

“Dear God, To Whom it May Concern, Hey You!”

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Dear God, please help me write this sermon! No answer. Okay, let's try this again. To Whom it May Concern, could you offer me some advice or guidance on how to get my mind working again after four months of not writing? No answer, this doesn't look good. Okay, one more time...Hey You! Sara's brain! Wake Up!

Early on in seminary I believed that the center of my life as a minister would be my personal spiritual life and practice (not that I had one at the time, but I had hope). Professors and evaluators all asked, “What is your spiritual practice?” and, like Dunn in our reading, I had no really good answer. So I thought since it seemed so important to everyone in seminary, that I would have time to sit and contemplate the ultimate questions about reality and life and the Holy once I got in the church.

Well, I've been doing this thing called parish ministry for awhile now and I've come to realize the core of my ministry is less about my personal spirituality than it is about yours, and rightly so. The foundation of my work as your minister is in helping you discover your inner truths, name what is sacred in your life and to guide you on the path of life, and in the purposes and meaning of Unitarian Universalism. It is my job to help you as a community to deepen your understanding of what it means to be a congregation, not just a gathering of individuals. My focus has become you and our community together. Needless to say, however, through the practice of ministry in real life and the daily tasks of a parish minister, my personal spiritual practice never really got off the ground, despite numerous, whole-hearted and well-meaning attempts.

But then, not long ago, I realized something profoundly simple. Within my first couples of years here, I began to light a chalice whenever I sat down to do some work; whether phone calls or notes, pastoral meetings, reading or writing. Each time I sat at my desk at home or here at the church I would light a chalice. I liked the symbolism. Somehow the flame reminded me of the larger and deeper purpose in all the tasks of ministry. The chalice reminded me of all of you, kept you in my focus. I've been doing this for years now and in fact even as I sat to write this the flame from a tall white pillar candle sat in my red pottery chalice on my desk.

After years of this, somehow along the way, something changed. I found myself saying a brief silent prayer each time I lit the chalice. "For all those, known and unknown, who need light, love and warmth in their lives, for my people and all whom I love." Every time the candle took flame these words would speak in my mind. Looking back, it seems inevitable, but to be honest I barely noticed the next shift. I found myself taking more time with each lighting to say an additional prayer for those of you I knew to be ill or struggling or hurting or celebrating. Sometimes I'd be sitting there silently wishing for each of you and all the world just what you need in life. With no conscious effort, and with little intention, prayer became central to my work and to my being.

As many of you know, a key component to my sabbatical was the creation of a book of prayer for my personal use. And I did just that, though the short draft version is more of a test run and only a fraction of what I intend to create, but I am thankful for it and what it opened for me. Don't worry, this isn't going to be a report on what I did on my sabbatical (there will be time enough for those stories over the next weeks), but rather

I wish to share with you the results of what lessons prayer has afforded me and the hope and peace that it brought.

Before we get there, however, what is prayer? In our reading this morning Philip Dunn's teacher says that all we do has prayer within it. But what does that really mean? Usually, prayer is defined as a reverent petition made to God, to the Holy, to something sacred outside of oneself. Historically, within the Judeo-Christian traditions, prayer has been seen as humanity's attempt to reach out to God, to communicate with the Divine in response to the events within one's life. People pray at meals and over newly born children, at marriages and at death. People have for millennia cried out to a creator in anger and in pain seeking comfort and justice. It appears that there lies within humanity an impulse to bring words to the profound moments of living; to ask for help from some power beyond ourselves; to seek an understanding for things inexplicable.

The Psalms are filled with such prayers; prayers of praise for God's greatness as in an excerpt of Psalm 113, "O Servants of the Lord, give praise; praise the name of the Lord. Let the name of the Lord be blessed now and forever. From east to west the name of the Lord is praised. Who is like the Lord our God, who, enthroned on high, sees what is below, in heaven and on earth? He raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the refuse heap to set them with the great." There are Psalms of thanksgiving for what God was believed to have brought into the writer's life, "I give You thanks with all my heart," begins Psalm 138, "when I called you answered me, You inspired me with courage... Though I walk among enemies, you preserve me in the face of my foes... you extend your hand, you deliver me." But the Psalms are not all about praising or thanking God, they hold pleas for help or for blessing like an excerpt from Psalm 35, "...O Lord,

be not far from me! Wake, rouse Yourself for my cause, for my claim...take up my cause...let them not rejoice over me..." And then there are the laments of how God fell short, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; why have you abandoned me; why so far from delivering me and from my anguished pleas? My God, I cry by day – You answer not; by night, and have no respite."

Now, we might not find ourselves using such language to express our inner most thoughts and desires because many Unitarian Universalists have difficulty with the idea and language of prayer. We are much more comfortable with the idea of meditation which, though is often understood as a form of prayer, comes without the baggage the concept and term prayer can elicit. Many of us would rather be asked to participate in meditation, in the quieting of one's mind, the focus on one idea or object in order to reach a state of clarity and peace. Many of us have a hard time with the idea of prayer because of hurtful, oppressive or demeaning experiences in other religious traditions and thereby associate the language and ideas of that tradition with a feeling of discomfort for some time to come. The ghost of the past can linger in the language of today. But how else do we put to words the struggles and fears, the laughter and joy of our lives; what is it we call our need to utter aloud or in our hearts those things of life that most touch us? If not prayer, what?

"Very few Unitarian Universalists today," writes Rev. Dr. John Young from the UU church of Jacksonville Florida, "think that you can manipulate the powers of the universe by what you believe or by what you sincerely address to God or to whom it may concern. This makes us suspect in the eyes and hearts of those who believe that you can pray for a new car, a lot of money, or automatic forgiveness for continued bad behavior.

Most of us don't think reality works that way. We don't think Creation, God, or reality can be pushed around, manipulated or seduced by what we say or believe.

“Because of these shared attitudes, some of us hesitate to believe that we pray. But in my personal experience over 36 years in our Unitarian Universalist ministry, I have not known a single Unitarian Universalist who did not sincerely and passionately express: gratitude, confession, and hopes at times in their lives, that were not only addressed to the people around them, but were addressed to the cosmos, reality, or God at large. By all the traditional understandings, when they do that, they are praying.”

As I have come to understand prayer, rather than only being an explicit request of a divine entity, it is also the longing, the yearning of the heart and the soul for the touch of something beyond, the touch of something infinite. Spoken prayer becomes the expression of that longing; it becomes my attempt to move my attention outside myself to what is ultimate.

Christopher Bamford asserts in the fall 2006 issue of *Parabola* that thinking becomes a form of prayer that emanates from the reading and studying of sacred text. Bamford writes, “Meditation works on the pith, chewing and savoring the food [of the spirit]. [Spoken] prayer yearns and asks for what we long for. Contemplation [the active thinking on ultimate matters] completes the process.

“Starting with ordinary thinking, we read a short [sacred] text. Slowly, reflectively, we mull over what is before us. We circle around each thought, each word. We associate. We remember. We try to gather everything we already know, seeking the essence, goodness, truth, and reality that these words – these thoughts – contain.

“[Then] we have found something,” he continues, “some insight, perhaps a thought we have never had before...So we turn our thinking around, upon ourselves. We take the subject of our thinking, our text, and apply it to ourselves. We enter into it. We go to the heart of it. We act as if these thoughts, these words, were addressed solely to us. We allow them to question us, to sink so deeply within us that they demand that we conform ourselves to them.”

So maybe, as Dunn’s teacher believed, if our meditating is prayer, and our expressed words of longing are prayer and our thinking is prayer, then in fact, within all that we do lies a prayer of one form or another. And this is what spending my sabbatical thinking, contemplating and praying taught me. That in all the work of my ministry and my life is the constant longing to reach for the sacred. To address the Holy, to call out to whom it may concern and put forth my hopes and fears, desires and disappointments to the cosmos and my innermost self.

But the one thing that was missing in all the praying that I did these past four months was you, my people. The sacred for me does not live in the hut of the hermit, nor does it require a retreat from the world to find. “Legend has it that there was one young monk who desired nothing more than to live his life in solitude as a hermit. For months he begged the abbot to allow him to go. Each time the abbot told him no, that he was too young, too inexperienced; he would have to wait. Then one day, much to the young monk’s surprise, the abbot relented and allowed him to go. He gathered the few things he would need and set off across the desert.

The next day he returned to the monastery. The abbot, not so surprised, asked him what had happened. ‘Father,’ he said, ‘I arrived at the cave and was overjoyed to be

free to discover God alone. I rejoiced over not having to cook or clean. I thought of the other brothers and their bothersome ways and I was thankful to be alone. I imagined how wonderful it would be to not have Brother James chanting off-key or Brother Philip telling his silly jokes. I arranged my things and sat down at my bench. I open my Bible to the day's reading, John 13. It begins with Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. Then I thought, whose feet will I wash here alone? I knew I could not grow closer to God until I had grown closer to my own brothers. And so I returned.' I may have finally established a strong, personal spiritual practice over the years and explored it more deeply while on sabbatical, but I still cannot fully know the Divine, what I call God without knowing you. And so I return.