

ON A WING AND A PRAYER

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What does it mean to pray?

To many, it means having a conversation with a supernatural being—a being powerful enough to change things in the world and yet still personal enough to listen to you. That conversation can take many forms—expressing thanks, asking for help, participating in a time-honored ritual. The conversation can be extraordinarily one-sided, and yet there is the expectation that somehow, somewhere, there will be a response.

To many, prayer necessarily involves a supernatural God.

But does prayer *have* to mean this?

If I thought it did, my sermon would be quite brief. And I know that for many of you, your attention to my sermon would be even briefer. I know, from the conversations I've already had, that there are some here who wince at the notion of "prayer" because of its traditional connotations, and I hope that today we can begin to move past that narrow view of this particular piece of religious language.

My intention today is to let you know what I mean when I use the word "prayer," and to challenge you to claim that word as something that fits within your own view of the world, be your theology theist or atheist (or committed agnostic), mystic or naturalist, Buddhist or Christian or Jewish or pagan, or, well, none of the above.

I have long since reconciled a prayer life with a theology that does not include a supernatural God. And while I'm comfortable using the word God to refer to forces within our natural world, I don't think that even that much is necessary for prayer.

What, then, is?

Barbara Merritt gives us one interpretation, one that is certainly compatible with a more traditional sense of theism: that prayer is focusing our attention on love and trust. As she puts it, trusting both "what is 'out there' and what is 'inside.'"

[Barbara Merritt, "Love Knows You" from the UUA meditation manual Amethyst Beach]

In this case, the limitations of the spoken word become apparent: in her meditation, Merritt puts both terms—"out there" and "inside"—in quotation marks, letting us know that the dichotomy is a false one. That what might be traditionally thought of as a power outside of us might well be the power inside of us after all.

Prayer, then, can be trusting what is within us, and speaking to that place—that still, small voice within us—that gives us the strength to carry on. Prayer can be nurturing a sense of connectedness with all of being that lets us know that we can take the next step in our journey.

Prayer can be a way for us to let go a little bit, to free ourselves of the heavy responsibility we feel for fixing all that is broken around us. It can be the practice of allowing ourselves to be held by a loving universe as we calm and center ourselves.

And while Merritt allows for the possibility that there is a power greater than we are in this universe, she doesn't insist that it's a supernatural power. In fact, she interprets this power simply as love.

Douglas Wood, in his beautiful children's book, gives us another view of prayer.

"Each living thing gives its life to the beauty of all life, and that gift is its prayer," Wood writes in telling the story of a grandfather's lessons to a young boy about prayer. [Douglas Wood, *Granddad's Prayers of the Earth*]

In deep conversations during long walks in the woods, the boy in Wood's book learns from his granddad that nature is full of the prayers of the Earth. He learns that prayer unites us all with the sacred beauty of being. He learns that he is connected to the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and that those connections are greater than any individual, or any moment—great enough to take on unbelievable burdens, or to transcend the pain of grief.

To Douglas Wood, prayer is an extension of being—it is what we are doing in living our lives, just as trees grow towards the sun and streams dance around rocks and flowers release their scent into the air to attract the insects that will pollinate them.

And nowhere in that notion of prayer is a supernatural God.

My own relationship with prayer changed dramatically a few years ago. While some of you might have read this story in my ministerial packet, allow me to share it with those of you who did not.

In 2004, I spent sixteen weeks working as a hospital chaplain. That time was the most intense and formative period I have experienced as a minister. In the hospital, I learned to summon the strength to be present in moments of intense pain and grief, to find ways of renewing my spirit when I thought it impossible to have the strength to respond to even one more request for my ministry, and to put my own theology aside when it seemed like it was interfering with my ability to listen to someone else.

And I learned a lot about prayer.

One of the hardest aspects of the chaplaincy program was being asked by patients and family members to pray for and with them. It wasn't the prayer itself that made me uncomfortable. Rather, it was the act of praying, out loud, for something, for someone. The act of asking for intercession in a sick person's life.

I struggled with this. Even the ability to put my beliefs about God and prayer on the shelf in order to care for people who needed me did not help much. I struggled, but I prayed. Dozens of times a day sometimes. I prayed the prayers that people wanted to have said, in a language that I could feel comfortable with. But something didn't seem right—I was still asking for things.

And then I met John. John's nurse, without giving me any further details, had suggested to me that though she wasn't sure if he would be willing to talk to me, she thought that perhaps he could use to talk to a chaplain. Having learned to listen to recommendations like this, I entered his room and introduced myself. I was not sure what was going on, or what I would be able to do.

John—not his real name—was a patient in his sixties who had a progressive disease that was making it harder and harder for him to move and function normally. He was at a point where it was becoming difficult to swallow food, making it probable that he would need a tube inserted into his stomach—at least temporarily—for feeding purposes. John had just moved to North Carolina from the Midwest, and had counted on being able to help support his daughter and young grandson in their life here.

When I met John, he was absolutely despondent. He was not quite sure if he wanted to live. He was struggling with the decision over the feeding tube. He was, however, willing to talk, so we did. We talked about his family, and the grief and guilt he still harbored from his mother's death years earlier. We talked about his illness, and his reluctance to ask his daughter to take care of him. We marveled at the fact that a good friend of mine works in the small town in rural Wisconsin where he was from. We talked about his own religious beliefs, and the fact that he sometimes questioned the existence of a God who would forgive him for all of the things he felt he had done wrong.

And then he asked me to pray. So I did. I prayed that he be surrounded by unconditional love. I prayed that he feel strength and comfort, and that he make peace in the relationships he was worrying himself about—with his deceased mother, with his living daughter, with himself. After I finished, a broad smile made its way across his face, and his eyes lit up with gratitude. He thanked me out loud, and I left, promising to stop back by the next day.

When I did that, I found a different man than the one I had seen just 24 hours before. John told me that my visit had changed his outlook on life, that he believed that God had sent me in his time of great despair. He told me that he had already discussed his treatment plan with his daughter, and they had agreed that he would have the tube put in.

He not only wanted to live, he saw in his life some of the possibility that had existed before the diagnosis: the possibility that he could contribute to the lives of his daughter and grandson, and not be a burden on them, the possibility that he could love and be loved, the possibility that someone needed him—or wanted him—to be there.

Maybe it was a good night's sleep that he needed. Perhaps it was just some time to think things over. I prefer to think that what he needed was prayer. I'm not going to claim that an intervening God came in and changed his life. Nor am I, certainly, going to take credit for doing what any person willing to be present with John could not have done.

But it occurred to me that as I was praying with my words, John was praying with his ears. He was listening, and in receiving the prayer that I had offered to him, he understood that I had been there with him—that we were in relationship in that moment. He understood his connection to his daughter and grandson, and the connection that death could not break between him and his mother. He was praying with his ears, and I was answering him.

My visits with John changed my outlook on prayer in the hospital. No longer was I petitioning on behalf of my patients and their families to a supernatural God whom I did not believe in, but I was talking directly to the patients and family members themselves. Showing that someone cared enough to listen. Giving them strength to face their illness or injury, or the illness or death of their loved one.

I was not, in fact, the one that was praying at all—they were. I was just the one who was speaking.

For years, I have made prayer part of my own spiritual practice. As regularly as I am able, I set aside time to sit in what I call contemplative prayer.

In this time, I think about the relationships I have with others—with those close to me, with those I serve, with those whom I know are going through tough times, and with those far away whom I will likely never meet. I think about my connections to the world around me, and focus attention on where those relationships are broken. I think about how I am living my life in relationship to others, and how I might do that better.

If this doesn't sound to you like a traditional prayer practice, that's probably because it isn't.

I have come to believe in prayer not as requests from a person in the sky, but rather prayers that express intention and connections to the universe. This is in keeping with my view of God as the potential bound in relationships.

It is with this belief that I developed this prayer practice, centering and calming myself each day with thoughts of my connections to other beings. My morning prayers are silent, not spoken, they are intentions and not requests.

When I pray, I am talking to myself. I am reminding myself of the relationships that I am a part of. I am expressing my intention to live in right relationship with an ever-widening circle of being. I am reminding myself of my connection to something greater than I am.

And that might be the closest I come to a traditional understanding of prayer as something directed towards God.

I believe that prayer requires of us an understanding that we, as individuals, are not the ultimate thing in the universe. We are not the pinnacle of all being; no individual possesses everything that it needs for life.

Whether you choose to call that which is greater than you are “God,” or “Spirit of Life,” or “the interdependent web of existence” or the power of human beings in relationship with one another, I believe we can all benefit from recognizing that we, alone, are not all there is to life and living.

Human beings need relationships in order to survive. This is a physical fact—even those who live by themselves, isolated from human community, need to be in relationship with the Earth and its cycles, with the sun and rain, with the plants and animals, in order to live.

This is also an emotional, psychological and spiritual reality. Whether our need for relationships is an expression of the connections of our soul, the actualization of our evolutionary potential or the result of complex biochemical pathways, it exists.

And so, we can't live in a vacuum. We must recognize our connection to other beings with whom we share a universe. We must, at some point, recognize our dependence—our interdependence—on all that is around us.

Once we've recognized this dependence, we can learn to trust. And in trusting, we can pray.

W.E.B. Du Bois is quoted in our hymnal as having written that “The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.”

Our being calls out for connection. For persistence in the relationships we spend time building. For building upon what others have created. For a life worth living.

Our being calls out for recognition of our presence, for gratitude for each new morning and for an acknowledgement that we have meant something to others.

Douglas Wood writes that “each living thing gives its life to the beauty of all life, and that gift is its prayer.”

Like the tree reaching for the sun, like the waters splashing their way to the sea, like the bird greeting the dawn with a song, our being calls out for prayer.