

The Language of the Heart

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell
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READING

We reflect this morning on prayer. So easily, we assume that prayer is about asking a God, “up there,” to reach down and intervene in our lives and grant our wishes.

Prayer is so much more than that, this comes close to a caricature.

Prayer, for me, begins with gratitude. It need not assume any God at all, except perhaps one we experience deep within our hearts.

*Let me read first from a little classic called *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer*, published in 1984. The author is Brother David Steindl-Rast, an Austrian who is now a member of a Benedictine monastery in Elmira, NY. He has become especially known, like Thomas Merton, for his efforts to bring together Christian and Zen Buddhist spirituality.*

In a chapter called “Heart and Mind,” he describes the heart as “the taproot of the whole person.” The heart, he says, is “our meeting place with God in prayer.”

But then he turns to the many of us who are not comfortable with the concepts of God we have learned, and of prayer. Psalm 42 may declare that “As a deer yearns for running streams, so does my soul thirst for God, the living God.” But, he says:¹

¹Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 32-35.

Lucky the psalmist who could give a name to what our soul is yearning for. But what name should we use now? Today many whose thirst is no less burning will not use the name “God” because of those of us who do use it. We have abused it and confused them. Can we find another name for that which gives rest to our heart?

The term “meaning” suggests itself. When we find meaning in life, then we find rest. . . . Meaning is simply that within which we find rest. But so is the heart. It seems to be a contradiction. . . . When our heart rests in the Source of all meaning, it can encompass all meaning. Meaning, in this sense, is not something that can be put into words. . . . Meaning is not something that can be grasped, held, stored away. Meaning is not something. . . . Maybe we should stop the sentence there. Meaning is no thing. It is more like the light in which we see things. . . . When we find meaning, we know it because our heart finds rest. It is always through our heart that we find meaning. Just as our eyes respond to light and our ears to sound, so our heart responds to meaning. The organ for meaning is the heart. . . .

In prayer, the heart drinks from the fountain of meaning.

SERMON

I want to offer this morning a humanist understanding of prayer. Oxymoron? Only with a very narrow understanding of both “humanist” and “prayer.”

My purpose this morning is to invite us to stretch our understanding of both terms. Do we really understand each other when we speak of “prayer”? Have we explored it deeply? Let’s reflect together.

Perhaps a few of you share my habit of reading the comic pages. The strip called “One Big Happy,” some years ago, pictured little Ruthie saying her bedtime prayers. Eyes closed and kneeling, she puts her palms together. Then she reaches

over her head, and turns this way and that. Her mother looks in and says, “Ruthie, what are you doing?” Ruthie replies: “Trying to get better reception.”

I think that fits the images of prayer, and God, with which many of us have grown up: God is up there, far away, and prayer is about asking Him (it was always “him”) to reach down and intervene in our lives. That would take pretty good reception.

This morning I want to offer us an understanding that is at the same time simpler and in my view, consistent with a humanist world view. I invite us to reframe our idea of prayer to focus less on God and more on ourselves, and each other. This approach to prayer does not ask that we speak of God at all. It certainly does not ask that we address the kind of supernatural, otherworldly God we learned in Sunday School.

I don’t suggest that anyone *should* pray. But I think that many of us do pray in the sense that I use the word, and others wish they could pray but feel constrained by doubts about God. I hope we can become comfortable enough with thinking about prayer in this very humanistic way to be able to talk about it, and even join in it. Our faith tradition has never been afraid to rethink traditional ideas. I hope that we can do so with prayer, as well. I can testify that it is an understanding that can go a long way in helping us escape the sense of existential aloneness in the universe which modernity has brought us.

What then might prayer mean for us, today, as children of the Enlightenment now facing the 21st century? Recalling that a free and open search for meaning is one of our foundational “Seven Principles,” as Unitarian Universalists, how might a fresh understanding of prayer help us to find meaning in our often uprooted urban lives, and to feel spiritually at home in the universe?

Prayer, for me, is not about magic. It's not about the supernatural. It is not anti-intellectual, but opens us to a deeper dimension of our lives. Some would call it the subconscious, others might call it the spiritual. Whatever we call this deeper dimension, prayer begins with an attitude – an attitude of emptying, opening and deep listening.

A prayerful attitude seeks to let go of our need to be in control; to let go of our pride in our ability, through the intellect alone, to run our lives; to let go of our busy-ness and agendas. It's an attitude of trust in life to guide us, strengthen us, and sometimes to comfort us and even save us. Even when we also ask, it's as often about helping us to let go and trust in life, as about seeking special favors.

“A” prayer, as opposed to prayer in general, is a particular form of prayer, in words, or even in body language or simple silence, which we use in seeking that relationship toward life. It invites us into awareness, and often seeks strength and comfort. It can also be a vehicle for lifting up our hopes and surfacing our fears, while drawing out our caring for others. It can be addressed to God, or the Spirit of Life, or, if you will, to whom it may concern.

I distinguish between prayer and “a prayer” to help us see prayer not just as an occasional recharging of our batteries, in a special, set-aside time, but in addition as an ongoing way of life. That's a goal we may never fully achieve, but with even modest success, it can enrich our lives as we begin to let go of our need to control, to find fault, to worry, and concentrate instead on the positive challenge of how we live our own lives.

Looked at this way, it seems to me especially helpful to see prayer, as Brother David does, as beginning not with asking, but with the cultivation of gratefulness – gratefulness for so many things, so much that we did not create, as we open ourselves to the surprise of discovering beauty all around us, feeling a

fresh awareness of our blessings. This is the foundation of an attitude of prayer, of prayer as a way of life. Prayer, for Brother David, is simply “grateful living.”²

We go through so much of our lives with tunnel vision, preoccupied or oblivious. We so easily assume that we already know what’s there – we’ve passed this way a thousand times. I’m sure that you, like me, have had the experience of driving with our eyes on the road ahead, or walking with our minds somewhere else, then being caught up short. “Look!” we cry out: “a rainbow!” Or a cardinal or great flock of migrating geese, or a tree ablaze with autumn foliage. Sometimes in the early morning as I walk my dog, it has been a sudden delight as my eye catches the first colors of the sunrise.

Harder, for some of us, may be opening ourselves to the inner beauty of people. The Trappist Thomas Merton once spoke of being on an errand for his monastery one day, and standing on a city street corner gazing at a crowd of people. Suddenly, they seemed to him aglow with light, as if they basked in a collective halo. And then it was gone. Now and then, this feeling has come to me, as I’ve sat beside a hospital bed, or looked out over a congregation, or sometimes as for a magical moment I’ve sensed the spark of the divine in another person. At moments like this, I think of our hymn, which sings of being –

*Surprised by joy no song can tell/no thought can compass/here we stand
to celebrate eternal love/to reach for one another’s hand.*

Perhaps growing out of his experience of sharing his spiritual journey with Buddhist monks, perhaps thinking of people like you and me, Brother David adds, in words that might describe you and me, that –

²Ibid., p. 59.

Even people whose world view does not include a divine Giver to whom thanks can be directed often experience deep gratitude in these moments. They experience it no less strongly than others, even though their gratefulness gets mailed without an address, so to say.³

We have been speaking of special moments of surprise, yet it is not a contradiction to think of experiencing all of our lives as a constant, joyful surprise. Thomas Kelly, a 20th century Quaker philosopher who taught at Earlham and Haverford colleges, called this way of living “Life from the Center” – the center of our being, where we experience what Quakers call the Inner Light. “One can,” he wrote, “live in a well-nigh continuous state of unworded prayer, directed toward God, directed toward people and enterprises we have on our heart.” As we grow in this ability, “we cannot keep the love of God to ourselves. It spills over. . . . It makes us see the world’s needs anew. . . . [We] . . . relove our neighbors as ourselves.”⁴

Of special interest to us in our intensely busy lives, this way of living does not take more time, but actually simplifies our lives. We learn to say Yes or No to the calls made upon our time and energy, not on the basis of “heady decisions,” but “on the basis of inner guidance and whispered promptings . . . from the Center of our life.” In this way, Kelly concluded, “Life from the Center . . . takes no time, but it occupies all our time.”

Perhaps no one ever succeeds completely in achieving this way of life. It is rather a spiritual image which beckons to us from afar, as it gradually opens us toward an ever growing awareness of the beauty which surrounds us. Elizabeth Barrett Browning described it in these familiar words:

³Ibid., p. 87.

⁴Thomas R. Kelly, A Testament of Devotion (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 122.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

An attitude of prayer as our way of life means seeing both the blackberries, and the “bush afire with God,” with beauty. Seeing the world with fresh eyes, we would have moved from prayer as an act, to prayer as becoming more aware, more alive.

It is this image of prayer as “becoming,” as changing our lives, that leads me now to the question of petitionary prayer, which has turned off so many of us from even thinking of prayer. If prayer begins in gratefulness for the beauty and divine possibility in everything and everyone, what can it have to do with our petitions? How, anyway, can we expect divine intervention in a rational universe? How would prayer as asking fit into a life lived as prayer?

Sorely tempted as I was during the football play-offs last year to pray for my Baltimore Ravens to prevail in the playoffs, and reach the Super Bowl, I resisted. Still, I wonder if there have not been some prayers offered even here in this Williamsburg congregation for the Redskins, who in recent years have seemed to need all the prayers they can get. I do confess that I sometimes pray as I navigate the relentless traffic of our interstate highways. I still have a vivid memory of praying years ago as I found myself white-knuckled in an airplane tossed wildly in a violent thunderstorm in these very skies: Please, God, see us safely to the ground. I have prayed as I lay in a hospital emergency room, with a heart attack. Please God, see me through this, be with me, guide the hands of these doctors and nurses.

Do I expect God somehow to save me? No, though of course I'd like it. But I profoundly need to share my fear and my hope with the universe, along with my longing for assurance. I'm talking to that place deep within my heart where I

experience my oneness with the universe, with God. I don't think about it – not at times like those -- I just do it.

At the other extreme, when I'm calm and collected, I may still offer a prayer which asks – not to be rescued from danger, but for guidance, or discernment. I pray, not for God to do what I want, but that I might do what God wants, or in humanist language, get in touch with the best that is within me, and either way, to find the courage to do it. I pray that I might be changed, and I have found that the experience of praying in itself begins to change me.

And in between, if my child or grandchild were serving in a war zone, I'm sure that I would pray for them, just because my heart cries out.

How can I ask these things, as a rational Unitarian Universalist? I will tell you that when my head cannot explain things, I'm likely to let my heart run ahead while my head takes the time it needs to catch up, one way or another.

So far I have spoken of private prayer. Public prayer, I think, serves much the same purposes, in calling us into deeper awareness of the relationships of our lives, and reminding us of those we care about. It, too, can change us. But it has the special added power which comes from sharing our caring, openly, in each other's presence. It has been said that public prayer for others is caring, made visible.

As we close, my prayer for all of us is that, if we feel the longing to pray, we will be able to get past our intellectual suspicion that we don't know about this God business, don't know how prayer works, and past the embarrassment that we may feel at the very thought of prayer.

I hope that we will find inspiration from little Ruthie, and find a way to pray that leads us into a place so close to our hearts that we will not have any trouble finding good reception for that still, small voice which we experience deep within us, however we may name it. After all, in the words of A. Powell Davies, so admired for both his spiritual depth and his fearless public ministry in our nation's capital in the 1940s and 1950s, prayer is simply "the language of the heart." And we all have hearts.

Will you join me, then, in a spirit of prayer:

*Spirit of Life in whom we all are one,
Open our eyes to the beauty in which we live.
Open our hearts to your still small voice within us.
Open our minds to the wonder of creation.
May we live in prayerful gratitude for all that is our life.*