

Reading from *The Prophet*:

Then a priestess said, Speak to us of Prayer.

And he answered, saying:

You pray in your distress and in your need; would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.

For what is prayer but the expansion of yourself into the living ether?

And if it is for your comfort to pour your darkness into space, it is also for your delight to pour forth the dawning of your heart.

And if you cannot but weep when your soul summons you to prayer, she should spur you again and yet again, though weeping, until you shall come laughing.

When you pray you rise to meet in the air those who are praying at that very hour, and whom save in prayer you may not meet.

Therefore let your visit to that temple invisible be for naught but ecstasy and sweet communion.

For if you should enter the temple for no other purpose than asking you shall not receive:

And if you should enter into it to humble yourself you shall not be lifted:

Or even if you should enter into it to beg for the good of others you shall not be heard.

It is enough that you enter the temple invisible.

I cannot teach you how to pray in words.

Good morning and Happy Sunday. My name is Kellie McBride and I'm a member of BSUU. I grew up in Helena, moved to California when I was 19 and returned 20 years later. My husband and I have five young adult sons and one 7 year old daughter. Professionally, I am the Development Officer for Florence Crittenton Home here in Helena.

Okay, here's the thing. When I first considered giving a Sunday message, my mind – and heart – went directly to prayer – the concept of prayer. What it is. What it is not.

At that point in time, last Fall, I was not happy with prayer or, more to the point, with other's idea of what prayer is.

My family had just been through a crisis where prayer had been requested. That healing prayer that we so often hear of. You know the kind. Bob is sick, or Mary is looking for a job. The asking kind of prayer where you hope that the Universe, or God, or Goddess will intervene.

In the grips of the crisis, I remember taking solace in the knowledge that there were prayer circles across the United States praying for my son and his recovery. I took comfort in hearing those words “we’re praying for you.” Friends and family. Christian, Jewish, Agnostic, it didn’t matter. They were praying in their own ways to their own deities for one thing – for my son.

And the joyous wonder. All of those prayers were answered with a resounding YES. (The fact that sometimes prayers are answered with a “NO” can be the topic of another Sunday Sermon).

So you would think I would have been singing the praises of the power of prayer. And I was. I was also singing the praises of the amazing ability of the human spirit to overcome, the advances in medical science, and the way the human body can seemingly, miraculously, heal itself. Life was good.

Then I got a phone call from someone close to me. She said that God (referring to the God she prays to) had answered our prayers and I needed to get myself to a Christian Church and thank God.

Wow.

Then the cards started coming. Apparently a prayer group from a Southern Baptist Church in South Carolina had been responsible for all the prayers being answered. And all of the individual members sent cards to let us know. Suggesting – not so subtly – that we should repent and come to Jesus.

Now I was mad. I shouldn’t have been. But I was. I think it was the self righteousness of it all. About this time I signed up to give today’s Sunday Message.

Well if THEY think they hold the market on prayer – I’ll show them! I’ll give a message on How To Say A Unitarian Universalist prayer. So there. (Sometimes my level of maturity astounds me) And I went online to a UU website and I found what I was looking for. A step by step guide. I printed it off and submitted the title of today’s message. Then I set it aside because – in retrospect – something didn’t feel right. And I’m a procrastinator – but honestly something did not feel right.

Yes, there is a step by step guide on how to say a Unitarian Universalist prayer. But after much soul searching – **it** feels a little self righteous and contrite. It is good. It is step by step, which can always be helpful. But, it is not THE Unitarian Universalist prayer. There is no such thing.

In bullet point fashion, it goes like this:
How to Say a Unitarian Universalist Prayer

1. **Light a chalice.**
2. **Close your eyes.**
3. **Center yourself.**
4. **Say a prayer.**
5. **Personalize the prayer..**
6. **Extinguish the chalice.**

Okay, my favorite part is that the instructions are followed by a warning:

Warnings

- If you pray or meditate with your eyes closed, make sure the candle is safe from dripping, tipping, or combustible materials such as paper or fluttering curtains.

My message today is on prayer. I admit, I am a pray-er. I pray. I've prayed all my life –as far back as I can remember. The way I pray has changed quite a bit over the years. Where I think my prayers go has changed. How I think prayer works has changed.

But I do remain an evolving pray-er. What does it mean to pray? That is for each of us to decide – or not – on our own. I can only share some of my insights and thoughts.

One definition I found says that prayer is the act of communicating with a deity (especially as a petition or in adoration or contrition or thanksgiving).

I'll repeat that: Prayer is the act of **communicating** with a deity (especially as a petition or **in adoration** or contrition or **thanksgiving**).

And from the reading in The Prophet we heard: "*You pray in your distress and in your need; would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.*"

I love that line. ...*would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.*

As a child, our pastor, a woman who I remember as being the female equivalent of Santa Clause in stature and disposition, Monida Vaughn, taught a lesson on prayer that I hold close in my heart. She said to always say your thank you's before you ask God for anything. Wise words for any relationship really.

Can you imagine being a God or Goddess or the Universe – that place where all prayers meet up -- and only hearing sad sad stories, wants, and needs? Petitions, contrition, distress and need. Oh my! Yes, there is a need for healing prayer. I don't discount that – and I have personally benefited from it. But there seems to be a lot of distress going out into the universe.

Is need the only reason for prayer?

Why do we think that prayers need to be so serious? Personally, the world I run in is pretty high energy and more often than not, full of laughter. Shouldn't my prayers echo that? My brother is just finishing up seminary and will be ordained this year. We don't agree on a whole lot spiritually – but I admit that I love to hear him lead a prayer. If I close my eyes I can picture him talking with a good friend.

“Dear God, well just thank you so much for being with us today! And you know, I am just thrilled that we are all here together. And just as thrilled that Mom didn’t burn the potatoes like last time. But what is up with Dad’s shirt?...”

When my brother leads a prayer there is always laughter. How fitting for the Universe. As I read earlier from The Prophet: “And if you cannot but weep when your soul summons you to prayer, she should spur you again and yet again, through weeping, until you shall come laughing.

And again from The Prophet: “Would that you might pray also in the fullness of your joy and in your days of abundance.”

The fullness of my joy? Song? I sing – I pray – in my car. This is not working with the step by step guide. I can’t be driving, lighting a chalice, closing my eyes and singing at the same time.

The fullness of my joy? When I stop to admire a gorgeous Montana sunset and whisper thanks into the air. Again, hard to do the step by step thing in that moment.

There is, in the end, no one way to pray. And even though they are titled “How to Say a Unitarian Universalist Prayer” the instructions I found online are not the only way.

We can each, in our own way and thought and voice, sing joyfully, thank graciously, laugh loudly, ask earnestly – or not – or all.