

**“Rethinking Prayer”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Karon Sandberg**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
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At least five times a day I pray the Lord's Prayer. As a hospice chaplain, most of my patients in this area are either traditional Lutherans or Catholics and when we lift up concerns in prayer many of them find comfort and familiarity in saying the Lord's Prayer along with me. I have to confess, at first this felt false and uncomfortable for me. Certain words grated on my consciousness. Its formal words and requests seemed so far away from anything that felt like connection for me. And yet, when I peeked out from underneath my bowed head, I could see that my patients glowed with a sense of comfort and peace in reciting these familiar and ancient words.

Do you pray or don't you? I think a lot of us in this room have had interesting relationships with prayer. Perhaps like some of you, I was raised in a typical Christian home, my family was ELCA Lutheran. We didn't exactly practice it much outside of Sunday mornings but it had a place in our lives that we turned to in times of trouble or joy. We were taught to pray to God to help us throughout our days. Over time, my prayers became more of a conversation with God, telling Him (And I say him because as a child I imagined the gray haired God of the Old Testament.) about my troubles and then usually requesting help or asking for things. In looking back, I am surprised that I didn't just imagine God in a red Santa suit as that was how it was really playing out with me and God. “Dear God, I need this or that or please make this happen for me, that would be so great. My life would finally be perfect if you did. Thank you, Amen.”

As I grew older, I began to see that those kinds of prayers were just that; a wish list for what I wanted. I stopped praying those kinds of prayers; in fact in college I stopped praying. I had trouble making sense of the God that I had been raised with.

As my life continued I began to dabble in Buddhism and discovered Unitarian Universalism. My view of prayer and meditation began to shift. I began to see prayer as a way of becoming part of something bigger than myself. I began to pray again, but in a different way. I began to recognize prayer in song, dance, poetry, nature, good food, powerful films, you name it! I have come to a place where I see so many things as prayer. What a shift from when I used to pray for things.

And so somehow, that long winding journey brings me back- to sitting across from my patient, holding their hands, and earnestly praying the Lord's Prayer with them.

Writer and Christian, Anne Lamont says that there are three basic prayers. Help. Thanks. Wow. Just for today, I am asking you not get bogged down in to whom we pray. Today I am going to invite us to rethink prayer. Many of us carry a lot of baggage from our past that have us question its direction and its purpose. As Unitarian Universalists it is easy for us to get stuck there. In fact that is the first question people ask me about when I explain what our faith welcomes. “Well who do you pray to?” they ask with disbelief. Unitarian Universalists could argue for decades about this topic. I am sure we

could do a great job of continuing that argument today.

But for us in this moment, what if we define prayer as communication from our hearts to the great mysterious, or greater goodness, or to the animating energy of love that we are sometimes bold enough to believe in?<sup>1</sup> These are words I can get behind; these are words that for me describe what I might be praying to or for.

For me, when I am confused, anxious or worried, prayer or meditation is my real self trying to reach out and be seen and be heard. In that moment, I am hoping to escape the feelings of fear and shame that I feel caught up in and instead be found by light, warmth and love in this world.

And I wonder, what if we re-framed all the things we do each day that give us a sense of meaning and a sense of connection? What if we saw these things to be forms of prayer or meditation? I wonder, is a beautiful song about love and loss a prayer? Is a poem about the beauty of the earth a prayer? For myself, I have found that perhaps all things in which we express ourselves honestly, can serve as little prayers that reach out and share our universal experience with others.

Ann Lamont feels the most common prayer that escapes from our lips in times of trouble is “Help.” The Help prayer happens when we are so devastated by circumstances that we throw in the towel. We admit we can't do it ourselves. When disaster hits, cancer, illness or accidents, my old self might have begged or demanded a fix or a resolution to the problem. But now life has taught me that sometimes the journey is not about the end results. Now I might pray or meditate for courage and strength to walk through it.

You and I lifted up a Help prayer just this morning. Our sharing of concerns in our service is in all reality a Help prayer. We are letting our circle of loving know what is difficult for us right now.

How often have you really been down or afraid and you've shared that with a loved one? We do it all the time. And sometimes they have a solution and then our problem is solved. And sometimes they don't and the problem is still there. And yet, just by sharing our problem we somehow feel better. Our load seems a little lighter. For me that is what praying for help does, it lets the universe know that I am overwhelmed and at the end of my rope. And in that moment of lifting it up in surrender, I have gotten pretty real with myself and I admit that I am lost and feeling vulnerable.

Anne Lamont feels that there is freedom in that vulnerability. In seeing that you won't be able to save or rescue your daughter or spouse, his parents or your career. You are actually admitting that you have reached the place of great unknowing.

That is the place where Buddhist Pema Chodron says we are fully alive and completely awake. To live fully is to be always in non-man's land. To live, says Chodron, is to be willing to die over and over again.<sup>2</sup> OK, that sounds exhausting and uncomfortable!

And then again, I know it is true. Life is always changing us. When I am at my most vulnerable I use prayer or meditation to reach out, to connect to something bigger than myself and breathe out my pain and suffering. It allows me the freedom to wail and vent and release emotional pressure. It puts

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1 Lamont, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. (Riverhead Books, New York, NY. 2012) pg.9.

2 Chodron, Pema, *When Things Fall Apart, Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, (Shambhala publications, Boston, MA. 1997) pg.71)

words to my anguish and to be honest, I think there is real power in that. When we put voice to the reality of a situation, it changes us. It forces us to pause and, yes, we are fully alive in that moment.

Fellowship member, Be Alford is my yoga teacher. She also meditates, writes poetry and music. I think all of those are ways in which she prays each day. In class last week she shared that the front of our bodies represent self effort. It is all that we do on our own each day. The back of our bodies represent the support, grace, care of the universe and whoever got us to where we are now, family or friends, mentors or teachers, or mother-earth.

And as she was saying this I thought about the Help prayer. In times of crisis the front of ourselves says, “I have been going forward out in the world, trying to solve this problem but it hasn't worked.” But what if we remembered that we are connected in this world to more than just the front of ourselves? We are connected to all that has brought us to this place, the people, the earth, the grace and the love. Prayer or meditation reminds us of that connection and when we pray or meditate we may feel less alone, and less afraid.

And guess what? Apparently there is science behind this idea too. Currently more than 200 controlled experiments in humans, plants, animals and even microbes suggest that the compassionate loving prayers and intentions of one individual can actually affect another. These studies paint a picture of human consciousness that is infinite. Our individual mind appears to be connected with all other minds, no matter how far apart.<sup>3</sup> Our UU principle of belief in the inter-connective web reinforces this idea. We are connected to one another and to everything.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that whenever we join our palms together in a daily practice of meditation, clarity and understanding are produced. When there is more understanding there is more love in the collective consciousness and our state of health improves, not only as an individual but also the community as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

With all of that collective love and grace lifting us up the first word that comes to my mind is “Thanks.” Lamont says that thanks prayers run the gamut from sharing your heart and saying “thanks, I appreciate my continued health or that was a good day at the office.” To saying “Thanks, that's a relief!” when it's not the transmission or an abscess or an audit notice from the IRS. To “Thank you, thank you, thank you:” my wife is going to live. We get to stay in this house. They found my son and he is alive and safe.<sup>5</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh offers short little prayers or Gathas for daily activities. One of my favorites is called “Waking Up”

Waking up this morning, I smile  
Twenty four brand new hours are before me  
I vow to live fully in each moment and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, (Parallax press, Berkeley, CA, 2006) pg. 13

4 Ibid. pg. 101.

5 Lamont, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. (Riverhead Books, New York, NY. 2012) pg. 32.

6 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, (Parallax press, Berkeley, CA, 2006) pg. 152.

What a great way to start the day.

Many of my patients feel abandoned by the God they have been taught about. Alone in a nursing home, perhaps family is too busy to visit often. Their faith tells them that God is with them but they are having trouble seeing it.

I have found that for me divinity is there in all the staff members who come in and out all day. Those who help them to wash or dress; housekeepers to sweep and dust; cooks who shop and chop and bake; social workers who handle insurance; chaplains like me who hold their hands and take them outside and listen to them and pray with them. I like to imagine that everyone who walks through their door collectively forms something bigger than just themselves. That collectively we are showing love to one another in all the little things we do for each other each day.

Waking up this morning, I smile

We have all heard the catch phrase that we should “practice” gratitude. And I agree, it is a practice. It is something we must train ourselves to do. It seems our messy human nature wants to notice the negative first. We let small things weigh too heavily and we grip tightly to old hurts. It is then when we need to practice. To lift up our heads and see how blue the sky is and listen instead to the sound of the bird singing outside. Perhaps we recognize that on that day we may have food in the refrigerator, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our head. We have this beautiful place to come and celebrate together, even when we are hurting or afraid. There are many ways to kiss the ground, says Rumi. We can find much to be grateful for if we open our eyes and our hearts.

How often do we write, dance or sing when we are grateful or happy? My daughter Claire has a beautiful voice. I have heard her sing on stage and in productions. But there is a different quality when she is singing in the bathtub, she doesn't always do it but when she does it is because she is profoundly happy about something. As I hear her voice ring out in joy, I believe it is a song of gratitude.

Gratitude begins in our hearts and then can dovetail into behavior. Ann Lamont says that strangely it almost always makes you willing to be of service to others and that is where joy resides. When you are aware of all that has been given to you it is hard to not want to share it.<sup>7</sup>

When we go from scratchy and clenched to grateful, we are often given the experience of grace. When that happens something shifts within us. We find that something has to open up; something inside us has to give way. Being present and noticing our blessings invites us to say thanks.

That movement of grace towards gratitude brings us from the discomfort of self obsessed madness to our own spiritual awakening.

And that is WOW. The wow prayer is offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath.<sup>8</sup> Wow is having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing and the miraculous. WOW signals a loss of words.

For me, wow usually comes when I am blown away by love. I see people who love so

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<sup>7</sup> Lamont, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. (Riverhead Books, New York, NY. 2012) pg. 37

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pg.45.

tremendously in my work. Families who tell me stories of their parents making great financial and physical sacrifices for their kids, never complaining and in fact doing so with great joy. Coming from a family that doled out love in measured amounts, this surprises me every time and makes me see how deep and powerful the human spirits can be.

Yesterday I saw a young twenty something nursing assistant come in on her day off, to hold the hand of a dying patient that she had cared for and loved. WOW! I see people finally let go and forgiving one another for long held grievances. Their faces shining with joy, tears and relief. WOW.

Thich Nhat Hanh shares a WOW prayer;

Breathing in I am so happy to hug my child  
Breathing out I know she is real and alive in my arms.<sup>9</sup>

After I gave birth, I felt like that was a wow prayer. How did my body do that? How did the doctors and nurses know what to do? How did my baby know what to do? WOW.

Nature is also a place where Wow prayers occur. I had the great fortune of being invited to preach at the UU congregation in St. John US Virgin Islands in May. While there, Joel and I made the habit of watching the sun set from a new spot every evening. Some were beautiful, but some were spectacular, deep reds and purples, oranges and pinks, the sky literally looked like it was on fire. I find WOW in the beauty and sighing of trees as they blow in the wind. I find wow in the delicate, intricate formation and color of irises.

I know all of us can think of music that has moved us so tremendously that we have wept. I think that is a WOW prayer. Hearing a beat poet share their truth with words that are so true and sharp, watching an actor portray an emotion or feeling that seems universal, that is a WOW prayer.

Thich Nhat Hanh wonders why we pray, why do we put these things into words or actions? Perhaps, he says, because all energy of prayer comes back to our simple human desire for happiness and to be connected to others and to something greater than ourselves. Prayer, whether chanted, silent, in meditation or dance or sung or painted is a way to return ourselves in the present moment and touch the truth and peace inside of us. It is simultaneously a way to put us in touch with the universal and the timeless and recognizing our connection to everything in the universe.<sup>10</sup>

So, how do you seek help when you are vulnerable or hurting? How do you give thanks for all that surrounds you? How do you express yourself when there are no words? Do you fall to your knees in traditional prayer or meditation? Do you sit quietly in nature soaking in the sounds and sights? Do you write in your journal or create a poem or write a song? Do you paint, dance or sing at the top of your lungs? Do you hold a loved one close? Is this prayer? I believe it to be so. Call it what you will, but it is holy. When we do these things, we are suddenly not alone, but instead we are brought out of the darkness and connected to something bigger than ourselves and brought out into the light. WOW.

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9 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer; How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, (Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA 2006) pg. 154.

10 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, (Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA 2006) pg. 119

May it be so.

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