

From the Heart – What Prayer Means to Me by Connie Skidmore

When I was a child, I would have conversations with God much like conversations with anyone in my family...except that they were one way conversations. It was like me telling God what I wanted the plan for my life to be, and God being this great big Ear that listened to my prattling without judgment. I had all the confidence in the world that I was heard and things were taken care of. As I look back, I would say my understanding was innocent.

When I became a Christian, I began to pay more attention to prayer. I became what I call "churched". I was told that the only valid community prayers were the ones printed in the Book of Common Prayer. Also, I began to ask and to expect answers because that was the example I was given. I found out that often there were no answers or at least not the answers I expected. I was both confused and rebellious.

I reasoned that if God is unconditional love, then I could be totally honest. I expressed anger and begged when I was troubled. Sometimes everything seemed to come out at once in one prolonged conversation. At one point I was working on the road away from my spouse and feeling very lonely. I bought a book titled *Prayer Works: True Stories of Answered Prayer*, which introduced me to Silent Unity, a group that is available 24/7 for free confidential prayer support. I called their 800 number. A kind person asked about my needs and spent several minutes with me in prayer. The Unity approach is based on positive prayers that have very broad appeal. After you call, they continue to pray for you for 30 days. Every time I've called them, within 30 days something has happened to affect what I was praying about in a positive way. I learned from this that when you set aside your own dictates and pray open-endedly in an expectant posture, something positive can happen.

When I was in college, I had a friend who used this affirmation:

The light of God surrounds me.
The love of God enfolds me.
The power of God protects me.
The presence of God watches over me.
Wherever I am, God is,
Closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet.

It turns out this affirmation is part of a Silent Unity prayer. As I began to interact with Silent Unity, it came back into my life. Now it's a staple of my prayer practice.

Praying has shown me that my physical being is a part God's physical presence in the world. This makes me responsible for aligning myself with God, or unconditional love, as much as I can and extending that as a positive influence in the physical world.

My best friend keeps a gratitude journal. Each night she enters five things from the day that she is thankful for. I liked the idea, but I am not a journal keeper, so I started just saying thank you every night for things that happened during the day. Then I read about people who wake up every morning thankful for another day. I guess the older you get the more than makes sense, but I liked that idea too, and so I started doing it as often as I could remember before my insistent cats, my feline alarm clocks, demanded their breakfast. The only way you can genuinely express gratitude is with humility. I recognize that there is something bigger going on here than just me and my needs.

Prayer is a place where I have to be my genuine self, honestly relating all of my moods be they appreciation, love or gratitude; disappointment or anger. When I seek a place of confidence in and cooperation with God's loving action in the world, I can be thankful that I do not have to go it alone. There is no magic formula to prayer. It is the expression of a relationship. After all these years, it's still just a conversation with God.