

“On an Inward Journey”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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The Reverend Judy Welles©

Invitation to Worship

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Recently when I should have been doing reading for my church history class, I found myself instead reading a new book that seemed to speak directly to me. The book was Karen Armstrong’s *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). Karen Armstrong is a British woman who has written extensively about religion including biographies of Mohammed and Buddha, a history of Islam and *A History of God*, but this book is her own story.

Her story is fascinating. As an emotionally intense adolescent, she entered a convent at age 17; she wanted to find God and to experience transformation. Instead, she lost her voice and her ability to think for herself. Required to pray in a proscribed manner each day, she confessed she had never felt consolation in this prayer. “I hugged to myself the shameful secret that unlike the other sisters, I could not pray – and we were told that without prayer our religious lives were a complete sham (p. 41-42).”

Seven years later, she left the convent “withdrawn, bitter, weary, frightened and ill (p. xix).” She lost any belief in God and no longer sought transformation. Yet the book tells how she in fact experienced a spiritual transformation and experienced moments of transcendence. She reclaimed her own life and found her voice. “In the past, my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas, true faith, I now believe, should make you more human than before (p.271).”

What spoke so directly to my life experience is not the content of her life story, but rather what she articulated about the process. “Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things which change you (p.270).” Essential to an authentic spiritual journey is the experience of pain and sorrow; it is allowing self to truly feel one’s feelings. Ms. Armstrong had distanced herself from her own pain for many years. When she began to feel it, she began to change. Truly recognizing one’s own suffering is necessary to recognize the suffering of the other. This recognition leads to compassion, to feel with.

We need to be compassionate with ourselves. Then we can be genuinely empathic and compassionate toward others. Karen Armstrong began to practice what she called “the spirituality of empathy.” Recognizing your own feelings is also necessary to the recognition of reality, to being open to what is.

Another essential practice that of finding what is your authentic way to live. Rather than follow socially conventional scripts, we must discover our own words.

Pain is unavoidable in life. Feeling it allows us to experience greater connection, greater joy in life. We may begin to see our unique path to meaning. And we can learn to pray our own prayer, the prayer of our lives.

First Reading

One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, this father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the car seat, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"¹

Second Reading

Let's consider prayer. Prayer is a topic that's made much too complicated by all the books and teachings on it. The fact is that prayer is the most simple, natural thing in the world. The only problem with prayer is to take away all the attitudes and preconceptions that keep us from prayer. I've come to think that prayer is simply being in touch with the most honest, deepest desires of the heart. What we have to push aside, then, are ideas about how we should feel, what we should want. What we need to push aside are ideas we learned about what kinds of words or language we should use, or even the idea that we need to use any kind of language at all. What we need to push aside is the idea that we need to have a systematic theology all worked out about the nature of God, the universe, human purpose, before we are qualified to turn our hearts in prayer. We don't need to have a definition of ultimate reality to pray. There's no specific idea of God that's necessary. Prayer is simply getting in touch with the deepest desires and currents of the heart in quiet, and in as much trust as we can muster, with as much honesty as we can possibly find. That's all. Prayers pray themselves.²

Sermon

The Rev. Judy Welles

I would like to re-introduce you to prayer this morning as though it were a raisin — something you think you already know about, but might experience in a new way if invited to do so. So I'm inviting you to take all your ideas about prayer — what it is,

¹ Foster, Richard, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Harper San Francisco, 1992, pp.3-4

² Straube, Arvid, from "A Spiritual Maintenance Schedule" in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, Scott Alexander, ed., Skinner House Books, Boston, 1999, p. 34

how to do it, whether it works or not, who or what might hear it, why you think it's maybe a good idea or maybe not — just take all those ideas and put them in a bag, and hang that bag off to the side. Just close it up and put it over there...

Now let's begin again with a blank slate. Hmmmm, prayer... what a concept. I wonder what that is... I'm not going to tell you definitively what it is (I couldn't), but I do hope to offer you some thoughts and observations this morning that might encourage you to think about prayer in a new way, maybe even open you to the possibility that there is a place for prayer in your life, if it isn't there already.

If you could only say one thing about Unitarian Universalist theology, you would probably say that it is based on personal authority, personal experience, the individual's inner knowing and understanding. While we respect the teachings of many religions, and have deep roots in the Christian tradition, we value our own right and our own ability to determine our religious understandings for ourselves. This is why we don't have a specific creed or profession of faith that we must accept in order to call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. Our ultimate source of religious authority is inner, personal, and private.

So it is also with prayer. Prayer is inner, personal, and private. Yes, of course there is public prayer, corporate prayer. We are offered that opportunity when we come together here on Sunday mornings. But regardless of the words of the worship leader, who is praying aloud on our behalf and trying to lead us toward some common experience, we don't all recite the same prayer out loud. We don't all pray the same words. Undoubtedly we don't all share the same thoughts.

Prayer, by its very nature, is intensely private. No one need ever know whether you pray, how you pray, to whom or what your prayers are addressed or whether your prayers are answered in some form — unless you choose to tell them. Prayer is about going deep inside, on an inward journey, and hopefully finding a place of comfort and solace there. Prayer is quieting the chatter, turning inward away from the demands of the world, and coming to a place of respite and peace within. It is a response to some inner yearning, a desire to connect this small, individual, flesh-and-blood person with something larger, something beyond ourselves, something elusive and indescribable.

In this way, prayer is about relationship, building and deepening a relationship with... well, with something, so of course the question immediately arises: relationship with what? With whom? What is it that prayer attempts to connect us with?

I think it is very difficult for many Unitarian Universalists to acknowledge that they have an inner yearning for connection with God. How could this *not* be so; how could it not be difficult? There is probably no more charged and challenging issue for the majority of Unitarian Universalists than the issue of God, whether there is a God, the nature of God, our relationship to God — “the whole catastrophe,” as Zorba the Greek said. And considering prayer almost forces us to consider God at the same time, because isn't prayer about connecting with God?

Well, maybe it is and maybe it isn't. But before I go there, I want to offer you a suggestion – or maybe it's a challenge – that might make it easier for you to hear my meaning this morning without getting too caught up in the words.

Much of my preparation for ministry and my continuing education in ministry has involved reading materials written by and intended for Christians. Early in my formation, I had to learn the art of instantaneous translation, so that as a non-Christian, I could still make use of the good ideas in the materials I encountered. I had to learn to think in concepts and metaphors, and not get caught up in language that wasn't quite right for me.

This is a skill we could all profit by. We live in a culture that is imbued with Christian imagery, shaped by Christian messages. There is a lot in those stories and images that is powerful, useful, meaningful, and worthy of our attention. If you allow yourself to be stopped by a vocabulary that isn't your own, you will miss out on some rich opportunities for learning and growth. So I want to encourage you to develop a facility with the art of instantaneous translation, going beyond the words to the meaning behind the words, and then putting your own words or images onto that meaning so that you can claim it for yourself.

Here is what I'd like to suggest for this morning's sermon, if you're having trouble with the word "God." If you are a Macintosh computer user, you've probably seen an icon on your screen to indicate something that isn't there. It's a small blue box with a white question mark in it, used sometimes if there is supposed to be a photograph or an image there, but that photograph or image didn't download with the text. I want to suggest to you that if you find yourself balking when I say "God," you immediately replace the word with that icon of a box with a question mark in it. An image to indicate that something isn't there.

What I'm talking about this morning is the nature of prayer, not the nature of God. Yet because the nature of prayer is about connecting, we can't fully turn away from the question, "connecting with what?" Maybe that little blue box with the question mark in it can carry you through this morning, and allow you to come with me into this exploration whether or not "God" is a word that is meaningful to you.

One of the most important things I can say about prayer is this: there is no right way to do it. And by the same token there is no wrong way to do it. There is no judge, no rating system, no rules. As Arvid Straube wrote, "prayer is simply being in touch with the most honest, deepest desires of the heart." It might take a while to get there, to settle down enough so that you can really listen to the longings of your heart. So it might help if you found a quiet place, turned off the telephone, closed the door, and gave yourself some quality time alone with yourself.

But there are no rules about what to say or think. Prayer is more like encountering the raisin than it is saying something specific: you just notice, contemplate, and the observations will arise of their own accord. The noticing will take you somewhere, and if you keep your heart open and pay attention, perhaps you will

become aware of what it is you long for. Perhaps you will begin to make a connection with what you long for, so that with the regular practice of this open-hearted prayer, the connection will become manifest.

When Bill Sinkford was running for President of the Unitarian Universalist Association several years ago, Duane and I were among his strong supporters and campaign workers. We had been in seminary with Bill; we knew his leadership skills, his accessibility, his vision for what the UUA could become. But that's not why I supported him, even though I value all those traits. What drew me to Bill was his deeply spiritual nature. This is a man who brings compelling religious authenticity to his position as our leader and spokesperson. There is something about Bill that very quietly but very powerfully exudes spiritual strength and commitment. I remember the first time I heard him lead a public prayer at General Assembly. He began by asking "Please enter the space of silence and honesty, which is known by many names. Let us open our hearts in prayer." It was the first time I had thought of honesty in relationship to prayer, and it immediately made perfect sense to me.

The open, prayerful heart is a place of pure honesty. What could possibly be hidden there? What deceit or untruth could possibly be spoken or even thought? If prayer is about developing and nurturing a relationship with God, surely God already knows what is in your heart. You don't have to impress anyone. You have nothing to hide; there is nothing you possibly *could* hide. What a relief, to spend time in a place of pure honesty where you can be exactly who you are, faults and shortcomings and warts and all. No role to fulfill, no expectations to meet, no agenda, no to-do list. Just you in that place of honesty, quietly coming into awareness of the deepest yearnings of your heart.

Now here's another place where it gets difficult to talk about the nature of prayer without talking about the nature of God. Some of us were brought up with a very different understanding about God than the presence that knows what is in our hearts and loves us nevertheless. Some of us may have a hard time shaking the idea of a vengeful and punishing God, a God of judgment who searches our hearts and finds us wanting, deems us failures worthy only of punishment, a God who created humans as sinful beings and then demanded their adherence to strict rules of behavior and obedience in order to be saved and redeemed from their sinful nature. If you have been imprinted with this image of a fearful and angry God since childhood, it can be difficult to imagine God in any other way.

Yet that is exactly what our Universalist forebears did. They preached and wrote and spoke about the God who loves us so unconditionally that we can never be separated from God's love. We are so imbued with the love of God that we have nothing to hide from God, nothing to fear from God.

Now if you find that blue box with the question mark in it popping up in your mind right now, think about the father in the shopping mall. It could just as easily be a mother. The loving parent whose kid is being a brat, but who finds a way to move past

annoyance and frustration to an acknowledgement of how deeply that child is loved. The loving force that reminds the child — could that child be me? — that she is loved, she is a delight, she makes others happy, she is perfect (even if sometimes badly-behaved). How good it is to relax into that kind of love, to be reminded of it, to feel it, to let it calm you and give you comfort and peace.

Prayer invites us into an awareness of the intimate relationship we have with that Great Whatever. I remember the very first time I was asked to pray with someone, out loud. (This had never been part of my practice as a Unitarian Universalist until I entered the ministry.) I was serving as a hospital chaplain, and I visited a woman who had recently had back surgery. Because of her allergies to certain medications, she was not taking any pain relievers, and she was in a great deal of pain. I remember her as dignified, loving and composed in spite of her physical distress. When she asked me to pray with her, I drew in a deep breath and began, “Dear God, please be with Mrs. Brown during this difficult time...” and she put her hand on my arm, stopping me in mid-sentence. “It’s Margaret, dear,” she said to me.

Of course! God knows our first names! We are on first-name terms with God. There is that place of honesty again — the place where we are known already through and through, where there’s no sense lying to ourselves or To Whom It May Concern.

When Duane and I did the Question Box sermon a few weeks ago, someone asked “Why is it so difficult to ask for help?” I thought of that question in connection with today’s sermon because of the issue of honesty. Prayer, the opening of our hearts to our deepest desires, can help us to acknowledge when we do need help. Perhaps it’s difficult to acknowledge in other contexts where we have an image to maintain — to ourselves or to others — that we are competent, fully capable of handling whatever befalls us. But in prayer perhaps we can find the courage to admit that we need help, that we are in over our depth, stretched too thin.

Honest prayer can bring us to compassion for others. If we need help, probably they do, too. If we seek solace, perhaps they are in pain as well. By learning to open our hearts to our own deepest yearnings, we learn also to open our hearts to others. When we begin to make manifest our connection with whatever it is that lies beyond, we also strengthen our connections with our sisters and brothers whose lives and yearnings are, after all, not so very different from our own.

Of course many people have this openness of heart even without learning to pray. Perhaps you read the story in a recent issue of the *U.U. World* in which a woman wrote about her elderly neighbor whose beloved husband had died. This neighbor kept his ashes at home, waiting until the weather warmed up enough to bury them in her back yard. One day the writer’s seven-year old son David didn’t come home for dinner, even after being called repeatedly, even after his mother went out to look for him. Eventually he turned up, flushed and talkative. Turns out the widow had snagged him and another boy and conscripted them into digging a hole in her garden in which to

bury her husband's ashes. She had cried and held onto the boys after they dumped the ashes into the hole, and then they said the Lord's Prayer.

Well, the widow and the other boy said it. David didn't know the Lord's Prayer, and he was upset because he thought he should. His mother reminded that he had known what to do that really mattered, to let the widow cry and hold him, to be fully present with her at a moment of grief. She concludes, "He may not have known the Lord's Prayer, but he knew churches aren't the only sacred places. He knew the most sacred place is the one he carried inside him, and that he could stand with an elderly woman burying her dead and say his own prayer."³

It's interesting to me that the only thing his disciples asked Jesus to teach them was how to pray. His response was to teach them the Lord's Prayer. I know it well not only because we said it aloud every Sunday in my Unitarian Sunday School, but also because we said it every weekday in school (yes, public school) after a Bible verse was read. I seldom gave it much thought, except to notice that the Catholic kids in my classroom stopped speaking before the Protestants, whose version ended with "...for thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, forever and ever, Amen." Memorizing this prayer and saying it every day trivialized it for me; it had less meaning, perhaps because it was commonly understood to be the *right* way to pray.

Let me say this again: there is no right way to pray. There is no wrong way to pray. There is just you in that quiet place of openness and honesty, getting in touch with the deepest desires of your heart. You own your prayer life. It's just yours and no one else's — inner, personal and private. Perhaps Jesus got it right after all, when he said to the disciples, "...and when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your God who is in secret."

Let the silence be our Amen.

³ Aldrich, Marcia, "Impromptu Mourner," *U.U. World* May-June, 2004, p. 20-21.