

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Prayer”

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One of the things I love about some of my college friends who are parents is that they don't sugarcoat the challenges of parenting. One couple in particular has a special needs child and because I am Facebook friends with this couple, I get to hear my fair share of their struggles. After one particularly tough day the woman in the couple posted about how difficult the day had been and asked her friends to pray for their family. Pray for us, she said. Pray hard.

It's probably not giving away too much to tell you that I don't believe the prayers of this woman's friends will, on their own, get rid of her family's difficulties. And yet after I read her post, I bowed my head and thought to myself, “Hey universe, I'm grateful for so much and I'm sorry my friends are in pain and I hope they find their way to a measure of peace. Amen.” And right now, you're either thinking, “Gee, that was beautiful,” or “Wow, Amanda's crazy.” But the truth is, I didn't pray in order for some mystical energy to zoom from my intention to her house and magically set everything right. As I realized later, I had really prayed to increase my own compassion so that I might help my friend. And indeed, after my prayer I emailed her to check in and send good wishes. It was what I could do that night, and it was enough.

Of all the words we will consider during this series on words with baggage prayer might turn out to be one of the toughest ones. It doesn't merely carry baggage that makes it hard to handle. No, even worse, prayer is like one of those Russian nesting dolls. You may have seen one or heard about them. The dolls are different sizes, and the smallest one is placed inside the next smallest one, which is placed inside the next smallest one, and so on. Prayer is like the smallest of these dolls. We may struggle to make sense of it or make use of it as long as it is buried in layer after layer of assumptions that don't work for us. What I would like to do today is to try to unearth prayer from its layer of assumptions to see what we find at the end. I'll focus on what I think are the most important assumptions:

- Prayer is inevitably directed either to a personal God who intervenes on an individual level or to an intermediary such as Jesus or Mary who will plead with God on our behalf
- Prayer is always a plea for God to change things because things won't change if God doesn't change them
- Prayer must take place in certain ways and use certain words to be efficacious. For example, one must bow one's head or close one's eyes to demonstrate physical submission to God in order not to offend God
- Similarly, one must pray in certain consecrated places or God won't hear the prayers
- Finally, if you don't pray, God won't pay attention to your problems. You need to pray to catch God's interest, like calling God on a cosmic phone.

There are many other assumptions we may have about prayer but I think that if we can release these assumptions, we may yet find some value in prayer. We'll work through the above list in order, focusing primarily on the first two assumptions.

First, prayer is inevitably directed either to a personal God who intervenes on an individual level or to an intermediary such as Jesus or Mary who will plead with God on our behalf. This is such

a basic assumption that most of us cannot imagine praying without a personal God or intercessory to whom to pray. It's not prayer if it's not to a person, we think. And if we don't believe in a personal God or in God's intermediaries, what's left?

Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom has written a book called, *Simply Pray: a Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life*. Here's his invitation to us concerning prayer:

“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 – the old white guy with the long white beard, or any of his stand-ins – yet can't figure out what to put in its place, stop looking for something and start simply 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 where you have encountered, or are encountering, the Sacred. In other words, simply pray. Pray without any preconceived notion of what you are doing or why. Simply do it, and see what happens.”

Now, it's no secret that plenty of Unitarian Universalists think anything related to the spiritual is a bunch of hooey. If we are that sort of Unitarian Universalist, Wikstrom's words will probably not appeal to us much. But if we are the sort of UU who can relate to or even translate words such as sacred and holy, and if we are willing to sit with our experiences and see what we find, Wikstrom's point may be useful to us. I know UUs who would say that being in nature is their prayer, or creating art, or petting their dog.

I often pray when I sit at the piano. Sometimes this involves words. If I am the musician at a worship service I will sometimes pray just before the service that my body and hands may be a good vessel for the Spirit of Life and that my music might transform people a bit. But even just playing itself, especially certain songs and hymns, can be a prayer of joy, a prayer of gratitude, a prayer of awe. This is something I have discovered to be true, not something I chose for myself initially. I've never found prayer of any sort easy. But when I figured out that those powerful emotions at the piano actually represented a kind of prayer I just said “thank you” to the universe and let it be what it was. Long before I read Wikstrom's book I had figured out that prayer was possible for me if I let it arise naturally and didn't try to make it something I could not accept.

You might wonder why I would call that experience prayer rather than something less controversial. I learned when I was young that it was possible to categorize prayer into three major types: help, wow, and thanks. More recently, I learned that there were other ways of thinking about this but the original three have stuck with me: help, wow, thanks. My piano praying, while not directed at an old guy in the clouds, involves all three. I ask for help in playing well, I experience the awe of the beautiful music, and I give thanks both for the music and for my ability to take notes on a page and make sound out of them. I'm fine with not having a clear sense that anyone else hears my prayer. I hear it. That's sufficient.

Unitarian Universalists are actually more comfortable than we think praying without expectation that a personal God hears us. Consider our opening singing today, in which we asked the Spirit of Life to come unto us, to sing compassion in our hearts, and to give life the shape of justice.

Are we terribly uncomfortable when we sing this? Well, maybe a few people are but generally most UUs I've seen sing this hymn do so with solemn joy and devotion. Is this a prayer? Well, it depends on how you define prayer but I see no reason not to call it that. And our chalice lighting today, taken from a version of the Passover Haggadah, lifts up our hope that we use our powers well to serve the Spirit of freedom. Is this a prayer? Again, it depends. Maybe it is a prayer to our own best selves but it doesn't seem to require a personal god as far as I can tell. We can interpret the Spirit of freedom about as many ways as we can the Spirit of Life, about which we usually sing with gusto. So, we UUs already do things that look like prayer when we gather for worship and our lack of common belief in an efficacious God has not stopped us yet. There is no reason we cannot pray without a cause-and-effect God unless we simply cannot uncouple the two ideas in our individual minds.

Moving on, we come to the second assumption, namely that prayer is always a plea for that personal God to change things because things won't change if God doesn't change them. Now, I think there are two important assumptions here, neither of which is necessary for us to engage with the idea or practice of prayer. First, there's the idea that what you pray for when you pray to the intervening personal God is for the intervening personal God to, well, intervene – to change things. While I've already suggested that there are multiple types of prayer, we'll want to spend more time with this assumption, which in my experience is problematic to plenty of people. But there's another assumption here, perhaps even more pernicious, which is that if God doesn't change things they won't change. The problem here is of course the role of people in changing things, more on which soon.

Is praying for help the only real kind of prayer? Wikstrom, who we met above, claims that there are four types of prayer in which even someone not traditionally theistic can engage. First there are prayers of thanksgiving and praise, in which we name the many ways that whatever we encounter as sacred moves in our lives and the world. This would include both the “wow” and “thanks” prayers mentioned above.

Second, there are prayers of confession, a word with a terrible reputation among many UUs but Wikstrom only means by it the practice of knowing ourselves fully in both strength and weakness. If you're familiar with any 12-step program you may remember the fourth step, in which one makes a searching and fearless moral inventory of oneself. Confession, as Wikstrom sees it, is a kind of prayer in which we acknowledge, to ourselves, and possibly to others in some way, the wholeness of who we are, warts, gifts, blemishes, and marvels included. I've found a highly individualized version of this quite helpful in celebrating my strengths and accepting my imperfections.

Third, Wikstrom refers to meditation, or listening to the voice still and small in each of us. We sing about this voice, the one we hear calling to us from deep inside, the voice that remains with us all our lives and helps us in times of challenge. Meditation is simply prayer without a stream of words. For some people it is actual meditation in, say, one of the Buddhist traditions, in which we watch our breath or reflect on a major Buddhist concept such as impermanence. Or meditation may simply be an attempt to quiet our minds without preconception regarding what we will or won't hear. But for our busy, crazy minds, it is an act of trust and in my experience at

least, of great difficulty that can bring great rewards. Is it prayer as we normally define the word? No. Is it a relationship with the sacred? Sure, if we want it to be.

Fourth, Wikstrom refers to loving as a form of prayer. He means by loving the practice of reaching out in loving concern to the world. You may remember that recently I mentioned Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's comment that he felt his legs were praying when he marched in a civil rights march. Well, this past week I spent voter registration day registering voters with the NAACP in Colorado Springs and that sure felt like a prayer of hope. I've engaged in various prayerful activities as an activist, particularly singing hymns while marching in gay pride marches. But sitting with a friend in pain can also be an act of prayer. Educating people about racial inequality can be an act of prayer. There are so many ways to reach out to the world in loving concern. Are they prayers? If we find them meaningful in this way, they are indeed.

Some of our worship words today reflect the idea that prayer can take many forms and can be useful in many ways. Our words of welcome from Unitarian minister Robert French-Leavens indicate that we pray to be able to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones in absence, to give thanks, to make confession, to prepare ourselves to offer forgiveness, for enlightenment, and to be strengthened more generally. French-Leavens also suggests that in prayer our hearts prepare a place for faith, hope, and love. I imagine this might be true of many types of prayer.

We also used as our reading today a lovely prayer adapted from the Christian mystic Hildegarde of Bingen. As you listen to me reread this text, please consider how different her understanding of God is from the white guy with the white beard.

“Fire of the Spirit, life of the lives of creatures, spiral of sanctity, bond of all natures, glow of charity, lights of clarity, taste of sweetness to the fallen, be with us and hear us. Composer of all things, joy in the glory, strong honor, be with us and hear us.”

Notice also that Hildegarde is not asking God to take any particular action, only to be with the worshipping community and hear the community's prayers. This is not about an intercessory God. It's about a relationship with all there is. Sort of like our Seventh Principle about the interdependent web.

Moving on, I said that I would address the assumption that things only change if God changes them. We know that's not true. In fact, it's a basic tenet of Unitarian Universalism that our work in the world is what changes things; it's perhaps the best contribution humanism has made to UUism. And it reminds me of a wonderful quote: prayer doesn't change things. Prayer changes people and people change things. If we pray to be strengthened on the eve of some frightening political demonstration, we may be more likely to show up at the demonstration with our courage intact. If we pray to be compassionate supporters of our friends, we may find the energy to take better care of them. Some people who don't believe in prayer say that prayer is a poor substitute for action. I say prayer is an action, and one that can lead to other actions.

Now, there's one more thing that must be said about the idea that things won't change unless God changes them. Some people have given up on prayer because bad things have not in fact changed. Our friend's cancer came back. The world is still at war. Ebola is eating up West

Africa. Our heart is still broken over our most recent ex-sweetheart. Sometimes, bad things don't change and sometimes they change for the worse. And if we think prayer is about asking an efficacious God to help us, bad news is not going to instill a sense of the value of prayer in us. But there is another kind of prayer that may help: prayer that we might have the strength to bear what feels unbearable. Will this kind of prayer result in a lightning bolt striking us from the skies? No, but it might make us just a little stronger, just a little more able to cope with life's profound and petty challenges. And anything that will help us cope is probably, on balance, a good thing.

Hopefully, I've more or less already addressed the remaining three assumptions about prayer by spending so much time on the first two. The third and fourth assumptions are that prayer requires certain formats, certain words, and certain locations to be efficacious. But clearly if prayer is not necessarily directed at a particular individual God who prescribed particular approaches to prayer, we are free to engage with prayer in any way that works for us, especially if we understand that prayer changes people and people change things. We are free to shout prayers of joy from the park near our house, to sit in meditation on our piano bench – yes, I've done this – and to improvise words when we are heartsick and don't remember any of the words we learned growing up. All I think we need to ask of a prayer is that it be genuine, a true attempt to connect with ourselves and the world beyond us. If there is in fact a personal God, I cannot for the life of me imagine that such a deity would care more about our structures than our intents – especially if this is the God of historic universalism. But I don't believe in such a God and it has not kept me from doing my best to enrich my life with forms of prayer that work for me.

The final assumption, that if you don't pray God won't pay attention to your problems, is actually rather ugly. It makes prayer something like a shopping expedition: you go into the prayer store and purchase God's attention by doing some stuff and in exchange you walk out with your problems being addressed by God which is a pretty good outcome, maybe, if it works out. Or it makes prayer like the relationship you had with that bully when you were in middle school. You had to behave in certain ways and give the bully certain things like your lunch to avoid being beaten up. Was it fair? No. But the bully had all the power. Similarly, this assumption about prayer is that God has all the power and you'd better suck up to God if you want that omnipotence to work on your behalf. If I believed in any personal God at all, it sure wouldn't be that one.

So, what do we find when we have stripped down all of these assumptions about prayer? There is no one clear answer to that question, of course, since we may respond to the sermon and indeed the topic in many different ways. But what I find is that prayer is a particular way of orienting myself to the world and to my own well-being, acknowledging my strengths and weaknesses, cultivating my humility, awe, and gratitude, and then turning outward to try to give the best I possibly can to those around me. It is simply a way to be in the world that requires not beliefs but practices, not rigidity but freedom, not fear, but trust. It may not work for everyone, but I believe deeply that we need not reject prayer completely simply because it has been swaddled in way too tight a swaddling cloth. Prayer that breathes deeply may help us breathe deeply too.

Friends, may you find ways of engaging yourself and the world fully, bravely, and hopefully, so that your own life is the richer and the many lives around you benefit from your own. Amen and blessed be.