

"WHY I'M PRAYING MORE"
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Appleton, Wisconsin
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Reading: "Eagle Poem" by Joy Harjo
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. Circles 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.¹

Sermon

Up until maybe the last five or ten years, I believed in a God who literally answers prayers. Now I never believed this intellectually, not even as a kid. That's not the understanding of God taught at the liberal church of my childhood. I never have intellectually pictured some Gary Larson-like God figure sitting at a computer, ready to push any number of keys, with the potential to be swayed by people's prayers.

¹ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175881>.

But I can tell that emotionally I believed in a God who literally answers prayers. I know this because when the chips were down, I'd pray for help. If I was in a pickle on the playground or on a plane bouncing in turbulence or a loved one was desperately sick, I'd find myself phoning God for help. "Please God: distract this big kid who's about to push me off the merry-go-round." "Please God, help this plane get through this turbulence and land safely." "Please, God, help my mother recover from this stroke." The results were mixed. The most effective prayer was about the big kid on the merry-go-round. Just as he was coming after me for some imagined offense I had committed against him, he fell off the merry-go-round and managed to hit his head on the side of the base. That head injury pretty much took him out of commission and led me to conclude either God or I had some considerable powers.² Other times my prayers didn't work quite as well, though to date every plane I've flown on has successfully landed.

Also, if I'm honest, I have to admit that once in awhile envy would get the best of me, and I'd pray for things I desperately wanted: the person I had a crush on to ask me out, a new car I lusted after, a head of hair like Jim Klinkert's. I'm not proud of this.

It dawned on me recently that I no longer say these crisis- or envy-inspired prayers. Maybe my emotions have caught up with my intellectual understanding. It's not that I no longer have moments where supernatural help would be welcome. I certainly do have such moments! But I just don't pray like that anymore, even in those moments. Praying for help and rescue is no longer my default response to crisis situations.

So does this signal the demise of my prayer life? Absolutely not! Even though intellectually and emotionally I believe less than ever in a God who has the power to fix or save or grant things, I find myself praying more often, not less. I don't pray when the chips are down anymore. I don't pray for specific fixes. I don't pray for things I want. Instead, I pray when I'm grateful. I pray when I am in need of discernment. I pray when I need a reminder—a reminder of who I want to be and what values I want to live by. I pray when I'm deeply aware of the wonder of life, or, more importantly, when I need to become aware of life's wonder because I'm lost in a cloud of obliviousness. I pray when I feel stuck or immobilized and need to remember to breathe and take the next baby step forward. I pray when I'm concerned about someone else—not for that person to be fixed but for that person's well-being, whatever that might be. I pray when my spirit feels parched and is in need of some sustenance.

My prayers today are a lot less specific than the old crisis-mode prayers. Somewhere along the line, I realized that I'm not really smart enough to know what specifically to pray for. Maybe the best thing for my elderly mom lying in the hospital bed after a stroke is dying, not recovering enough to limp along until the next catastrophic illness. Who's to know? Not me. Probably not anyone. None of us are that smart.

I'm reminded of the Taoist story about the farmer. This farmer had only one horse, and one day the horse ran away. The neighbors came to console him over his terrible loss. The farmer said, "What makes you think this is so terrible?"

² I neglected to mention in the sermon that a year or two later, I fell off the same merry-go-round and also suffered a head injury. Maybe I'll save that story for a sermon on karma.

A month later, the horse came home—this time bringing with her two beautiful wild horses. The neighbors celebrated the farmer's good fortune. The farmer said, "What makes you think this is good fortune?"

The farmer's son was thrown from one of the wild horses and broke his leg. Such bad luck, the neighbors lamented! The farmer said, "What makes you think this is bad?"

A war came, and every able-bodied man was conscripted and sent into battle. Only the farmer's son, because he had a broken leg, remained home. Every last soldier in the unit the son would have served in perished in battle.

So who's to know what's best? The farmer could have prayed for his horse not to run away or for his son not to get injured on the wild horse. But the farmer, like all of us, cannot really see what might be best. Even if God is sitting at his computer and might be inclined to hit the key I want God to hit—which I don't believe—how do I know that this would in the end be a good thing? How do I know which key God should hit? I don't.

With my new kind of prayer, I find that I care less and less about who or what might be on the receiving end of my prayers. Maybe it's nothing more than my inner self. I'm fine with that possibility. Or maybe it's the Oversoul Emerson wrote about--the divine spark that is in me and everything else in the universe. Maybe it's the Goddess. Maybe it's Love (capital "L") or the Spirit of Life. Maybe it's simply a complete fiction and there's nothing on the other end. Whatever. I really don't care. My prayers are not about getting answers or my needs met anyway. So I don't give a rip who or what is on the receiving end, or even if there is something/someone on the other end at all. Being agnostic doesn't impact my prayers. Neither would deciding once and for all I'm an atheist.³

So what is prayer? For me, more than anything prayer is about paying attention and acknowledging and naming what's going on around and especially within me. It helps me name and own what I'm feeling: fear, concern, joy, love, whatever it is. Prayer also helps me be aware of all of the blessings in my life, especially those smaller blessings which I too often am completely oblivious to. It helps me think about what's most important in my life and how I am tending to what's most important. It helps me contemplate those whom I'm concerned about. It helps center me. It helps calm me when the seas of my life get choppy.

³ In the Congregational Response, someone brought up the stumbling block that has kept her from praying: how to start and how to end her prayers. She wasn't necessarily comfortable using "God" at the beginning and "Amen" at the end. I suggested in response that she use the prayer opening from a common joke about Unitarian Universalists: "To whom it may concern." Or pick a different word, like Love or Spirit of Life. Or forget about an opening and just jump into the prayer because it really doesn't matter what we call the person/thing on the other end of our prayers or whether there is someone on the other end at all. I also mentioned that I thought of using a Buddhist gong in our services in part because I wasn't sure how best to end the time of silent meditation and prayer in our services. I'm ambivalent about "Amen," and I know that many folks here are not comfortable with "Amen" (while some are). Sounding the gong at the beginning and end of the silence solved my dilemma. I'd summarize all this by noting that many Unitarian Universalists use discomfort and confusion about how to start and end prayer as a reason not to pray. I recommend you just forget about how you start and end the prayer and who you're praying to and instead just dive in and stop abruptly when you're ready to stop. See how it works!

There's really nothing mysterious or magical about all this. Simply put, prayer helps me get in touch. With myself. With others. With what's going on near and far in the world. With the Great Spirit, if there is such a thing. Joy Harjo's poem that was the Reading today captures this essence well: when you pray, "you open your whole self/To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon/To one whole voice that is you." There doesn't have to be anything supernatural about it.

In the movie *Harold and Maude*, Harold asks Maude if she prays. "Pray? No. I communicate," she replies. She communicates with her deepest self and with the universe. That's like my praying to get in touch. I'm okay that Maude does not label this as prayer. You might not, either. But I do.

So I try to set aside prayer time each day. I usually start by being aware of my breath and then taking some deep breaths. The Buddhists are right: there's spiritual power in simply tending to this most basic of all human functions: breathing in and out. It strips everything else away.

After being attentive to my breath for a bit, then I'll often check in with myself and notice how my body feels and what I'm feeling emotionally. It's remarkable how often I haven't been attentive to some significant physical or emotional sensation prior to the prayer time.

Then I do an inventory of what I'm thankful for at the moment. I almost always notice that so many things surface which I otherwise would have taken for granted. I think that taking life's gifts for granted just might be a deadly sin: it kills gratitude. It kills relationships. It kills our spirits. A gratitude inventory is the perfect antidote.

Next I contemplate the primary relationships in my life and what I might do today to strengthen them. It's interesting: when I take the time to do this, I tend to be a much better spouse, dad, friend, colleague. And when I don't, well, let's say that doesn't always work real well for me, not to mention those I care most about.

Then I contemplate my deepest values and whether I am living in accordance with them. If not, what can I do today to make my actions match my values?

Then I lift up those I'm concerned about, including you when you are suffering. I say a prayer for the well-being of those I'm concerned about. Joys and Concerns provides great fodder for my prayers. I don't know whether my praying for a Fellowship member who has cancer helps her or him get cured—and anyway, I'm not even praying for that. But it helps me feel compassion for that person, and from that feeling of compassion to reach out with love and care. That's all I need from this sort of prayer. It's not miraculous, unless you count love as miraculous—which, come to think of it, I do.

This summer, more than usual, the world feels like it's in particularly bad shape: Ukraine, Ebola, Gaza, religious fanatics taking over broad swaths of land in Syria and Iraq, children risking their lives to get into our country and then running into walls and hatred, Ferguson, a passenger plane shot down, the announcement that there are 50 million refugees from war in the world today. It's overwhelming, isn't it?

Prayer helps me in such times. In my prayer time, I contemplate the people who are suffering. I try to picture them, picture what their lives are like and how they are suffering. It's not a happy thing to do, but it kindles my compassion for them. Maybe in my prayer life I can walk a mile in their shoes, or even a few feet. Then I ask myself a question: What small thing can I do today to help? I listen to the still voice within and try to discern what that small, probably indirect thing is. Maybe it's something as simple as deciding that I will take care of the sticks my neighbor tossed into my yard instead of tossing them back into his. I know this is not going to solve the world's problems, but it's a place to start. If I'm feuding with my neighbor, well, that feels like a lower stakes yet still related version of what's going on in Ukraine and the Gaza. Prayer helps me realize this.

Now this way I pray may sound rather elaborate. Many days I don't do go through the whole cycle. Some days I just do one aspect of it: say, pay attention to my breath. And it's enough. There are days when it's good to keep it simple. Anne Lamott says her prayer life boiled down to its basics is three words: "Help. Thanks. Wow."⁴ In one of her books, she writes about a woman who prays in the morning "Whatever" (as in whatever will be will be) and then "Oh well" at the end of her day.⁵ This can work, too.

In my two favorite lines from Rumi, the Sufi mystic/poet, he writes, "Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."⁶ These two lines sum up so much of my spirituality. Prayer helps the beauty I love become what I do. It is one of the ways I choose to kneel and kiss the ground.

If prayer is something that works for you, great! If you pray in a different way from mine, great! If there are other ways you let the beauty you love become what you do and prayer is not your thing, great. I don't care what you do, but I hope you do something spiritual. Because translating the beauty you love into what you do does not often just happen by accident.

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⁴ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead, 2012).

⁵ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor, 2000), p. 82.

⁶ http://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/meditations/today_like_every_other_day.html