it sounds like: being still and quiet and listening to the silence. That's what we often do together in the center of our Sunday services – the bell rings and we sit in silence together, listening. Writer Kathleen Norris says, "Prayer is not doing, but being. It is not words but the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself" even if that something greater is simply silence.

What is the way into silence? In Zen Buddhist practice, you typically begin by counting your breaths. In Transcendental Meditation, you repeat a mantra. In Catholic Centering Prayer, you choose a single word and repeat it gently, whenever you find your mind is thinking. Wikstrom says, "Each of these things gives the mind a little something to do while it learns to do nothing." Most of us are not used to the "empty non-productivity" that listening requires.

Unitarian Universalist minister Laurel Hallman, in her "Living by Heart" spiritual practice, instructs us to "pause without expectation." This type of listening is unfamiliar to most of us. She says, "Most of us are willing to pause, but only if we are sure that there will be results." But listening prayer has no purpose other than Listening.

Laurel recommends taking some words into the silence of listening. I have followed her practice and memorized a few poems. Depending on the day and my state of being, I will chose one poem over another. Or I will simply sit in silence, attending to my breath and just notice which poem rises to the surface. As I listen to the silence, I say the poem slowly, either out loud or inside my mind quietly. I dwell with the words and notice what they do inside me.

Here is one poem I have learned. I use it sometimes during seated prayer and I also use it while I'm swimming. You'll see why.

"First Lesson" by Philip Booth

Lie back, daughter.  
Let your head tip back in the cup of my hand gently and I will  
hold you.  
Spread your arms wide, lie out on the stream and look high at  
the gulls. A dead man's float is face down.  
You will dive and swim soon enough where this tidewater  
ebbs to the sea.  
When you tire on the long thrash to your island  
Lie up and survive.  
As you float now, here where I held you and let go,  
Remember when fear cramps your heart what I told you.  
Lie gently and wide to the light year stars.  
Lie back and the sea will hold you.

The Loving form of prayer is Wikstrom's way of re-framing intercessory prayer or prayers of petition. He writes, "Prayer practice that focuses only on the self is ultimately hollow. At some point, the quest for personal peace enlarges into a concern for peace in the world . . . We are communal beings and, it can be argued, it is through community that we are really alive."

If you were an adult during the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war and no nukes movements, you may recall that many social justice activists prayed before their rallies and marches, and before their acts of civil disobedience. In an essay about social justice as spiritual practice, Art McDonald, Deborah Holder and Stephen Furrer point out that Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Phillip and Daniel Berrigan prayed before, during and after their actions for justice. This kind of Loving prayer was not a flight from the world, but an immersion and an action in the world, for the world.

On the personal level, Laurel Hallman takes the Loving prayer into her family as a practice of kinship. She learned from her mentor Harry Sholefield, to look at a family photograph and call each person to mind, one by one, concentrating on who they are and sending loving energy to them.

Laurel has also adapted this Family Roster practice to her work. Each day she takes her calendar of appointments and imagines each person with whom she will meet and each event of the day to come. She holds each person in her mind with loving attention. This fosters a sense of kinship with the world, rather than fear or isolation.

Wikstrom recommends a similar practice. He suggests we create the space in our daily practice for three separate people to arise in our mind: one with whom you are close; one who is tangential in your life; and one with whom you have need of resolution. Hold these three people, one by one, with loving attention. It may or may not do anything for them, but it certainly has the potential to transform you.

Ellis Peters writes of this kind of prayer, "He prayed as he breathed, forming no words and making no specific requests, only holding in his heart, like broken birds in cupped hands, all those people who were in stress or grief."

If I were to pray for you, if you were to ask me to pray for you, this is what I would do: simply hold you in the Light, as the Quakers say. Simply hold you in my heart in all your brokenness and shining joy. And then I'd release you into that larger Mystery in which we all reside, whether we name it that or not.

Kathleen Norris writes, "Prayer is often stereotyped in our culture as a form of pietism, a lamentable privatization of religion. Even many Christians seem to regard prayer as a grocery list we hand to God, and when we don't get what we want, we assume that the prayers didn't 'work.' This is privatization at its worst, and a cosmic selfishness. Prayer does not 'want.' It is ordinary experience lived with gratitude and wonder, a wonder that makes us know the smallness of oneself in an enormous and various universe."

Why am I praying? Because I can't imagine being in the world without being in a state of gratitude, a place of wonder, a practice of self-questioning, openness and loving connection with others. I can't imagine being in the world without relating to its beauty and its suffering. Prayer is a word I have claimed to name that way of life.

Who's gonna hear my prayers? Well, I am. I'm going to hear. That's why I pray -- to hear myself think. To slow down and be mindful of my thoughts, feelings and actions. To take stock of my life. To set my intention. To make well-considered choices. To hear both inner and outer wisdom. To open myself to guidance. To remember that I'm not in control of everything. To connect to that vast field of energy that is so much bigger than me and my concerns. That's what prayer is to me.

I want you to know that it's OK to talk about the big scary religious words, and to redefine them, and to reclaim them, if that is meaningful to us. The only thing we have to fear is that we might judge or dismiss each other as irrelevant. But you know we're not irrelevant. We're each one of us irreplaceable, inherently worthy and deeply, invisibly connected.

I used to think I didn't know how to pray, until I found Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem," or rather, until it found me:

To pray you open your whole self  
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
To one whole voice that is you.  
And know there is more  
That you can't see, can't hear  
Can't know except in moments  
Steadily growing, and in languages  
That aren't always sound but other  
Circles of motion.  
Like eagle that Sunday morning  
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky  
In wind, swept our hearts clean  
With sacred wings.  
We see you, see ourselves and know  
That we must take the utmost care  
And kindness in all things.  
Breathe in, knowing we are made of  
All this, and breathe, knowing  
We are truly blessed because we  
Were born, and die soon, within a  
True circle of motion,  
Like eagle rounding out the morning  
Inside us.  
We pray that it will be done  
In beauty.  
In beauty.

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#### REFERENCES

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