

Preparation for Prayer

Many Unitarians struggle with the spiritual practice of prayer. Within our congregation we have a rich diversity of opinions and beliefs about prayer. Atheists and humanists may be skeptical of a view of prayer in which one requests help, confesses, or expresses adoration to God or other higher power. Some people may feel more at home with meditations such as the Loving Kindness Meditation. In this topic we will explore our experiences, growths, joys and frustrations of prayer.

Below are a few descriptions of prayer.

Asking some power beyond us (God, divine being) to change life's circumstances

Asking for the strength to handle life's circumstances

An act of desperation, giving voice to the human predicament

A spiritual act of centering and opening of the heart

Letting your life be your prayer

Prayer and meditation are the same

Prayer doesn't have to mean "praying to" some entity. Author Christine Wicker says that prayer doesn't need a recipient: "The prayer could be a feeling of awe, a feeling of peace brought on by nature, a transcendent moment in response of music or art." Rev. Lynn Unger adds, "In the moment of beauty it doesn't matter whom I am thanking or even whether I am heard. It is enough to be grateful and to be a witness to wonder."

Rev. Roger Cowan, a humanist, says that he begins his day a time of silence and prayer. "Why do I do this? I need a quiet time. I need to express my gratitude. I need humility. I pray because – alone – I am not enough and also I am too much."

Still, not every spiritual practice "works" for everyone. Dan Harper, UU minister, shares these thoughts about prayer. "I don't pray. As a Unitarian Universalist child, I learned how to pray. But when I got old enough to take charge of my own spiritual life, I gradually stopped. Every once in a while I try prayer again, just to be sure I have found my spiritual disciplines – walks in nature, deep conversations, reading ancient and modern scripture, love – or they have found me. Prayer doesn't happen to be one of them."

I don't pray often. But when I do, it's because I'm desperate. I want to tell you about this, because sometimes these prayers, desperate though they may have been, have changed my life. Not because they were answered in any obvious way. Not because the universe offered me any sign to confirm that I was going in the right direction. Not because of anything outside myself, actually – but because of something inside, something that allowed me to open up, or to change, or to move on in ways I desperately needed to do. *Judith Meyer, retired UU minister*

One of the biggest challenges Unitarian Universalists may have when it comes to prayer is understanding it only in the most narrow definition of asking some power beyond us to change our circumstances Silent contemplation, meditative practice, yoga, listening for the still, small voice, taking time to just bring your awareness to one thing (your child, the beauty of a flower, the smell of the desert after a rain). All of these are forms of prayer and practice when we do them with intention and mindfulness. *Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray*

Whatever else it may or may not be, prayer is at least talking to yourself, and that's in itself not always a bad idea. Talk to yourself about your own life, about what you've done and what you've failed to do, and about who you are and who you wish you were and who the people you love are and the people you don't love too. *Frederick Beuchner*

The important thing is that the energy is there and the heart of love is there and is being sent out into the world. When love and compassion are present in us, and we send them outward, then that is truly prayer. *Thich Nhat Hanh*

But the value of the gift, it seemed to me, depended on there being someone to pray to, so I stopped praying. I stopped believing that there is a distinct divine being outside of me who is listening. And yet, I've sometimes wondered: Why should that keep me from praying? I desperately want to give that very real gift of caring and comfort, and I have come to believe that is possible – that what I can offer is the prayer of blessing. *Patricia Montley*

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence. *Annie Dillard*

Prayer is the spiritual practice of leaning into the spiritual need of the pressing moment and being fully present to it. A child going to bed needing the reassurance that all is well. A family praying for a loved one to be healed. A congregation of people with different pressing issues coming together as a community on Sunday morning. *Rev. Krista Taves*

Questions to Ponder

1. If prayer was a part of your childhood, think back to an experience of prayer.
2. Reflect on the various descriptions of prayer in the preparation essay and quotes. Are any of these practices part of your life? Do you consider them prayer?
3. Unitarians have many different beliefs about God and about spirituality. Do you find a connection between your spiritual beliefs or practices and any form of prayer?
4. If you have ever turned to some form of prayer in a time of crisis, reflect on that time and what prayer meant to you.
5. How do you feel about prayer in our Unitarian Universalist services?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe your definition of prayer. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "A practice in my life that might be called prayer is ..."