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Prayer

A reflection from Karen Hering, Assistant Literary Minister

Each month worship, religious education, community outreach ministry, covenant groups, and Wellspring Wednesday programs will offer opportunities to contemplate, consider, contend with and discuss an intergenerational curriculum based on monthly themes. Our hope is that this approach will bind us more closely together and inform our lives in positive ways. February's theme is... Prayer.

I was sitting in the back of the hospital chapel, tears rolling silently down my cheeks, when a woman entered behind me, passed to the front of the room and, facing eastward, unfolded her rug. She then folded her knees and her prayer tumbled out in words foreign to my ear but so familiar to my heart. When she had finished, she stood, folded her rug and passed by me again on her way out. Our eyes met and I said, "Thank you. Your prayer gave me strength."

We Unitarian Universalists take an open approach to prayer. We follow no prescribed practice, no certain dictates of when to pray or how, nor do we even agree about whether to name it as prayer. "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground," the Sufi poet Rumi said many centuries ago, and we cite this quote often for the historical permission it grants. Sitting side by side on Sunday in the prayerful silence of our worship services, we seldom if ever kneel; but we do make room for hundreds of ways to pray with deep respect for the diverse beliefs and practices of our members and with deep awareness of the diverse reasons that call us to prayer.

Still, questions about prayer hover around our plentitude of practices. What does it mean to pray? And to whom are we praying? Is it prayer if it's delivered in an envelope that bears no address? Is it prayer if the message

has no words? Is it prayer if it's lifted up on the currents of our doubts and questions instead of being carried off by the sturdy messenger of belief?

If we listed all the forms that prayer can take – petitions and gratitude, praise and lamentation, confessions and indictments, wailing words and silent breath, bended knees and wakeful walking, a listening ear, an open heart, a quiet space, a widening circle – we would find no shortage of ways to pray.

"To pray you open your whole self," says the poet Joy Harjo, "to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon, to one whole voice that is you. And know there is more that you can't see, can't hear, can't know except in moments steadily growing, and in languages that aren't always sound but other circles of motion. Like eagle that Sunday morning over Salt River. Circles in blue sky, in wind, swept our hearts clean with sacred wings."

A common element of prayer, no matter how it is done, is humility and surrender, the presentation of our hearts to be swept clean. Opening our whole selves to "one whole voice that is you" and knowing too that there is more we cannot see or hear or know "except in moments steadily growing."

Prayer is not a rational proposition, and this can make it difficult in our age of reason. As the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams warned, we must be wary of rationalism and moralism unaccompanied by an open heart. "They can," he said "give us a 'poise' that freezes the knees and keeps us erect . . . in face of the divine demand for repentance, for change of heart and mind."

Perhaps the simplest definition, then, is that prayer is a posture. Whether standing or prostrate, it is a position of humility and openness, a posture of the heart. An acknowledgement of all that we do not know or understand or even believe.

Prayer can be like the eagle circling overhead, rising higher and higher, until that one instant, with one more push of its wings, when it passes beyond our vision from below and disappears into thin air. Even though we know it's there, we cannot see it. Blue sky closes in around it.

"Prayer is circumference we may not reach around," writes the poet Jeanne Lohmann, "space for all we cannot hold, the rim of love toward which we lean."

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

The Energy of Prayer

by Thich Nhat Hanh

After the Ecstasy, the Laundry

by Jack Kornfield

The Soul is Here for Its Own Joy: Sacred Poems from Many Cultures

Robert Bly, editor

BOOKS FOR FAMILIES

A Child's Book of Blessings and Prayers Collected and Introduced by Eliza Blanchard. Interfaith prayers, ideally suited for UU families.

The Monk Who Grew Prayer by Claire Brandenburg. A sweet example of "prayer without ceasing": a Christian monk blends prayer in with his daily tasks like chopping wood.

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A World of Prayers by Jeremy Brooks. A dreamily illustrated collection of prayers organized into categories like, "Mealtime Graces" and "Bedtime Prayers."

Grandad's Prayers of the Earth by Douglas Wood. A grandfather shows his grandson how the whole earth prays by offering its beauty.

Resources for parents and children, see pages 12-13.



Prayer for Unitarian Universalist Families

from Kerri Meyer, Director of Religious Education

Unitarian Universalist parents express a great deal of worry about prayer. We struggle with its motivation, with its language, with its results (or lack thereof) and we wonder anxiously what these elements of prayer might impress upon our children as they grow. If we assume Ghandi's perspective and think of prayer not as asking, but as the practice of surrendering our selves to that longing in our souls, we might see a crack of light in the doorway to prayer with our kids.

This time last year, our Religious Education classes focused for six weeks on prayer. Children who participated in Workshop Rotation will be familiar with the ideas below, but they are worth repeating and exploring in the context of the home. Bedtime is a natural moment for the quiet, centering experience of prayer: you can share in the words and the silence or you can turn the moment over entirely to your child.

“What Am I Supposed to Say?”: Five types of prayer for children



Using the five fingers of your hand, or even five colorful prayer beads that you string with your child, you can practice all five types in one prayerful sitting. You can also separate the types of prayers and slip them into different points in your family's day, depending on the rhythm of comings and goings, shared meals and private moments.

1. Prayers of Thanksgiving – in which we express our gratitude for the blessings in our lives
2. Prayers of Praise – in which we express our wonder and amazement at the miracles of the Universe
3. Prayers of Petition – in which we express our own needs and our own intentions to change and ask for help
4. Prayers of Intercession – in which we express our compassion for others and hope for fulfillment of their needs
5. Prayers of Contemplation – in which we let go of words and wait, listening to the stillness of the Divine within us

Whether the beliefs you're sharing with your child include a personal God that is available in communion with the human heart or celebrate a world shaped by our own human intentions, there are words that can work for your child in prayer. Some families might feel comfortable with phrases like “Thank you for...” and “Please help me...”. Other families can choose word like, “We are thankful for...” and “May I learn to...” Whatever words feel right for your family, modeling the pattern of the five types of prayer is an easy way to introduce your child to both shared and individual prayer:

One way the words might work...

1. “We are thankful for this day and for all we have learned. We are thankful the home we share, for our warm beds and for the chance to start a new day tomorrow.

2. We celebrate the miracles of sunset and sunrise and all the beauty in between.
3. May we act in ways that are fair and kind.
4. May all people live in peace and share the things that humans all need to live well.
5. May we find inside us the love and courage to build such a world. [generous silence]. Blessed be.”

Another way the words might work...

1. “Holy One, thank You for this day and for all I have learned. Thank You for this home we share, for my warm bed and for the chance to start a new day tomorrow.
2. Today, I saw You in the beautiful sunrise and sunset.
3. Please help me to be fair and kind.
4. Please help all people share and live in peace.
5. I remember that You are inside everyone, and inside me, too. [generous silence]. Amen.”

The Body in Prayer

Prayer is a kinesthetic experience for children. Make a prayerful space at home that engages the senses in a calming way. Learn about the different ways that people hold or move their body in prayer. If you learned to pray as a child, show your child how you learned and talk about how that feels for you now. Ask your child what feels best for him or her. Prayer beads, in their many forms, are wonderful tools for centering and focusing the praying child.

What if...?

What if my child does ask for something in prayer that they are not likely to see come to fruition? Given a belief in a Universe in which myriad things are

continued on page 13

Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul.



Prayer for UU Families
continued from page 12

possible or in an all-loving God, kids may offer unanswerable petitionary or intercessory prayers that make a parent's heart ache. Grandma may not ever recover from her stroke. The earthquake on the news cannot be undone. Your child will not ever be able to fly like a bird.

Here are some possible responses to those longings of the soul that may remain longings.

- "I hear you pray that Grandma will get better, because you love her so much. That would be the most wonderful thing for you and for me. This may be the time in Grandma's life, like in all living things lives, when she doesn't get better. What if we pray for what *Grandma* needs *right now*, even if her body can't heal? May she be free from pain. May she remember that we love her. May the love she taught us shine in us as we take care of her."
- "I hear you pray that the disaster we saw in the news will be undone. In our beautiful Universe, time only goes forward. What can we pray will happen from now on? What can we do to make those prayers become reality?"
- "I hear you pray that God will make you able to fly. Do you know any people who can fly? I bet lots of other people have the same great idea as you and pray to God to let them fly. Why do you think God doesn't respond to those prayers by making people fly? I wonder if what you really want is to be extra special? I'm going to pray a prayer right now to say thank you for all the ways you are already extra special – want me to pray it on the outside or the inside?"

Books on prayer for families –
turn to the front cover.

Teens Strut Their Stuff in the Name of Unity

"When I created this show, I wanted to engage an audience in a new and enthralling experience and take them on a journey of self-discovery and education. This show is about opening people's eyes, hearts and minds to the racism that exists today in our very own community." High school junior Nathan



Eckstein used these words to describe A Fashion Show for Social Change, a teen-led effort to engage Unity Church and the broader community in calling attention to white privilege and discrimination against African Americans.

The January 17 fashion show was free and open to the public, and over one hundred people packed the Parish Hall to witness the show. Tower Club teens modeled their original t-shirt art adorned with symbols and words, accompanied by selected text from their artists' statements. For instance, Abby Guthmann writes, "though the struggle between ethnicities still remains today, we have been gifted with the forgiveness and hope to overcome it."

Nathan was inspired to create the show as a vehicle for education and dialogue following his experiences in Penumbra Theatre's Summer Institute, "in which social justice and responsible civic action are essential to the practice of art." Participants in the program are charged with the task to apply their learning and demonstrate their leadership through a project of their own design.

Prior to the show, Nathan spent several weeks engaging the Tower Club in discussion about racism and white privilege, using work such as Peggy McIntosh's writing on white people's "invisible weightless backpack." Cindy Starkweather Nelson later hosted a t-shirt-making workshop when the teens were ready to create their art.

The fashion show's collection of clothing will be the featured art display in the Parish Hall in May. Thank you to the church community and Penumbra Theatre for supporting this event!

Donate Books Now for the High School Book Sale

Donations are being accepted for the annual Tower Club used book sale. Donations in bags or boxes can be left on the labeled cart in the Parish Hall. Proceeds from the book sale help youth pay for the pilgrimage to Boston.

February Dates for Your R.E. Calendar

- Sunday, February 1: regular R.E., Celebration of New Lives, 4:30 service
- Wednesday, February 4: Junior High Youth Group - Civic action w/Mason
- Wednesday, February 11: Junior High Youth Group - Baking in the Kitchen
- Sunday, February 15: Story Sunday (Workshop Rotation kids begin in Sanctuary)
- Wednesday, February 18: Junior High Youth Group - Civic action w/Mason
- Wednesday, February 25: Junior High Youth Group - Baking in the Kitchen