

Before I get into my message this morning, I'd like to share just a bit about the process for coming up with this service and message. We are a lay-led Fellowship and that means that one way we look to our members and friends to contribute is by leading services.

A number of resources exist to help plan a service including members of the worship committee, these worship service guides available for check-out downstairs in our Library which provide a template of our order of service as well as a list of online resources and "singable songs," and my favorite resource, our hymnal "Singing the Living Tradition" that is so much more than a hymnal, I'd consider it one of the best anthologies of world spiritual wisdom I've seen. One of my favorite (and one of the easiest) parts of planning a service is browsing for readings because so many are so good and it is well-indexed.

We don't follow much of a liturgical calendar, so topics or themes are pretty much up to the people willing to lead. I tend to believe that any topic that has informed, motivated, strengthened, or challenged our spiritual journeys will likely resonate with other in the Fellowship—that is certainly my hope today!

Coming up with a message to deliver can look like finding one online, or writing one's own. Either way allows for a great opportunity for public speaking in a very hospitable environment. We've even listened to pre-recorded sermons delivered by professional UU ministers from around the country.

If you are interested in leading a service or teaming on one, please talk to a member of the Worship Committee or the chair, Bill Kronholm.

Today I'd like to talk about prayer and some reflections I've had on it recently. I'm speaking not as a scholar (I have not studied prayer in preparation for today), but more as a struggler, someone for whom prayer has frequently raised questions. I'm going to start with a brief history of prayer in my life because I think some of the questions are revealed there and also because I imagine some of my experiences may echo with yours. I look forward to hearing your thoughts during reflections.

My first experiences with prayer probably occurred in church, at Sunday school, summer bible camp, and around the dinner table. It was generally something done with eyes closed, head bowed, hands together, or perhaps joined with others in a circle. Mostly it was someone else's words that were spoken, a passage from the Bible memorized, or an adult such as my grandpa, a very devout man, who sprinted through a ritualized grace that I honestly never quite understood.

I was never much instructed on prayer on my own, but I watched Laura Ingalls Wilder and others say bedtime prayers on TV and had a general idea about the purposes of prayer that seemed to fall into perhaps four categories: gratitude, praise, confession, and request. (A confession right off the bat: my message today strikes me as fitting the classic definition of an essay—an early attempt, please see this as a draft!) That said, I'm thinking that the purpose of prayer that has most troubled me is the last one—the request.

Expressions of gratitude, praise, or confession, whether they are to ourselves, God, other humans, or Nature, don't cause me to question nearly as much as praying for something.

I don't think I prayed to receive a BB gun for my 8th birthday, but I'm sure I hounded my Mom for weeks and likely months before. It wasn't an easy decision for her, and she's told me that she sought the counsel of my uncle Ginger whose sons, my cousins, I would shoot with on the farm. I did get my weak little Daisy that year and set out to hunt birds much like my older cousins did in their barn. I'm not sure how many BB's I scattered in our yard during the hot Iowa summer days that followed, but finally one day, a young robin landed on a fence post about 15 feet away. It was frighteningly easy, too easy to aim and pull the trigger and see the bird fall to the ground. Though I'd just achieved the goal I'd been striving for, my accomplishment soon turned to horror as I knelt down beside the tiny dead creature. I don't know what I expected to feel, and I can only imagine that it was my own recent experience of losing pets and trying to nurse orphaned bunnies that made me to realize the enormity and finality of what I'd just done.

I picked up the bird and ran with it around to the side of the house. I laid it down on a rock, and I began to pray... HARD. I asked God to bring this little bird back to life, to forgive me for what I had done. I bargained, promising to be good forever if God would just take back the BB. I had the perhaps unconscious knowledge that resurrections happened out of sight, behind stone-blocked cave entrances, so I told God that I would go around the corner of the house and that the bird could just be gone when I returned. I prayed that He would make it so, and I tried several times. I prayed for an hour or more, but the bird stayed dead. I did not blame God; I blamed myself. Pop cans and paper targets were all I aimed for after that, and I think an early lesson about responsibility may have been planted with that experience. A lesson that I, we, are responsible and relying on God to clean up our messes or intervene was futile

I may have prayed on occasion after that, but it was likely only at the ordained times: at church (when we'd go); at Grandpa and Grandma's; maybe in times of severe duress.

My spiritual journey has meandered... a lot. Not just meandered, perhaps plunged underground for great lengths of time only to be daylighted again here and there. I did go through a bit of a spiritual renaissance during my late 20's and soaking in the pools at Hot Sulphur Springs along the Colorado River became part of a weekly Sunday night ritual. I'd always been a bit of a skeptic about spirit inhabiting place, but did discover at the hot springs that there seemed to be a healing benefit that was greater than the sum of just the physical benefits of an immersion in hot mineral water. Whether the communion is with the Earth and the waters percolating up from so deep after so long, or whether it is with the untold numbers of people who've visited and brought a spirit of sacredness to the place, or whether it's all in my head, it is a communion for me. Anyway... the central pool at Hot Sulphur Springs is the Ute pool and it has a little waterfall you can get under and let the hot waters pound your shoulders, and there is a tiny side pool, really just a crack that you have to squeeze into and lie reclined in even hotter water, face-to-face with the rock right above you, your toes dug in to the sand and silt, and if you dug too deep, you could feel the Earth's intense heat. My friends and I called this little pool "the

womb.” The constant cascade into the adjacent main pool added to the meditative quality and one day I found myself praying there—giving thanks, sending warm wishes out to those I knew to be in need, asking for help in areas of my life I was struggling with. It became a ritual, and it still is when I visit hot springs. It felt good and centering to have this ritual all snuggled in to the Earth, but I still didn’t really have an idea of how prayer worked and some of the essential questions remained.

We spent a week of our honeymoon praying and meditating with the Buddhist monks and nuns of Plum Village in France, which was a powerful experience, and I am still bolstered knowing that so much goodwill and lovingkindness emanates daily from that and so many other spiritual communities and individuals around the world.

Still, prayer did not become a big part of my life.

I was moved to pray just about four years ago when I learned of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the catastrophic loss of life that occurred. I prayed, but I’m not sure what for...for there to be a measure of peace amidst such immense suffering, to be a witness in my thoughts for some sense of solidarity with my brothers and sisters???

I also found myself almost automatically praying this fall watching the first live shuttle launch I’d seen since my senior year in high school when we’d all been gathered in our classrooms to watch the first teacher go into space aboard Challenger. As I watched the shuttle this fall, I just kept uttering the words, “Please, please, please...” But I’m not sure to whom I was pleading or with what expectation.

It was also this fall that our circle of family and friends seemed to hit one of those cycles of suffering that come from time-to-time. We had friends get hurt, lose jobs, relatives die, and friends whose first child was delivered after a healthy pregnancy with massive complications that nearly cost the newborn his life and leave lingering questions about long-term brain damage.

I found myself praying again, trying to send love and good vibes out to the people I knew who needed it, but still, I wasn’t sure how this prayer stuff worked, and because of that, my prayers seemed well-intentioned, but sort of fumbling. I guess the aspect of prayer I struggle with the most is just what does it mean to pray for someone at a distance, or a stranger, or to pray for peace???

I knew that both Nisan and I were holding people close to our hearts and in our thoughts during all this time, so one night after trimming the tree, I asked her what she did when she prayed for people, how she viewed it. It’s a really personal question, and one for which Unitarian Universalism doesn’t supply easy rote answers. She seemed kind of hesitant, but offered that she thinks about it in terms of light, sending bright, colorful, healing light towards those in need. I was impressed and blown away on a couple of counts. One was that she had made more tangible what had for me been so nebulous. Another realization was that I needed to be much more patient with the selection of colors for the walls of our house—colors and light are sacred to her and I need to respect

that better. But I also realized that light wasn't the vehicle for me, that I needed some other tangible medium for these wishes to take. I thought about music or poetry, great candidates, but then I thought about food. I thought that what I could wish for was that our friends, while they endured these trials, would find nourishment made by loving hands with healthy ingredients, that the people who served them food or brewed their coffee would do so with love and kindness, such that regardless of the outcome of those things beyond our control, they would be that much more surrounded by positivity and love and able to deal with circumstances better and with a greater feeling of kinship and solidarity. I realized, that I wasn't asking for an otherworldly intervention to dictate an outcome, but for a very humanist intervention to affect the spirit. Something I am much more comfortable with. And something I discovered to be very much in line with Unitarian Universalist thinking.

(pocket guide readings)

What I discovered I was asking for in my prayers was for those people, those thousands of people whose lives would intersect with my friends in myriad ways to carry love and kindness in their hearts. And I realized that there was no way for these strangers to have any idea that I was praying that they would do so, and I realized that there was no way I could know how many others were praying for all the people I would meet and interact with during my day. I realized that to pray in this way is to enter into something of a covenant of kindness, a sacred compact (and I say sacred not to limit this to "believers" but because it is an act of faith...) This covenant is really just a minor tweaking of the Golden Rule that encourages us to treat others the way that we would like to be treated. It becomes not just how we want to be treated, but how we pray those for whom we're praying are treated. By entering into this covenant of kindness, we can as Emerson encourages come to "see prayer in all action." Our actions can be guided by the advice offered by Saint Augustine to "love and do what you will", or by the realization that we are all One—Namaste, or by the affirmations of the Seven Principles.

As I was preparing for this service, I found this card in a Library book. It says "I Hold You in my Thoughts and Prayers." I think there is power in this card, just like I think there is power in sending light and good vibes, and certainly in calling or writing to let people know we are thinking about them. My own struggle to make prayer more tangible has led me to see the opportunity for prayer in all that we do and I think there is great power in that. We want to be the vehicles for light and love in this world and to treat everyone as a card-carrying member of this covenant of kindness.