

# What does it mean to be a people of Prayer and Practice?

## A Community of Prayer & Practice



As the UUCP Worship Associates gathered to brainstorm for our theme this month of “Prayer and Practice,” one asked, “Is prayer a four-letter word in Unitarian Universalism?” I am not sure I would go that far, but it is true that we have varied views on the efficacy, meaning, and value of prayer. And for some people it is absolutely true that the word itself triggers painful memories from difficult religious upbringings.

As we kept talking though, several people shared their own stories of prayer and practice and what it means to them. People shared how in opening to the silence of prayer, they heard a still, small voice of comfort and strength. Others talked about mindfulness and compassion that has grown deeper through a regular meditation practice. Others reflected on how even if they don’t pray, that some of the prayers they learned by heart in childhood—like the 23rd Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer—still have meaning, perhaps especially because of the familiarity of the words.

About 12 years ago, I learned about a contemplative practice developed by two Unitarian Universalist ministers called “Living By Heart.” For several years, we’ve had an ongoing group following this practice, which is based on learning poetry or wisdom words by heart. By reciting and memorizing poems meaningful to us, they come to be a deeper part of our ways of looking at the world.

One poem I have memorized is all about greeting the day with joy and gladness. It’s called “Why I Wake Early” by Mary Oliver. It’s so easy to begin our day feeling rushed or stressed, tired or afraid, gloomy or

alone at the prospect of what is ahead. I have found that once I wake up, if I can take a few moments, often even longer, to greet the day with an intention of gratitude, that I can change that habit of mind and start the day on a stronger foot.

By memorizing this poem by heart, it comes to me at times of difficulty and reminds me of the gift of the sun and the earth, reminding me that even in the midst of grief or challenges I am not sure I can bear, that there is still beauty in this life and much for which to be grateful. This contemplative practice—or any one that helps us take a moment to be attentive to nature, to focus on compassion or gratitude—will not change the circumstances of our lives, but it can bring about a change within us and how we approach our circumstances.

One of the biggest challenges Unitarian Universalists may have when it comes to prayer is understanding it only in the most narrow definition of asking some power beyond us to change our circumstances. This is really the last and most desperate form of prayer (and yes, it is one we may all call on sometimes even if we don’t believe prayer works that way). But in truth, spiritual traditions around the world offer much greater depth to the variety of prayer and spiritual practice. Silent contemplation, meditative practice, yoga, listening for the still, small voice, taking time to just bring your awareness to one thing (your child, the beauty of a flower, the smell of the desert after a rain). All of these are forms of prayer and practice when we do them with intention and mindfulness.

*Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray*

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## **Living the Theme: Prayer & Practice**



## **Developing & Sustaining a Prayerful Practice**

There are many kinds of prayer and practice that different religions, spiritualities and philosophies use. Prayer can be silent or out loud, it can also be memorized verses or something you make up. Gatha is the sanskrit word for verse, and is a common tool in Zen Buddhism for memorizing simple verses you recite at different parts of the day or for different activities. Meditation and mindfulness is another kind of practice that is used to bring focus to the present moment. For UUs, we say that “service is our prayer,” meaning that we understand our actions in the world to be a manifestation of sacred and intentional work.

Consider some ways that you might create or integrate some kind of prayer or practice into your life. Think about a time of day, or an activity, that would be a good time to take a moment and connect with your heart, be centered, and recite something you memorize or make up something extemporaneously. Some ideas would be to have a morning or evening practice, a blessing before meals, a quick prayer when you get into your car and put on your seatbelt... You can also think of time for micro-practices—a quick check-in when you brush your teeth, or bringing a bit of mindfulness to chores such as folding laundry or washing dishes.

For families, consider starting a practice that includes children and youth. A blessing of backpacks before school, or sharing gratitudes before eating a meal. Incorporate an object to hold onto and pass around to bring more focus to the practice. Use Anne Lamott’s suggestion to make simple prayers of help, thanks, and wow (something you need support for, something you’re grateful for, something you’re amazed by).

### **Sample ideas for a prayer, gatha, or mindfulness practice:**

Morning Gatha: “Awakening this morning, a new day is before me. May I live each moment mindfully, and look upon all beings with eyes of compassion.

Mealtime prayer: “We are grateful to the earth, hands, and machines that provided us with this food. May we be nourished to be strong and courageous in the world.”

Evening: “As the day comes to a close and I prepare to rest, I am grateful for... (name 1-5 things)”

Driving: “As I buckle this seat belt, may I be alert, patient, and joyful in my journey.”

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## **Questions to Contemplate**

1. What does prayer mean to you? What kinds of prayer have you been taught?
2. If you pray, how do you do it? To whom is it addressed (if anyone), do you make petitions and requests, offer gratitude, or say something else? Do you recite a memorized prayer, or pray extemporaneously?
3. Do you have a consistent form of prayer or practice? What does it entail?
4. If someone asks you to say a prayer, for example during a meal, what do you do?
5. Have you ever asked for prayers, either for yourself, or for someone close to you? Is prayer used more in hard times, or also in good times?
6. How has the meaning of prayer or practice changed throughout your life?
7. Last year, after a Satanist group offered to give the opening prayers for a Phoenix City Council meeting, the council voted to end the practice of starting the meeting with a prayer. They've since re-instated the practice by only allowing police and fire chaplains to do the invocation. What do you think about the role of prayer in public and government settings?
8. The Standing Rock camps in North Dakota to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) are grounded in indigenous practices of prayer and ceremony. Many faith traditions, including Unitarian Universalism, blend their faiths with social justice action. How do you see prayer or practice incorporated into justice movements?
9. Do you feel like prayer is totally useless, or a waste of time? Do you think less of people who pray?
10. In our congregation's covenant that we recite each Sunday, we say "service is our prayer." What does this mean to you?
11. Have you ever felt betrayed by answered or unanswered prayers?



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## Quotes and Thoughts on the Theme

And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch ...by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home.

—Wendell Berry

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.

...Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

Most of us take for granted that time flies, meaning that it passes too quickly. But in the mindful state, time doesn't really pass at all. There is only a single instant of time that keeps renewing itself over and over with infinite variety.

—Deepak Chopra

Meditation and mindfulness are tools for working with the mind, but where they have led me is to a blossoming of the heart.

—Narissa Doumani

Zen does not confuse spirituality with thinking about God while one is peeling potatoes. Zen spirituality is just to peel the potatoes.

—Alan W. Watts

Mindfulness meditation doesn't change life. Life remains as fragile and unpredictable as ever. Meditation changes the heart's capacity to accept life as it is. It teaches the heart to be more accommodating, not by beating it into submission, but by making it clear that accommodation is a gratifying choice.

—Sylvia Boorstein

**You pray in your distress and in your need; would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.**

**—Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet**

Compassion is not complete if it does not include oneself.

—Allan Lokos

...it is often more difficult to re-member to be mindful than to be mindful itself.

—Donald Rothberg

Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.

—Thích Nhất Hạnh

*Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* By Anne Lamott:

Lamott makes her contribution to succinct devotional literature by reducing prayer to three words: help, thanks, and wow.

Never forget the three powerful resources you always have available to you: love, prayer, and forgiveness.

—H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who prays.

—Soren Kierkegaard

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If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is *thank you*, it will be enough.

—Meister Eckhart

‘Thank you’ is the best prayer that anyone could say. I say that one a lot. Thank you expresses extreme gratitude, humility, understanding.

—Alice Walker

In my deepest, darkest moments, what really got me through was a prayer. Sometimes my prayer was ‘Help me.’ Sometimes a prayer was ‘Thank you.’ What I’ve discovered is that intimate connection and communication with my creator will always get me through because I know my support, my help, is just a prayer away.

—Iyanla Vanzant

Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one’s weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Read my letter to the old folks, and give my love to them, and tell my brothers to be always watching unto prayer, and when the good old ship of Zion comes along, to be ready to step aboard.

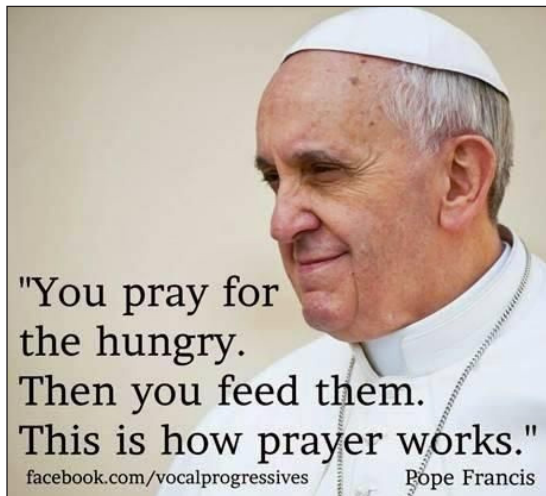
—Harriet Tubman

Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us. The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love. Love is not great delight but desire to please God in everything.

—Saint Teresa of Avila

Appreciation is the highest form of prayer, for it acknowledges the presence of good wherever you shine the light of your thankful thoughts.

—Alan Cohen



Joy is prayer; joy is strength: joy is love; joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.

—Mother Teresa

The scientific observer of Nature is a kind of mystic seeker in the act of prayer.

—Muhammad Iqbal

I talk to God but the sky is empty.

— Sylvia Plath

This, I thought, is what is meant by ‘thy will be done’ in the Lord’s Prayer,

which I had prayed time and again without thinking about it. It means that your will and God’s will may not be the same. It means there’s a good possibility that you won’t get what you pray for. It means that in spite of your prayers you are going to suffer.

—Wendell Berry

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Under certain circumstances, profanity provides a relief denied even to prayer.

—Mark Twain

The prayer preceding all prayers is this:

May it be the real I who speaks-

May it be the real thou that I speak to

—Rabbi Zusya

I prayed for freedom for twenty years, but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.

—Frederick Douglass

The man who prays is the one who thinks that god has arranged matters all wrong, but who also thinks that he can instruct god how to put them right.

—Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality*

*You carry Mother Earth within you. She is not outside of you. Mother Earth is not just your environment. In that insight of inter-being, it is possible to have real communication with the Earth, which is the highest form of prayer.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh

In prayer all are equal.

—Jalaluddin Rumi

O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient.

—Qur'an, 2:153

Patience has all the time it needs.

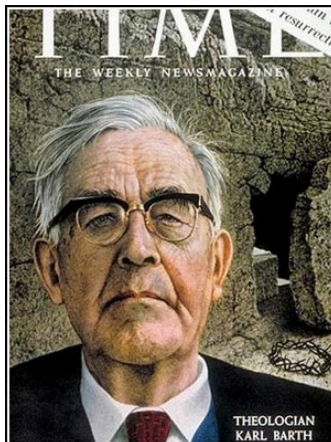
—Allan Lokos

Prayer cannot bring water to a parched field, 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.

—Rabbi Abraham Heschel

Between the humble and contrite heart and the majesty of Heaven there are no barriers; the only password is prayer.

Rev. Hosea Ballou, Universalist Minister



To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.

— Karl Barth —

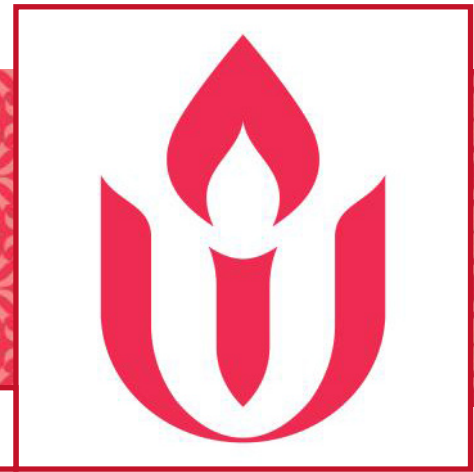
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## UU Voices on Prayer



### I have begun to pray recently...

This may sound odd coming from a minister, but as much as I adore leading prayer in front of a congregation, on the state capitol steps, or at a patient's bedside, I've always held a certain amount of shame that prayer isn't central to my spiritual practice. Perhaps shame isn't the word; it might be more like envy: I want to be good at it.



I'm under no theological pressure to keep up a prayer life. I don't believe that a God will smite me if I don't engage in regular conversation. In fact, I'm comfortably perched on the fence about God (that is, if by "God" we're talking about a noun). I lose interest the minute that God is spoken of as an enormous celestial ATM who doles out rewards to some, and punishment to the kids who are too busy to call home every once in a while. Yet I appreciate the word God for the sake of common vocabulary. It's a good universal shorthand to describe the little moments in our daily life that smack us into paying attention: "Hey! This, right here —

this moment, joined with all other such tiny moments — is why you're alive. This is Holy. Here it is."

I love the word prayer over meditation because often the latter is used to describe an emptying of one's mind... and I'm looking to deliberately fill mine up. In understanding what I'm doing as prayer, I place myself in

the company of souls throughout the millennia who also hoped, cried, were sickened with worry, loved desperately, and felt impossible levels of joy. I join those who have reached into their chests, yanked out their hearts, and offered them to this world.

When I try to do it, my mind drifts. But I sit in my hammock under a big old oak and notice that when I look up from my day and reach right in, my heart is filled with so much God.

Rev. Marisol Caballero  
Austin, TX

### Practice of Zen Prayer

I've found through ordinary attention I can know enough to find authentic peace and joy.

We can know ourselves and our place in the play of the cosmos through sustained attention to what is going on. I've found the beauty and mystery and grace of our existence are revealed in prayerful attention. Through attention we can come to know the connections.

In my thirty years delving into the Zen practices of bare attention, this has been my experience. At the moments within our complete nakedness to what is we find our foolishness and glory are all revealed. Here our hearts and minds open. And, here, we come to an experience that is worthy of those wonderful words "meaning" and "purpose." Within this prayer, within this attention, we can find our connections as a deep intimacy. And out of this knowledge we find a moral perspective, a call to justice, and a peace that passes all understanding.

Rev. James Ishmael Ford