

MAKE OF YOUR LIFE A PRAYER
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Once two Unitarian Universalists were having a heated theological discussion. One said, “Unitarians are so badly educated when it come to the Bible, I can’t believe it.”

“We are not,” the other argued back.

“Oh yeah?” said the first UU. “I’ll bet you can’t even recite the Lord’s Prayer,” and slammed down a five dollar bill.

His religious fellow-traveler slammed down his own fiver and recited:

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

The first UU shrugged and said, “You win.” (Foss, 5)

I dedicate this morning’ service to my mother, Peg Phillips, who died on November 7, at the age of 84. Mom was proud of the Unitarian Universalist side of the family—a good friend to this congregation—but was certainly not above a little poking of fun, for she loved to laugh. She also loved prayer and wrestled with the subject.

I invite you to gently let go of any preconceived notions you have about the subject. “Prayer” comes in many forms, and we pray for many reasons. However we go about it, it simply expresses the universal human need to be mindful of the incomprehensible Mystery that represents the Highest Good, calling us to respond with our best selves.

There are so many, many ways of addressing the Great Whatever It Is. Let me share a few with you. Perhaps, if a term arises that gives you an allergic reaction, you can substitute: Holy and Haunting Presence—Kindly Light—World Invisible—Eternal Spirit—Divine Master—Earth Mother, Star Mother—Grandfather/mother—Marvelous Truth—Spirit of Community—Adonai—Compassionate Lord—Spirit of Life and Renewal—Wonderful Weaver of the World. Some leave out naming the object being addressed, and say “May I/we....” or “Let us....”

And some simply say “Thou,” that intimate second-person address, as used in the prayer from India we heard earlier in the service:

Thou art the path
and goal that paths never reach.
Thou feedest and sustainest
all that one sees, or seems.
Thou art the trembling grass
and the tiger that creeps under it.

Thou art the light in sun and moon,
the sounds fading into silence, and the sanctity of sacred books.
Thou art the good that destroys evil. (*Singing the Living Tradition*, #523)

At our best, we recognize the oneness of everything. We understand ourselves to be part of something greater than we—collectively or individually—will ever understand on this earth. And so we pray for mindfulness. We pray for awareness of the Great Pattern. We know that paying attention will draw us closer to the place we want to live. Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes:

That morning we drove to the field (air field); excited faces around of those who had already been up. I kept saying over and over to myself, “God, let me be conscious of it! Let me be conscious of what is happening. Let me realize it and feel it vividly. Let not the consciousness of the event (as it happens so often) come to tardily, so that I half miss the experience. Let me be conscious of it!” (Klug, 31)

When we are conscious, we find wonder and glory in all kinds of things, and we are grateful. In the chaos of my last two weeks, grieving and adjusting and working like a dog with my family to get everything done that had to be done, I was struck over and over and over by the fabulousness of the world. A scattering of small maple leaves on the still-autumn ground, green and gold and red and yellow and orange. The dear face of a friend beloved for decades, who became desperately ill while I was in Seattle. My daughter’s laughter as we shared one of our wry family jokes. The miracle of my mother’s unquenchable life force. The warmth of a funny little house that has seen so much creativity and uproar and affection and life and death and affirmation and liveliness. My gratitude rose up time and again, only to be magnified when I got home to all of you.

Frederick Ohler is (was?) a Presbyterian minister who wrote startling prayers. He exhorts us about gratitude in no uncertain terms:

“Thank you for a nice evening—
we must do it again, sometime.”
“Thanks for the present—it was very nice.”
“Sincerely yours....”
“Thank You God, for health, for life, for whatever...amen.”

O God, who of us does not mouth such
kempt
precedented
underwhelming gratuities?
Who of us doesn’t sense how very shallow they are?
For even we
have known those moments
those shining experiences
when gratitude was not a stifling obligation

but an ecstatic necessity
a joy
a delight
when our very souls were grateful
to be alive
to learn
to love
to wonder
to say “AH!” (Ohler, 31)

Gratitude for all creation, deep and abiding.

But... Sometimes we simply do not have what it takes to be grateful, or perhaps even aware. Sometimes, in the lives of human beings, we are in the darkness and must depend upon faith and the kindness of others, in order to make it through. Sometimes, our hearts and souls are lost. When that happens, we can only pray for comfort and strength, for guidance on the path toward living once again in the light. Saint Anselm, venerable church father, wrote:

Lord, if thou art not present, where shall I seek thee absent? If everywhere, why do I not see thee present? Thou dwellest in light inaccessible; and where is that inaccessible light? or how shall I have access to light inaccessible? I beseech thee, Lord, teach me to seek thee, and show thyself to the seeker; because I can neither seek thee, unless thou teach me, nor find thee, unless thou show thyself to me: let me seek thee in desiring thee, and desire thee in seeking thee: let me find thee in loving thee, and love thee in finding thee. (Church, 20)

In our despairs and pain, we pray for knowledge of how to live our way through to the other side.

Unfortunately, sometimes we are the agents of our own misfortune. Sometimes we opt for the shadow side of Creation. When that is so, when we have behaved or thought or hoped meanly, we turn to the time-honored prayer of confession. This one is definitely not big with UUs. But we are approximately as good and as bad as the rest of the world, and therefore approximately as much in need of facing our transgressions as are other, more “traditionally” religious people. Rev. Ohler again:

O God, it is easy to pray for “mankind” and “the world”
to anguish about the great problems
to confess humanity’s faults
global sins
international stupidities.
It is costless to confess my sins
if I keep my prayer comfortably vague
piously general
if I never get closer than
“We have all sinned and fallen short of Your glory.”

Help me to confess
only that sin which I have committed
which I honestly would get off my soul's back
for which I am responsible
refusing the easy alibis of original sin
Freudian determinism
or "The Devil made me do it."
I don't know if the world has conspired against love—
I have conspired against love.
I have hated
I have killed
and I have tried to come clean
to own up
to quit faking it.

Give me Your answer
not in the easy absolution of assured pardon
but later today
and tomorrow
in the fabric of my changing life.
I don't want cheap grace;
I do pray for Your costly mercy
for Christ's sake

amen (Ohler, 72)

When we have looked, prayerfully, through the "whole catastrophe" of being human—and also part of the Divine—we genuinely begin to live our prayers. We pay attention, feeling closer to the Source of All. We find delight in creation, and we say "Thanks, Whoever You Are." We summon the courage to look at the shadow side of our goodness, those things we did not do that we should have, those things we did that we should not have done. As we do this, ever striving to remain in contact with the Great I Am, we see with our heart's eyes that we are here to contribute to the harmony of existence. Our soul recognizes that one of our duties as sojourners on this earth is to be part of making things better. Our Unitarian forefather, Theodore Parker, said:

O thou who coverest thyself with light as with a garment, shine thou in us, putting to flight all the forces of darkness and guilt, of sin and selfishness. Shine also through us to any that live in shadow and so fill us with thy radiant spirit that we may be a lamp unto a neighbor's feet and a light unto his path. And when this day is done, may every face we have met be the brighter for our meeting, and every heart braver, with new joy and cheer and grace and strength. (Church, 82)

Parker live his life embodying that radiant spirit, preaching and practicing justice, equality and compassion.

Poet Arthur Waskow lifts Parker's prayer into a twentieth-century context, also evoking images of light:

We are the generation that stands between the fires:
behind us the flame and smoke
that rose from Auschwitz and from Hiroshima;
before us the nightmare of a Flood of Fire,
the flame and smoke that consume all Earth.
It is our task to make from fire not an all-consuming blaze
but the light in which we see each other fully.
All of us different,
all of us bearing One Spark.
We light these fires to see more clearly
that the Earth and all who live as part of it
are not for burning.
We light these fires to see more clearly
the rainbow in our many-colored faces.

Blessed is the One within the many,
Blessed are the Many who make one. (Roberts, 105)

The prophet Mohammed understood:

What actions are
most excellent?

To gladden the heart
of a human being.
To feed the hungry.
To help the afflicted.
To lighten the sorrow
of the sorrowful.
To remove the wrongs
of the injured.
That person is the
most beloved of God
who does most good
to God's creatures. (Roberts, 109)

Poet Denise Levertov aches for the communion that heals and makes whole. She sees the awfulness and the radiance, the terrible brokenness and the hope for transfiguration:

But we have only begun
to love the earth.

We have only begun
to imagine the fulness of life

How could we tire of hope?
--so much is in the bud.

How can desire fail?
--we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast
and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done
to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we
would join
our solitudes in the
communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud. (Roberts,
117)

A Buddhist pray-er speaks of being in the world as a process of trying to live
one's prayers:

As no one desires the slightest suffering
nor ever has enough of happiness,
there is no difference between myself and others,
so let me make others joyfully happy.

.....

For as long as space endures
and for as long as living beings remain,
until then may I too abide
to dispel the misery of the world. (Roberts, 121)

And so, this morning, let us pray:

Fountain of Life, Dear Weaver of Our Heart's Design, we turn to you in the
complete embodiment of human joy and woe. Each of us brings our fullness, our
generously-springing spirits and our meanly-crawling little selves; each of us asks
humbly for holy insight, that we may incline toward creation and not destruction.

Some of us are tired, sick, mad, grieving, wishing this particular day or week or
year or month would just get on with it and be over. For us, we ask the wisdom to know

when to cry and when to fight and when to ask for help; we ask for the strength to endure with grace.

Some of us are vibrant and whole and open and rejoicing, praise be to The Mystery. For us, we ask full consciousness of our time's good fortune, that we may give thanks, that we may cheer, cajole and succor our sisters and brothers.

All of us are in need of Thee, Great Whatever You Are. May we live as though we know this truth. May we live gratefully, with open ears and eyes and hearts. May we feel in our bones the call to heal the world. May we live our lives as a prayer.

May it be so.

Sources consulted

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