

22 October, 2006 τ The Loving Aspect of Prayer τ Rev. Erika Hewitt

*“When you pray, move your feet.”* ~ African Proverb

For each of the four years that I lived in New Orleans, in the late 1990s, that city found itself topping the list of U.S. cities with the highest homicide rate. It felt like a dangerous city to live in because shootings and other violent crimes were so unceasing, and random, and seemingly unstemmable.

During one particularly violent summer, I was at the Winn Dixie when I noticed that many of the store’s cashiers were wearing buttons that said, PUSH: “P.U.S.H.” Those letters, if you read the small print, stood for “Pray Until Something Happens.”

*Like what?*, I remember thinking. What’s the *Something* that they’re praying for, to end the rash of homicides in our city? Pray....until each and every family in New Orleans loses someone to violence, and we finally say “no more” and take back our neighborhoods? Until we acknowledge and reverse the corruption that funnels money away from families living in the housing projects and into the pockets of the over-privileged? Until we stand in the streets and say “this violence is not acceptable” with passion equal to our lining the streets and begging for Mardi Gras beads?

I don’t think that’s what the button-wearers had in mind. Although I was too timid to ask what my fellow citizens were praying for, what it meant to “Pray Until Something Happens,” I suspect the *Something* they were praying for was a divine intervention of some sort, a supernatural miracle, wherein God would charge into town smiting people left and right until only the righteous were left in the city.

The problem is, that’s a theological game of Russian Roulette. If you believe in a Superhero God who’s stirred into saving a city if we just pray hard enough, then you can believe in a God who punishes wicked cities by destroying them with hurricanes. When theologies draw lines of exclusion and judgment; when they fail to do justice to the magnificent, unconditionally-loving Force that is the Holy Presence, I believe, they create more harm than comfort, and distort our already-tenuous process of knowing truth.

What do we Unitarian Universalists mean when we speak of praying for people, and for situations? What are the theological implications of those prayers?

All month long, we've been exploring different aspects of praying – ways to “connect and reconnect to the source of our lives.”<sup>1</sup> We took apart the concept of “prayer” – which many Unitarian Universalists feel unsure or ambivalent about – and discovered ways to re-imagine its many forms, uses, and gifts. Our journey began with the most complicated aspect of prayer, *Naming*, which led to the *Knowing* aspect of prayer, and arrived last Sunday at prayer that is *Listening*. All three are very personal, inwardly focused ways to connect and reconnect to the source of our lives.

The last stop in our series is an aspect of prayer that draws us *outward*, emphasizing our part in the communal human family. *Loving* prayer sparks our awareness of the larger world, acknowledging the interconnections among all beings. The Loving aspect of prayer requires us not only to name our hopes for the world but also to, in the words of an African proverb, “move our feet,” so that we bring that world into being.

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Unitarian Universalists have inherited a legacy of motion, of action, and of service from our religious ancestors. Our Universalist tradition, in particular, rested on the conviction that we are the earthly vehicle for God's unconditional and unending love; that ours are the faces, the voices, the hands, the feet of the Holy. Universalists figured that if all beings are saved (and therefore bound for the welcoming arms of a joyful afterlife), then our work on this earth is not to save souls, but to create heaven here on earth through a new social and economic order, driven by “the help of the strong for the weak until the weak become strong.”<sup>2</sup>

Our Universalist ancestors were the fire behind many social reform movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including abolition, women's rights, temperance, prison reform, labor relations, and the creation of homes for orphans and the aging and infirm<sup>3</sup> (they must have very busy, and very tired, people!). So perhaps you can understand why, nearly a century ago, the dean of Ryder Divinity School in Chicago, said, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move.”<sup>4</sup>

The Universalists “moved their feet,” all right – but in response to an *ecclesiastical* position: a denomination-wide theology. We, the inheritors of their tradition, have woven new strands into Unitarian Universalism: the threads of our unique spirituality, as individuals, and our personal spiritual practices that give shape and life to our progressive religious values.

Are we called to repair and bless the world not through an ecclesiastical or theological

imperative? Perhaps. But the practice of Loving prayer suggests that we might also be called through this most private act. We engage the Spirit of Life (the Ultimate, the Ground of Being), through Loving prayer, with the hope of being engaged with **in return**, and of being **acted upon**.

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In *Simply Pray*, Erik Walker Wikstrom describes a few forms of Loving prayer, beginning with the method of sitting in “an attitude of loving concern” and calling up the names and faces of people you want to pray for.<sup>5</sup> The practice of traveling down your list – whether spontaneous or prepared – requires devotion, rather than checking people off as if it were a grocery list.

A deeper form of Loving prayer is to engage in deep listening, rather than have a fixed idea of where our prayer will take us. “Allow yourself to quiet the chatter of your mind,” Wikstrom suggests,<sup>6</sup> “and see who comes into your consciousness. Assume this is the person for whom you are to pray.” Who, or what, calls for your attention?

The non-theist frame for this practice is that “your subconscious... bring[s] to your attention that about which you care most;” the God-language frame is that “you move yourself out of the way so that God can tell you who is in need of your prayer.”<sup>7</sup>

Either way, “we engage in Loving prayer, [and] we are engaged with in return,”<sup>8</sup> because this practice enlarges our awareness of the brokenness in the world, whether it’s a friend’s need for emotional support or the need to bear witness to the suffering of a people on the other side of the Earth. “We most certainly can do nothing to help a situation... that we don’t know exists,” says Wikstrom. “Whether or not you believe that there is a ‘God’ listening to your prayers, bringing the needs of other into your consciousness has merit.”<sup>9</sup> Loving prayer that broadens our aware of the needs in the wider world also invites us to be changed, to shift internally, to choose to be transformed.

τ Clearly, this practice is very different than what some of us slip into, at times, especially in moments of desperation: pleading, demanding forms of prayer, in which we bargain with the Universe, make promises, and zero in on what we’re certain is best. We pray for outcomes that, in the tangle of time and chance, might pale in comparison to the glory of what could actually be, or that might turn out to be just plain bad for us.

To say that such prayers border on *obsession* isn’t too strong a word; obsession is a fixed, unyielding state that closes us off both from *possibility* and from *listening* with openness. This is why, since time immemorial, spiritual leaders “have suggested that

prayers should...include an element of openness to the unknown and unseen possibilities....It is often very difficult to know for certain what the best possible outcome of a situation is – for ourselves or for others.”<sup>10</sup>

τ The assertion that we are changed by opening our awareness through Loving prayer cuts nicely around the question of whether, or how, our prayers for help and healing can elicit concrete responses from the Universe.

On one hand, I believe what many studies have shown: that prayers for healing can and do affect our physical wellness – our own, and others’. But the fact that people do suffer and die, despite fervent prayers, is evidence of a larger Mystery, an Incomprehensibility, at work (an Incomprehensibility that, when people attempt to explain it, dissolves into “bad theology”). I can only concur with Erik Wikstrom,<sup>11</sup> who warns that, “We should never allow ourselves to imagine that our prayers directly create specific outcomes. Theists and nontheists alike agree that it doesn’t work like that.”

How *does* it work, then? If we can’t be certain that Loving prayer creates palpable ripples in the fabric of our reality, then why do it?

For ourselves. We can “move our feet” – we can make subtle shifts in the world around us – only after an internal shift occurs. Loving prayer is an invitation to be changed; it offers us a choice. This is how writer Martha Beck explains<sup>12</sup> that choice:

For the past several years, it seems I get everything I pray for...It has something to do with the way I’ve learned to pray, which is more about listening than demanding. Every day, if I can still my body and mind enough to hear Silence, I notice that my heart is yearning toward certain things, avoiding others. It’s when I voice this deep yearning that my prayers are answered. And nothing else I might ask for really matters.

I don’t believe that having one’s prayers answered is a sign of favor; it’s just what happens when anyone prays sincerely....My God is...amorphous, more of a universal constant, like gravity or magnetism. This constant doesn’t pick favorites; it simply flows into any opening we make for it...I believe that the line between good and evil doesn’t separate human

beings into different categories; it runs through every one of us, and every moment is a choice: heal or destroy.

Loving prayer creates the opening for the universal constant of love to flow into us, to seep into the cracks around a hardened heart and quietly do its work.

Loving prayer is an acknowledgement that all is not well in the world – that perhaps all is not well with our own soul – but that it our own rough edges and pain are sufficient for meeting the world's brokenness.

Loving prayer is letting in the pain and injustice around us, and choosing to keep steadfast faith with those who uphold life.

Loving prayer is a choice to bless the world.

I leave you with these words from the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker:

“The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,  
a moving forward into the world,  
with the intention to do good.

It's an act of recognition,  
a confession of surprise, a grateful acknowledgement  
that in the midst of a broken world  
unspeakable beauty, grace, and mystery abide...

And where there is injustice,  
anesthetization, or evil there moves  
a holy disturbance,  
a benevolent rage,  
a revolutionary love  
protesting, urging, insisting  
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live

their lives as a gesture of thanks  
for this beauty  
and this rage.”

May you choose to heal, to bless the world,  
to live your life as this gesture of thanks,  
this prayer of love.

**Benediction** – the words of the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker:

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—  
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind’s power,  
The strength of the hands,  
The reaches of the heart,  
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
Bind up wounds,  
Welcome the stranger,  
Praise what is sacred,  
Do the work of justice  
Or offer love.

You must answer this question:  
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

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1. Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Simply Pray*, p. 6
  2. In Rev. Clarence Skinner's "A Declaration of Social Principles," 1917, written for the Commission on Social Service. Cited in *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* by Charles A. Howe, p. 94.
  3. See Howe, esp. Chapter 6
  4. Cited in Howe, p. 96
  5. Wikstrom, p. 39
  6. Wikstrom, p. 40
  7. Ibid.
  8. Wikstrom, p. 45
  9. Wikstrom, p. 37-8
  10. Wikstrom, p. 44
  11. Wikstrom, p. 44
  12. Martha Beck, *Leaving the Saints*, p. 194