

# **I Know Where Prayer Comes From**

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 24, 2009

## **Meditation**

On this weekend of remembrance.... we remember....  
We remember all those we loved who have gone before...  
and we Hold them in our hearts, whatever the contradictions and complexities of  
our relationships, treasure their memories with love.

On this Memorial Day Sunday we remember especially those who have died in service of  
their country...

We remember those who serve today...  
and whatever our politics, whatever our opinions, we hold them in our hearts just  
as we hold in our hearts and minds the ideals for which they have died and for  
which they serve.

At the same time we pray that we might find more peaceful ways of creating a world of  
greater justice and peace, freedom and democracy, dignity and love.

In this spirit, may the prayers of our hearts become the work of our hands.

## **Reading** – from *Primary Speech* by Ann and Barry Ulanov

Everybody prays. People pray whether or not they call it prayer. We pray every time we  
ask for help, understanding, or strength, in or out of religion. Then, who and what we are  
speak out of us, whether we know it or not. Our movements, our stillness, the expressions  
on our faces, our tone of voice, our actions, what we dream and daydream, as well as what  
we actually put into words... say who and what we are.

## **Sermon**

A friend and colleague, Herb Vetter, has put together a fine book titled *Prayers of Power*  
(available at [www.harvardsquarelibrary.org](http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org)) which includes selections from a wide variety of  
individuals and traditions. His preface to the book begins:

Prayer is an act of making the world whole again. An anonymous person once put the  
issue in a single word:

Here is a prayer to be said  
when the world has gotten you down  
and you feel rotten  
and you've got too much to do,  
and you're mad at everybody,  
and you're too tired to pray:  
HELP!

More seriously, Herb affirms that prayers represent our “creative responses to crises” in our lives, that prayers are “precious for our own health and healing,” that prayer can be “both necessary and invaluable for maintaining our own buoyancy and balance.”

But... do Unitarian Universalists pray? Well, I’ve discovered something interesting during the past few weeks, as I’ve asked Old Shippers to talk to me about prayer. Some of you tell me that you believe that most UUs don’t pray... but *you do*.

Of course UUs, given the nature of our tradition, are free to pray or not to pray, are free to understand prayer in whatever way we choose, are free to embrace prayer as a regular spiritual practice or to discard the word and concept and practice as not meaningful or useful.

But a little secret would seem to be that while no doubt not all of us pray, probably more of us pray than we might think.

Where does this praying come from?

What is it about? Or for?

Let me begin with a personal story:

Some of you remember my dear colleague and friend Elizabeth Tarbox. She had been a member of the First Parish in Duxbury, studied for the ministry and served as intern at First Parish in Norwell, was ordained and then went on to serve our UU congregation in Middleboro and then at First Parish in Cohasset. It was during her first year in Cohasset that she was diagnosed with the cancer that would take her from us within the next two years.

I recall well the last time I saw Elizabeth. Several of us, colleagues and friends, had gathered around her bedside. We talked... and I guess we prayed. In any case, Elizabeth must have asked us about prayer. And I found myself saying something I hadn’t realized before. I said that I don’t know where prayer goes or what its outward effects might be. But I do know very well where prayer comes from.

And I put my hand over my heart.

It is, it seems to me, as simple as that.

Following this assertion to its natural conclusion, some have said that Unitarian Universalists do indeed pray... we pray “to whom it may concern.”

“To whom it may concern” might elicit knowing laughter. But there is something to it. We pray to the God beyond names. To the cosmos. Directly to the heart of the one for whom for whom we are praying. Or we’re not sure. But we – many of us – do pray.

So we know that something within us, many of us anyway, moves us to pray, whatever our theology. And though we may not know where the prayer goes, we can know with certainty from where the prayer comes.

From the heart, from a certain kind of longing in our hearts.

This longing is in every prayer, isn’t it? Even in the simple prayers we may criticize – prayers for material things or for one team’s victory over another... even in such prayers is a longing – to paraphrase Herb Vetter, a longing for wholeness, for healing, for love. However papered over with more mundane concerns, doesn’t every true prayer – whether or not we even call it prayer – come from our heart’s longing for wholeness, healing, and love in our souls, within and among those we love, in the world?

The first prayer I learned may have been the first prayer some of you learned. For years I said it every night, my mother at the side of my bed:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
And if I die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Then the prayer would continue: “And God bless Mommy, and God bless Daddy, and God bless my brothers...” (well, it is, I suppose, possible I did not include my brothers every night)... and on to aunts and uncles and cousins.”

A simple prayer to be held and cared for by some reality far larger than myself, linked with a prayer for health and wholeness – for myself, for others. The heart’s longing put into simple words.

The Lord’s Prayer is really just a more sophisticated version of the same heart’s longing, isn’t it? May our lives here on earth be more closely aligned with the life of heaven as we imagine it, a life of Godly perfection – well-being, health, wholeness. It is the heart’s longing.

In the Buddhist tradition, the Metta Sutta – or sutra of compassion – is a simple and profound expression of our longing that all be well and whole. It begins (depending on the translation):

May I be filled with loving-kindness.  
May I be well.  
May I be peaceful and at ease.  
May I be happy.

In this practice, one is meant next to focus on someone you love, wishing that person loving-kindness, health, peace, ease, happiness. Then one focuses on someone with whom you have a troubled relationship. Then a stranger. Then all beings.

All from the heart’s love and the heart’s longing for more love. Yet with no need for naming a God, a divine being to whom one is praying. This prayer, if we choose to call it that, is simply a prayer of the heart for healing and wholeness and love: for oneself... and for all beings.

Yes, we know where such prayer comes from, perhaps every prayer just a variation of this prayer of the heart, coming from the heart’s love, seeking wholeness and health and well-being... for all beings.

So – a prayer as we dedicate a child, celebrate a wedding, remember a loved one.

So – a prayer for harvest, for justice, for peace.

So – a prayer that those suffering without a home or a job, hungry, caught in the midst of war.

Each, wherever the prayers might or might not go, a prayer from our heart’s longing – which may sometimes initially sound or feel selfish, but which in the end is about love and about the longing for universal well-being.

But, all this said, if *all* we know is where prayer comes from... why bother to pray? If we believe that there is no one somewhere, up there, out there hearing and answering prayers... why bother to pray?

There are certainly those – some of you among them – who believe firmly, even fervently in the power of prayer to effect change: to bring about what might be called miraculous healing in oneself or others, to make change in the world that otherwise might not be possible.

One of you attested to me to precisely such an experience, believing you had been brought back from death by the prayers of others surrounding and holding you.

I do not judge such an experience, even though I've never had one myself. But who knows? The world is a complex place with more mystery than not. I close no doors. Indeed there are some very intriguing scientific studies exploring the power of prayer. I close no doors.

I've also spoken with others who have affirmed that whomever might be listening up or out there, and whatever other effect prayer might have, it most certainly brings them greater peace or clarity. The prayer from our heart's longing perhaps simply renewing our connection to our heart's love, renewing our connection too to the reality that though we might feel alone we are not alone, since everyone is connected through the heart's love. And sometimes we may just need to pause and find rest in that love, that center... the reality in which we live and move and have our being... that some call God. St. Augustine put it simply in traditional Christian language (you can translate for yourselves): "Everlasting God... our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

And so in the reading we heard earlier, Ann and Barry Ulanov affirmed that everyone prays, whether or not they call it prayer. We pray with our whole selves from our hearts, from who we most deeply are – through what we might call prayer or we might call our hopes or we might call wishes or dreams. We pray – in whatever form – from that longing.

Yet, in spite of maybe not knowing where the prayer goes or who or what might be listening, maybe we also do, paradoxically for the agnostics and especially the atheists among us, pray as a way to be listened to. Because we all need to be listened to, to be heard, really heard. Our hearts and souls can shrivel if we feel we are not heard, that no one is listening, that it's as if we hardly exist.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the parents out to dinner with their four-year-old son. The waitress is an old hand, hospitable but firm. She takes the parents' orders and then turns to the boy.

"And what would you like?"

"A hot dog!" he replies.

"No," says his father. "He will not have a hot dog. He will have the chicken with rice and spinach."

The waitress doesn't miss a beat. "And what would you like on your hot dog?"

The boy is amazed! "Lots of ketchup, and a pickle too."

"Got it," she says, turning from the table without a glance at the nonplussed parents.

The boy looks up at his parents and says, "Wow! She thinks I'm real!"

(adapted as told in *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* by Daniel O.S.B. Homan and Lonni Collins)

Maybe prayer, too, helps us to feel real, in fact to be real, because however mysterious the question of where prayer goes, we may still have the feeling that it goes somewhere, somewhere or to someone who doesn't judge us, who doesn't care whether we are young or old, whether we are whole or broken, who just listens as that waitress *listened* to the boy.

Which can be everything.

Which might mean that whatever particular form our prayer takes – whether it is more of a meditation than a prayer, or a simple expression of a hope or a wish, whether it is for the well-being of ourselves or someone else, whatever it might be *for*, perhaps every prayer comes from a longing of the heart (here is another way of putting that longing...) to be heard... and so to feel once again connected to the family of life, not alone, not having to do everything ourselves, not having to carry the burden unassisted.

As Wendell Berry has written, in words that catch me, stop me, hold me every time I hear them, “Not by your will is the house carried through the night.” Our small self, our egoistic self, cannot control everything. We must let go – at least sometimes – into something larger, call it God if you will, or call it the Tao, the eternal way, or call it our larger Self, the Self of compassion that knows we are part of an interwoven fabric of life, not an isolated soul.

Yes, from my heart “I pray the Lord (cosmos, universe, Tao)... I pray the Lord my soul... and yours... and everyone’s... to keep...”

Yes, whatever else prayer is, however prayer might or might not be effective beyond our skin... prayer – from the heart (where else?)... prayer by whatever name can transform our weakness into strength, our despair into hope, our loneliness into communion, our isolation into love, making us feel once again *real* and held, once again opening our heart – which may be the most important result of all, the real pay-off... a heart once again open.

So that’s the longing... a kind of circle: Love longs for a heart open to love.

So may it be.