

L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle
(The love that moves the sun and the other stars)

~ The Naming Aspect of Prayer
by Rev. Erika Hewitt

For the past six months, my “go with me everywhere” bag has been home to a hand-strung loop of prayer beads. I use them occasionally, but more often just hold the beads in my fingers to remind me of the journey whose reward they are. My journey of prayer (along with the design and significance of these beads) was catalyzed by *Simply Pray*, a prayer guide written by my colleague Erik Walker Wikstrom; it forms the backbone of the sermons you’ll hear this month.

For the next four Sundays, I’m going to look at four aspects of prayer, four steps for “connecting and reconnecting to the source of our lives.”¹ (That will serve as the definition of “prayer” for this series: “connecting and reconnecting to the source of our lives.”) These sequential approaches to prayer – **naming, knowing, listening, and loving** – are “core elements that are common across the religious landscape...practiced in one form or another by every religious tradition.”²

Prayer is probably the oldest, most universal spiritual practice of the human family, and yet prayer might seem obsolete or stale to us unless we take the time to view prayer as we do our faith journeys, which we know to be dynamic, malleable, and opening to make room for new sources of truth and meaning.

Please be clear about this: the gifts of our Unitarian Universalist tradition are many; one of them is our individual authority to be as creative as we need to be in naming our relationship with the “All That Is.” In other religious traditions, the names of, and metaphors for, God are provided for followers. The juicy freedom that we have, as Unitarian Universalists, is to use our *personal experience* and our *inner authority* to give shape to our spiritual life.

This is precious work. Not only are Unitarian Universalists in a unique position to re-imagine and re-craft our ways of approaching the Holy, the Oneness that underlies our being – it’s what many of us yearn for: to find pockets of space in which we return to our fullest selves and remember our wholeness; to remove that which “grows between

our hearts and the day;”³ to live in greater awareness of the Larger-Than-I.

Whether we approach the Great Mysterious with awe, despair, or soul-deep questioning, we seek to connect with it; to seek to connect with it implies **relationship**. The first step “in establishing a relationship with... the wider life of which we are all a part”⁴ is **naming**.

By “Naming Prayer,” I mean a process by which we establish a metaphor for how the Presence of Life is visible or palpable in our day-to-day experience. Metaphor is the best we can do, after all, because there is no single definitive or finite experience of the Holy. Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that “we are always naming *toward* God, using good, true and beautiful fragments that we experience in the world to point to the infinite mystery who embraces the world.”

Let’s tackle the first problem of Naming Prayer straightaway: What if your theology doesn’t include “God”? Who or what do can we *name*, if we don’t name a Holy Presence? That depends on *with whom* you desire to establish, or deepen, a relationship... and there are at least three ways to enter into naming prayer, deepening relationship, without a belief in God.

(1) My colleague Tom Schade calls this aspect of prayer “naming the goodness.” When I take the time to lift my head and simply look at the beauty and joy in my life, remembering to be grateful for each one, that’s a form of prayer. As Meister Eckhart wrote, “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.”

(2) Naming prayer can also consist of remembering earlier generations of our family. Many indigenous religions, especially in Africa and East Asia, center around praying to the ancestors: calling into the present moment those who aren’t visibly present, but who live in our genes, our blood, and our memories, “still...living and engaged with [our] lives.”⁵

As Thich Nhat Hanh explains from his perspective as a Vietnamese Buddhist monk,⁶

...nothing is born and nothing dies. When [our ancestors] die, they are no longer with us in the way they used to be. But they could be manifesting themselves in

some other way that our eyes are not yet able to recognize. They are always there. So it is still effective to pray to our [ancestors].

In this sense, a prayer practice of naming involves recalling the names, faces, and stories of our family members – whether we knew them or not – as a means of honoring something much larger than our own lifespan.

(3) A naming practice of prayer can also be meaningful, even without a belief in God, when our intention is to create a new thread of energy in the universe. In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh,⁷

When we meditate with our focus on compassion,...this transmission of energy is a form of prayer....When our heart is full of love, then we are creating more love, peace, and joy in the world.... the important thing is that the energy is there and the heart of love is there and is being sent out into the world.

Dr. Larry Dossey affirms this by explaining that scores of scientific experiments ⁸

paint a picture of human consciousness that is nonlocal, a fancy word for “infinite.” Our individual mind appears to be connected with all other minds, no matter how far apart. Individual minds appear to be unbounded... Therefore, the most significant contribution that prayer makes to our welfare is.... the realization that we are infinite, eternal, and one.

To focus our prayerful “naming energy” on the Ultimate Reality that all beings share, then, is to renew our sense of participation with the collective consciousness.

For those who *do* hold a belief in a Larger Presence, people across time and space have created many different forms of naming prayer. Seven centuries ago, for example, in his *Paradiso* book of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante described God as “*L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*,” or “The love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

As another example, in African religions, names for God reflect traditional values of “communal experience and closeness to nature.” Many of the names for the Holy translate as “the One who”⁹:

the One you confide your troubles to
the One who can turn everything upside down
the One there from ancient times
the One who began the forest
the One who gives birth to the people
the One who does not die
the One who has not let us down yet
the One who has seen many moons
the One who thunders from far-off times
the One who carries everyone on her back
the One who is heard in all the world

If words neither ancient nor exotic speak to you, the philosopher Sam Keen urges you to “invent new names...; use them once and discard them. Stretch language to its breaking point. There are no literal truths in the realm of theology, so get wild and excessive.”¹⁰ Instead of “God,” Keen suggests these names:

The Quantum Leaper

Being-Becoming-Itself

The Subject that Encompasses All Predicates.

The Great Whomever or Whatever that Is Within-Without-Beside-Before-After-and-During.

The Verb that Activates All Other Verbs.

The Cosmic DNA.

The Source from Whom All Longing Flows.

The Eternal Not Yet.

Despite the seduction of these whimsical and personalized names, there’s something to be said for the names for God that have been spoken by tens of millions of people for thousands of years. Each of the Abrahamic faiths – Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – has its own long-standing way to name, and call upon, the Great Force Moving Through All.

In Islam, God, or Allah, has ninety-nine names (the one-hundredth name is hidden); among them are *Al-Wahhab* (*The Bestower, The One who is generous in giving plenty without any return*) and *Al-Mujeeb* (*The Responsive, The One who answers whomever*

calls upon HIm).

In Judaism, God's name is considered so sacred and so imbued with power, that it ought not be written or spoken out loud in casual contexts, lest it become an idol. Those who strictly observe this Jewish practice refer to the Holy as *Hashem*, which means "The Name" – the name that is so sacred that to speak it would be to dishonor it.

Of course, the Christian tradition in which Unitarian Universalism has its roots also has its own names for God – there are more than fifty terms for the Holy in the Hebrew Bible alone (from *El Shaddai*, or "Self-Sufficient," to "I Am Who Am"). While it's not necessary for us to use these names comfortably, some Unitarian Universalists have found agency and meaning in reclaiming that language. The UU minister and blogger "PeaceBang" cheerfully uses the name "Lord"¹¹ because, she says,

My tradition – the Unitarian and the Universalist ones, that is – boldly claim that the LORD is a mighty advocate for the poor, a shepherd who wants to make of the warring human nations one people, and a lover who calls us to intimate and even erotic relationship with this world...

["Lord"] is bombastic and majestic, powerful and evocative... For those of us who adore Micah's question, "What [does the Lord require of you?]" and try to live by its answer ("do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God")... "LORD" becomes a word we like to hear roll around in our mouths, rumble like thunder in our mortal bellies, and sound like drums in our heads... I use ["Lord"] as a UU because it is for me the most powerful, Charles Heston-ish name for the holy that the Western world has produced, and I'll be...damned if I let the Pat Robertsons of the world use it as a whipping rod against those you and I are called to love and to speak up for, least of all ourselves.

I'm not suggesting that all UU's should embrace "Lord" language -- PeaceBang's choice need not be ours. I'm not implying that there's a hierarchy of language, wherein we evolve upwards by moving closer to the name "God."

What I want you to hear is the breadth of what it means to name the Holy, as a Unitarian Universalist. I want you to hear *possibility*: your right to take ownership of language that we've been divorced from, or that's never even occurred to you. I want

you to hear that there is no right way to acknowledge the presence of Mystery; that the only “wrong” way to engage that Mystery – if there is one – is to do so inauthentically, or constrained by limits.

With whom, with what, is your relationship?

By what name do you know call the journey of deepening your spirit, and growing your soul?

Whose power will you ultimately call upon, in honoring the Ground of Being?

May you live into these questions, and may they shape the journey of your connecting, and reconnecting, to the source of your lives.

May it be so.

1. Wikstrom, p. 6.

2. Wikstrom, p. 8.

3. Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, p. 119.

4. Wikstrom, p. 18.

5. Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions*, pp. 38-40.

6. Thich Naht Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer*, p. 65.

7. Ibid., p. 39.

8. In *The Energy of Prayer*, pp. 13-14.

9. Elizabeth Johnson, “Naming God She: The Theological Implications.” Broadman Lecture in Christian Ethics, University of Pennsylvania, 2000. See

<http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=boardman#search=%22%22the%20one%20there%20from%20ancient%20times%22%22>

10. “In the Beginning Was Silence,” by Sam Keen. See

www.beliefnet.com/story/12/story_1261_1.html

11. This blog can be found at <http://peacebang.blogspot.com/2006/06/lord-lord-lord.html>