

Prayer and the Liberal Religious Spirit

A Sermon by the Rev. Makaanah Elizabeth Morriss

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“Spirit of Life, energy and Mystery of the Cosmos, come unto me.” Words of naming, of knowing, of listening and of loving – all in one song, a song which may seem like a meditation, maybe even a prayer.

Prayer and the liberal religious spirit – hmm...you may be thinking, that sounds like a pretty big leap.

For some of us the word “prayer” has negative memories and connotations reminding us of religious experiences that were neither empowering nor inspiring. For others of us the word “prayer” is positive because our memories and experience is that times of prayer brought us a sense of peace and hope, courage and commitment. And for still others of us “prayer” is neither especially negative or positive – it may not have much meaning for us personally but it also does not push old buttons.

Since my family growing up was not much into religion, prayer was not something I knew much about. We did not say “grace” before dinner unless it was Thanksgiving. My parents did not talk about prayer and I never heard or saw them pray. My father’s belief in reason and the results of science was much clearer to me than what his beliefs were in relation to a Supreme Being. The findings of astronomy and physics seemed to be more pertinent to understanding the origin of life than stories of Creation in Genesis.

My mother taught us that God was a loving God. She did not like confessional kinds of creeds or prayers which invited guilt at all. She taught us that prayer should be simple and heartfelt and not selfish (as in asking for a particular thing). I felt at a disadvantage at times since I really had very little idea of how to pray the way some of my friends who were Catholic or Episcopalian did. Praying always seemed like some kind of foreign or maybe I should say “cosmic” language that our family did not speak. It was for me a missing part of my life growing up.

Erik Wikstrom, Unitarian Universalist minister and author of a new book, *Simply Pray*, suggests that prayer to the religious liberal is an activity with many possible forms by which we experience ourselves connecting and re-connecting to the source of our lives, that Sacred Mystery “in which we live, and move, and have our being.” And as Unitarian Universalists how we define, name and experience this “sacred mystery” is up to each one of us.

For Wikstrom, prayer connects with the liberal religious spirit as we let ourselves experience life fully and mindfully. He writes, “Build your theology on your experience, rather than the other way around. Define the divine for yourself through your own experiences rather than seeking experiences that match someone else’s definition...”

“If you long to connect with the Sacred, if you desire to live a life that is more in touch with the Holy, stop listening for something and start simply listening. If you have given up on an anthropomorphic deity, yet can’t figure out what to put in its place, stop looking for something and simply start looking around you. Notice those places in your life where you have felt yourself in the presence of the Holy, remember those experiences in which you have heard your connectedness; seek in your own life – your own feelings, your own moments – those places you have encountered or are

encountering the Sacred.” (Wikstrom, *Simply Pray*, p.5)

This kind of listening, this kind of looking, this kind of seeking, this sense of connection – all of this is “prayer” for the liberal religious spirit.

Prayer in this way becomes a “conversation with the Sacred Mystery,” a conversation which can take many forms, occur in many different places, can be silent or spoken or danced or sung or drawn or painted or sculpted or planted.

Wikstrom who grew up in Presbyterian and Methodist churches wandered widely in his own quest for a spiritual practice that was deep enough to really help him reach out beyond himself, yet also broad enough for his eclectic tastes and experiences. Sound familiar? Many of us found Unitarian Universalism because of somewhat similar journeys.

For Wikstrom his homemade practices often felt inauthentic, yet the traditional sanctioned “authentic” practices felt too limited. And so while in Divinity school he decided to do a cross-cultural study of spiritual practices to see if he could discover or create an approach that was both innovative as well as grounded in tradition. (Wikstrom, p. 8)

From his study, he found core elements that are common across the religious landscape. He proposes that there are four types of prayer practiced in one form or another by every religious tradition. He calls them Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving.

His book and our new adult ed course will be looking at these in depth but let me give you a brief taste of each of them to help you understand and experience how they might connect with your liberal religious spirit.

“Naming” is a type of conversation with the Sacred Mystery in which we name the many ways the sacred and the holy move in our lives and in the wider world. In a naming spiritual practice, we use words to acknowledge the gift of life, the wonder of existence, the miracles of everyday being and the mysteries beyond our knowing.

In truth most religions have many names for the sacred or divine. In traditional Christianity, “God”, “Lord,” are used most often but a study of the Christian Scriptures shows many names used to describe Jesus. In Islamic tradition, Allah has ninety-nine names. Some are found in the Qur’an itself and others in the Haddith, the collected sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, yet all are recognized as ways of understanding, and therefore naming, the Sacred One. Some examples are al-Rahman (The Compassionate), al-Rahim (The Merciful), al-Ghaffar (The Great Forgiver), al-Latif (The Subtle). (Wikstrom, p. 16)

Elizabeth Jones in the book *She Who Is* looks at the variety of names for the Sacred Mystery found in indigenous African religions – names such as the Architect of the World, the One who sees all, the One you confide your troubles to, the One who can turn everything upside down. (Wikstrom,

p. 17)

Wikstrom points out that the Hindu tradition recognizes thousands of divinities, each with their own names yet understands them all to be essentially manifestations of one overarching reality.

Earlier this morning we sang, “Over my head, I hear music in the air, there must be a God somewhere,” which is a hymn to give voice to our sense of the many ways in which we may experience our connection with the Sacred Mystery.

Each Sunday as Bob and I begin the time of spoken and silent prayer and meditation, we use several different ways of speaking of or “naming” this Mystery – we may say Spirit of Life, Mother and Father of us all, Creative Source of the Universe, Truth, Wisdom and Light” and we do this to embrace and honor all the ways in which we who are gathered may experience that which is both within and beyond.

As Unitarian Universalists we not only have permission, we have the responsibility to continually seek out new truth and understandings on our life journey. As Scott Alexander says, in our liberal tradition “Every individual is expected with the help of clergy and community, to nurture and tend the garden of his or her own religious life each and every day.” (Wikstrom, p.7)

This is not easy but it is a magnificent, life-enhancing freedom and responsibility.

In our “naming” prayer or conversation with the Sacred Mystery, we express our thanks, our gratitude for all that is good in our lives, all that brings us growth and greater insight, all that brings us joy and nurture. Naming prayer encourages us to look at our lives to see where and how the sacred is present. As Wikstrom points out, “Perhaps in your life right now, you are experiencing the divine, the Mystery, as “Comforter.” Or perhaps for you right now it is “the One who churns things up.” It is the experience of engaging yourself in this greater conversation which is the key.

And Naming prayer does not require a “Sacred Other.” Instead it can be as Wikstrom writes, “an opportunity to lift up all for which you are thankful at this moment, all the blessings and miracles in your life, all the joy in your living.” (Wikstrom, p. 17) Even at the most turbulent of times, there are miracles of love and joy waiting for you to notice them – the small flower growing in the crack in the sidewalk, the genuine smile of the person waiting on you in the coffee shop, the purr of your kitten when you arrive home. Your open ears and eyes are all that is needed to experience these joys.

What name do you give to the Mystery of All, the sense of universal connection, the Source of Life and Love? For what are you grateful this morning as we are gathered here? As you give voice within your heart to these questions, your conversation with the Sacred Mystery, your prayer of Naming occurs.

“Knowing” is the second kind of prayer which Wikstrom suggests is found in all religious traditions. In this form of conversation, we have a chance to reflect honestly on our life as it is today

– to own times and ways in which we may have fallen short of our desire to be loving and calm, patient and kind. We know ourselves better than anyone else – and we are often our own worst critic and judge. This prayer of “knowing” is not judgmental or to invite shame or guilt. Instead it is a way of entering into a clearing kind of depth – where we can look at times or instances where we fell short of how we ideally would have liked to respond and to perhaps discover the unconscious roots of old pain which may have tripped us up.

A “knowing” prayer is one where we acknowledge mistakes in order to help us untie knots of confusion and discouragement. We gently but clearly look at what happened and own our part. We ask for courage to make amends and to go forward with love, understanding and forgiveness of ourselves and others.

This prayer of “knowing” is sometimes the most challenging for us as religious liberals – not because we think we are perfect, but because the old prayers of confession that many of us grew up with caused us to feel so unworthy. And so we shy away from any kind of meditative experience which has a confessional feel to it.

None of us is perfect in one sense and all of us are perfect in another existential sense. What matters most is our ongoing process, our willingness to be mindful and honest in the living of our lives, to get back on track when we have strayed off the mark. In meditation practices we are taught not to berate ourselves when our mind wanders, but just to notice that it has wandered and then to bring gently back to the focus point once again.

The prayer of knowing is what this is – “I am sorry for having gotten angry in that situation and realize now why I overreacted. I will find renewed ways to support my sense of self, my sense of loving grounding so that I will be more mindful and centered in my interactions.”

“Life is change, growth, movement. Perfection, then, is not about becoming something that we’re not, but fully being what we are.” (Wikstrom, p. 22) Praying about the broken and fragile places in our lives is not about seeking God’s understanding and forgiveness but about seeking our own understanding and forgiveness. The Knowing Prayer is a prayer which can bring us healing and wholeness and peace.

The Listening Prayer is a form a prayer which is probably most familiar to us as religious liberals. This type of prayer is not about words and ideas but about gently and easily moving from all forms of doing to a simple state of being. (Wikstrom, p. 27) We move into a time of silence and quiet and seek that inner unspoken sense of clarity, love and connection deep within and without.

Most forms of Eastern meditation are listening prayer. Our monkey-minds may need help in getting the chatter to be still and thus focusing on one’s breath, repeating a mantra, gazing upon a candle are all techniques which may help.

Western religious traditions call this contemplative prayer. Centering prayer of the Catholic tradition is an example where you choose a single word, perhaps a name or attribute of God and repeat it gently whenever you notice yourself thinking instead of just being; otherwise you sit in silence.

Each Sunday we offer you a period of silence as part of our prayer and meditation. We actually usually give you 2 minutes and for some this may seem very long, to others very short. Since the congregation as a whole is very used to this, there is a level of comfort with the silence which makes it easier to move into the experience. We often hear from folks that the silent meditation is their favorite part of the service. That's fine (although it makes all the time spend on sermon preparation seem a bit questionable!).

Our Bird and Bell Meditation group and Beth Howard's Spiritual Yoga classes both offer time and space for Listening Prayer. If you have never tried this, I encourage you to give silence a try. It is a gift to yourself and to our world.

Loving Prayer is a form of prayer where we move our awareness of compassion outward to family, friends, neighbors, community, and our global village.

As the sermon began we sang together, "Spirit of Life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. Blow in the wind, rise in the sea; move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice."

These are words of a Loving Prayer. We think of those whom we love and we picture them in our minds and hearts. We send them our loving and healing energy. We use ourselves as channels or vessels for the energy of love which is truly mysterious in its make-up but very real in its outcomes.

Nothing profoundly great has ever been accomplished without this connection of the heart with the Source of All Life and Love. We offer our unique gifts and talents to the world as we connect these abilities with our cosmic sense of love for the interdependent web, the network of mutuality and support of which we are a part.

In Loving Prayer, we may name to ourselves or out loud those individuals and groups and areas of the world which touch our heart on this particular day. The victims of the terrible earthquakes in Pakistan and India, those who have suffered due to the hurricanes, the injustices which occur in our country and all over the world due to hate and prejudice – and if we know of a person, an individual in any of these situations then saying their name with love is a prayer with a mission.

Modern science has actually proven that loving prayer does have a beneficial effect. "At San Francisco General Hospital, cardiologist Randy Byrd assigned patients in the coronary intensive care unit into two groups 192 were to be prayed for and 201 were not. The doctors and nurses on the unit, even the patients themselves did not know who had been assigned to which group. Those doing the praying were scattered around the country and we only told the first name, diagnoses, and prognoses of the patients. According to the American Heart Association's journal, the prayed-for group had significantly fewer complications and fewer people in this group died than in the group that was not prayed for." (Wikstrom, p. 42)

Each week during our Candles of Joys and Concerns, we are asked as a Caring Spiritual

Community to hold in our minds and hearts family members, neighbors, friends, co-workers who are facing difficult and painful situations. We light our Community Candle as a symbol of our shared caring, our Loving Prayer.

Loving Prayer cannot predict a particular outcome. As with all forms of conversation with the Sacred Mystery, there needs to be an openness and a trust in the process which goes beyond our individual images of what might happen. Loving Prayer does not necessarily prevent death from occurring – death will occur for all of us eventually – but it can help the ultimate transition be one of peace and healing and wholeness in an existential and spiritual way.

And when engaging in Loving Prayer, don't forget yourself. Jesus' great teaching is to "love your neighbor as yourself." If we do not love ourselves and include our own needs in our Loving conversation with the Sacred Mystery, then we are not able to offer a fullness of love to others.

Naming, Knowing, Listening and Loving – four forms of prayer or meditative conversation with the Sacred Mystery which are very congruent with our liberal religious path, which can be very nurturing to our liberal religious spirit. Which one would you like to focus on in the next few moments? I am going to invite you into 2 minutes of silence to experience your choice of meditative conversation or prayer.

Would you like to move into a time of Naming Prayer – speaking in the silence of your heart and mind, your name or names for the largeness of life, the Source of All Creation, the Mystery of Life and Love? Your Naming Prayer might also be a time to focus on your gratitude for the joys and miracles small and great will fill your life.

Would you like to move into a time of Knowing Prayer – speaking in the silence of your heart and mind those aspects and parts of your life which may feel fragile or broken, those times or actions when your response was less than what you wished it had been. Your Knowing Prayer is a time to be honest and to be gentle with yourself – looking deeply, forgiving, and experiencing the healing energy which will fill you with the courage to make the changes you are wanting in your way of being.

Would you like to move into a time of Listening Prayer – moving deep within to the silent center of all being; listening mindfully for the experience of Universal Connection and Sacred Mystery. Your Listening Prayer includes gently bringing your mind back to silence if it wanders off for a moment into chatter.

Would you like to move into a time of Loving Prayer – speaking in the silence of your mind and heart the names of those you love, those for whom you feel concern? Let their faces and names come to you, or let their part of our planet earth come to your consciousness as you invite the energy of healing and hope and wholeness to surround them.

Move now into YOUR time of meditative prayer...I will ring the chimes as we begin and as the time is up...

[2 minutes of silence]

I want to close this morning with a reading by the Rev. Bill Schulz, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association and currently President of Amnesty International:

“Unitarian Universalism affirms that creation is too grand, too complex
and mysterious to be captured in a narrow creed.

That is why we cherish individual freedom of belief.

At the same time our convictions about Creation lead us to other
affirmations...

That the blessings of life are available to everyone, not just the Chosen
Saved;

or the

That Creation itself is Holy – the earth and all its creatures; the stars in
glory;

all their

That the Sacred or Divine, the Precious and Profound, are made
evident not in the miraculous or supernatural but in the simple
everyday;

and

That human beings, joined in collaboration with the gifts of Grace, are
for the planet and its future;

responsible

That every one of us is held in Creation’s hand – a part of the
interdependent cosmic web – and hence strangers need not be

enemies;

That no one is saved until we are All saved where “All” means the
whole of Creation;

That the paradox of life is to love it all the more even though we
ultimately lose it.” So may it be. So may it be...