

Prayers for UUs
Adele Failmezger
November 10, 2002

This talk is partially excerpted from “Contemporary Unitarian Universalist Prayer Traditions: A Reflection of Theological Diversity”, an interseminary seminar by Kim Wilson, 1997.

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious denomination whose members collectively embrace a broad spectrum of religious beliefs. These beliefs include not only differing theistic views, but atheism, humanism, and agnosticism as well. Consequently, it is not surprising that the mention of prayer evokes a range of reactions, from highly positive to one of disinterest, discomfort, or outright rejection. Even among those who find prayer to be a meaningful act in their spiritual lives, theologies of prayer vary, with some beliefs about prayer dovetailing with or paralleling those of traditional Christianity and other beliefs stretching and moving beyond traditional Christian concepts.

For many Unitarian Universalists, prayer is somewhat different from traditional Christian prayer. It may be defined not only as speaking to God, but it may also have personal meanings which differ from traditional Christianity; the “receiver” of prayers is often other than God the Father of Jesus, and some of the ideas about why prayer “works” may be different.

UUs who pray believe that there is a fairly wide latitude for acceptable prayer. For UUs, an effective prayer brings greater meaning and a sense of wholeness to one's life as well as a connectedness to the rest of the universe. It may be spoken or unspoken; it may be a dance or an act of love or even an attitude toward life. Prayer expressions which are not thought of as traditional within Christianity may be forgotten Christian practices, such as walking meditation. They may be adaptations of practices from other world religions (yoga or Tai Chi, for instance), or they may have developed naturally out of an individual's personal spiritual journey.

The variety of views of prayer has evolved not only because individuals are given the freedom to practice prayer in a way that is personally meaningful, or to not pray if it is not meaningful.

There were several major theological developments within Unitarianism and Universalism which altered the way its members conceived of God and how they understood prayer. Accompanying the development of Unitarianism almost from the beginning was an emphasis on the use of reason as a tool for biblical interpretation and also as an approach to theology in general. William Ellery Channing explained that Unitarians “feel it is our bounden duty to exercise our reason perpetually”.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other Transcendentalists saw nature and the human mind as reflective of each other and of the universal consciousness of God. Nature and natural law were endowed with divine significance. Religion, then, was centered in the everyday experiences in the world. This naturalistic view of God was gradually adopted by many Unitarians, replacing the fatherlike, personal God of traditional Christianity. As this occurred, Unitarians' concept of prayer expanded, leading Emerson to make statements such as, “All honest work is prayer” and “Every secret wish is a prayer”.

The most important factor which led to the modern-day diversity of opinion on prayer was the rise of religious humanism. William Channing Gannett, in 1887, wrote a statement of “Things Most Commonly Believed Among Us”, in which he described God as “That Love with which our souls commune”. This implied to some that God was not necessarily a supernatural being or even a being at all. God might then

be simply a name or symbol for the aspiring religious sensibility of humanity. Early Humanists saw that God might be thought of more precisely as “an expression of the human personality itself, and religion might well be redefined as a purely human enterprise”.

In 1993, a group of Humanists, through their statement, “A Humanist Manifesto”, did just that when they stated that religion consists of “those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant”, and characterized the universe as “self-existing and not created”. The Humanists also affirmed the “supreme worth” of human beings. While this group did not specifically deny the existence of God, they in effect ignored the question of God’s existence. By the mid-30’s, partly through the influence of the Humanist movement, there was a significant element within Unitarian churches which rejected much of the traditional vocabulary of religion, including “God” and “prayer”.

It should be noted that about 90% of Unitarians come from different religious backgrounds or have little or no religious affiliation. Many of these people find expression and support for theological positions with which they had struggled previously. These converts often bring with them memories of having felt forced to pray in ways that felt oppressive or wrong. Some were instilled with a sense of guilt through prayer, and others felt rejected. Women may have felt outside the divine presence in praying to “God the Father”.

In the process of trying to heal religious wounds, many people choose to disconnect from their former faith. These people find it difficult to redefine traditional elements, including prayer, in new ways that might be meaningful to them. This “throwing out the baby with the bath water” response may account for much of the discomfort with traditional religious language and the desire to substitute words like meditation, reflection, or aspiration for prayer in the order of worship.

Therefore, in many congregations, including our own, there is little support for and encouragement of traditional prayer. Rather than the word “prayer” in the order of service, silent or spoken meditations are substituted. In some congregations, the insertion of a time of silence in the order of service is looked upon as “creative worship”. In other churches, the word prayer is used without apology.

John Buehrens, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, acknowledges that many people in the denomination have given up on formal praying. “But under difficult conditions”, he observes, “there is something in us that cries out for expression”. Most everyone prays spontaneously at some time in his life. Rev. A. Powell Davies agreed that virtually everyone prays, although not everyone admits it.

A survey of UUs’ personal beliefs and attitudes revealed that approximately one-third considered the term “prayer” to be not useful. More than a third said that prayer functioned as a form of meditation for them and slightly less than a third used prayer as a communion with the inner self. Only about twelve percent said that they used prayer to communicate with God.

However, it would be misleading to assume that theists pray and agnostics and atheists do not. Many UUs believe in God but do not pray because of past negative associations. Agnostics and atheists may find meaning in contemplative prayer, “the act of simply calling those forces which created and sustain the universe to mind and considering them and rejoicing in them”. And there is the hopeful agnostic, who prays because “I find the alternative, namely that I and other like me are the highest power to be found, infinitely terrifying”. This person finds comfort and peace in praying to nature, a force greater than we are.

If prayer is defined as a process in which people's deepest feelings, longings and constructs of meaning are expressed, then even an atheist can pray. One humanist/atheist says that he doesn't pray in the traditional meaning of the word, but he can meditate, Zen Buddhist style.

Another atheist tries to think positive thoughts, which he sees as a form of prayer. He believes it is a "waste of time" to try to converse with, make requests of, or give thanks to a superior power. "If a superior power does exist", he speculates, "wouldn't it already be aware of your thoughts? And if it is not aware, does it matter? A superior power is not very superior if it can be convinced to change its direction due to a stated request from a mere human on one small planet. I believe the time spent in (traditional) prayer would be better utilized by doing something to improve my situation."

Many more UUs might accept prayer into their lives if they could move past certain hurdles. One is that UUs tend to worry about whether they believe or not—in a God who hears, in the possibilities of prayer itself. And there is the problem of excessive rationalism, wanting to understand it all and to be in control. Sometimes this is a fear of the imagination and of the unknown.

The Transcendentalist movement probably did more than any other theological development to expand the concept of prayer. Emerson, seeing all of experience as sacred, concluded, "All men are always praying." George Marshall, in Challenge of a Liberal Faith, describes contemporary UU prayer as a way of relating to the universe. It deals "with the question of our potentialities and how we answer the questions 'where', 'what', and 'why'....It is the direct means by which we relate ourselves through directed thought with a cause and relationship larger than our human fellowship."

Rev. Roberta Finkelstein sees prayer as an expression of "our deepest longings, our most profound fears, our most unspeakable joys and desires". She and others see prayer as more of a process than an act. A part of the process is pushing through the layers of distraction that surround us to get to what is truly important and real. Prayer, then, does not even have to involve words. Drawing on Transcendentalist theology, it can be a state of mind, an attitude toward life, "our desire and our concern in those times when words and traditions fail us". Prayer can be characterized as a primary religious experience—a response of inexpressible awe and wonder to the mysteries of life, the vastness of the universe or the power or the beauty of nature. Prayer is "thought, enriched and clarified through meditation, giving creative expression and loving, constructive direction to our emotions". Some consider this kind of thought to be our richest achievement and a manifestation of our fullest power of being as humans.

What are the motives for praying? How do we communicate through prayer? What results should we expect? Most UUs who pray do so because it brings a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. Many people pray because they believe it offers hope for personal transformation. When people become aware of a sense of incompleteness, they become motivated to address their needs to become whole. Prayer offers a way to address this need.

For prayer to be effective, people must speak with all their selves, with the voices of anger, grief, and confusion as well as cheerfulness, gratitude, and wit. Through the process of prayer, someone can change from who they have been to a person who is more honest, real, and loving.

Prayer is a way of participating in the ongoing creation. Although for most UUs, God is not a personality or a force with emotions or desires, many UUs who pray speak about prayer as a relationship. That relationship can be one with the rest of the beings in our environment, a relationship which UU people of faith are called

to understand more fully. Prayer can be a way of furthering that attempt at understanding. Some people see the relationship as one which involves the entire cosmos and/or life itself.

To pray is also to affirm belonging. That belonging, the sense of connection to the larger reality, is a human need recognized by many UUs. Through this sense of connection, those who pray can rediscover the awe of their own existence and the world around them.

These goals of relationship and connection are fairly universal among prayer traditions. It is probably in the realm of specifically identifying the “receiver” of one’s prayers that the differences between traditional Christian and modern Unitarian Universalist prayer are most apparent. While some UUs are comfortable praying to God the Father, most of us get hung up on the question, “to whom do I pray?” Often when God is redefined in terms of the creative power of the universe, the ultimate reality, the force of nature, or the powers of good inside us, people find they are more comfortable with prayer.

For quite a few of those who pray, the recipient of the prayer is not of paramount importance. Wordless prayer eliminates the issue of who hears—just fling it out on the wind. Buehrens adds that the point of praying is not to make requests of God, but “to listen for God’s will in one’s own life.”

Since there seems to be a lack of emphasis on the specific character of a prayer’s recipient, there is the question of whether UUs believe that God (or the universe or the Ultimate Reality) responds to their prayers. Prayer advocates think it is possible to hear a response, which might be one’s best self speaking.

If God does not intervene directly, as most of us believe, then the response would tend to be one which comes from within. A. Powell Davies is quoted as saying, “Sometimes, O God, our hearts do know themselves, as we come close to life’s meaning. Give us to prize these hours of insight and grant us hearts that remember.”

It is a response which demands a certain level of personal responsibility. Davies also said, “Give us to know, O God, how vain are all our hopes, how empty all our prayers, until we ourselves are ready to fulfill them.”

Reaching one’s human moral and ethical potential seems to be a primary focus of UU prayer. What about prayer for the well-being of others or for the earth? We in UUFR include a time of “Joys and Concerns” in our order of worship, where congregants are invited to share publicly significant situations in their lives. The community is encouraged to hold these people (and the family and friends mentioned) in their thoughts. Some congregations encourage their members to pray for those in need.

This approach to prayer would undoubtedly meet resistance among congregations with strong Humanist and rational-minded leanings. They would consider highly improbable the idea that praying for others could influence the course of events for those being prayed for. However, prayer advocates say that these prayers help those who pray by establishing a relationship with the people for whom they pray and with the world in general. The prayers can be meaningful to the recipients of the prayers if they know that others are concerned about them. It helps the recipient’s family and friends to feel less burdened, and it helps to strengthen the church community. Even the most rational members could probably accept all of these reasons.

How should we treat prayer in our fellowship? Some congregations consider music, or even dance, as forms of prayer. Some include chanting Buddhist mantras, combining Christian prayer with yoga, doing tai chi, or praying using body motions. Silent retreats are popular. The labyrinth walking meditation often leads

to a profound experience of clearing the mind, receiving illumination, and taking a renewed vision into the world.

The Unitarian Universalist denomination continues to be challenged by its theological diversity, with many voices calling for greater spirituality in general. The issue of prayer offers a particular challenge to UUs, some of whom may feel threatened by the practice of a discipline which, to them, seems irrelevant or reminds them too much of what they left behind. Others who believe in the power of prayer may feel censured by lack of support for prayer in their congregations. Due to the pluralistic nature of the denomination, there will almost certainly never be consensus on the issue of prayer. But, just as theological developments in the movement over the past three centuries have molded and changed interpretations of religious practices, the next decades may see greater movement among Unitarian Universalist churches to embrace prayer by its traditional name, in all its diverse forms.