

To Whom It May Concern

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*Prayer may not change things for you,
but it for sure changes you for things.*

— Samuel M. Shoemaker

Call to Worship Kim van Alkemade

“Dear lord god, we pray to you in the name of your son Jesus, please look down on Kevin and through your love, lord god, please help him to heal, we pray in Jesus name, amen.” This is the prayer (a rather shortened version, let me assure you) that my sister-in-law made on behalf of my ex-husband during his recovery from a cerebral hemorrhage last summer. He has healed remarkably well, and the prayer was really nice, but . . . I have a big problem with the word “pray.”

Now, I know people will say that prayer is like meditation, or soul searching, or contemplation of the mysteries of the universe. But I’m an English teacher and a writer; I think if you are going to contemplate the mysteries of the universe or emanate positive



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thoughts, you should just say so. To pray, to me, sounds like asking for something, because usually the word "pray" is linked with the word "for" as in, "to pray for." And the list of things people pray for is pretty endless. People pray for health or a cure or a miracle, they pray for their team to win, they pray for rain or sun or snow (depending on the season and the occasion), they pray for safe journeys or smooth sailing or calm skies, they pray for better jobs, they pray for a sign, they pray on behalf of others, they pray for favors large and small, they negotiate bargains, they beg.

For me, praying leads to the question, to whom are these prayers addressed? When people pray for certain kinds of weather or for health or for their team to win, the implication is there is some all-powerful entity with the ability to change rain to snow, to take away cancer, to favor the Yankees. Now, I don't happen to believe there is such an entity with these precise abilities, but that's beside the point. What really bothers me about prayer is this: why should this entity give you what you want, even if it could? And if it can give you what you want, what do you do with your belief in this entity when you don't get what you asked for, no matter how sincerely? But most frustrating to me about the concept of prayer is this: why should I get what I want, when people the earth over are getting too much rain or not enough, are contracting viruses or losing games or suffering through long days of terrible conditions at work? One reason I don't pray for anything is because the implications of actually getting it are too terrible to bear.

Now, I know many, many people are comforted by the notion of a god who cares for them personally and can intervene in their lives, but for me, this idea is profoundly distressing. When people say they are praying for me, I try to accept it graciously, mentally translating prayer into "think positive thoughts on your behalf." And if rain comes when it's needed or things go well at my job or my ex-husband recovers or the Yankees win, I'm just generally grateful, but not to anyone or anything in particular. Come, let us have a common religious experience often called "worship" together.

Reading

"Let me not pray..."
by Rabindranath Tagore

Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,
But to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain,
But for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not look for allies in life's battlefield,
But to my own strength.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved,
But hope for the patience to win my freedom.

Grant me that I may not be a coward,
feeling your mercy in my success alone,
But let me find the grasp of your hand in my failure.

Sermon

Duane Fickeisen

Folksinger John Wesley Harding has written a song for his New Deal album released this summer with this prayer:

"...To whom it may concern
Now we will begin
I'm not gonna post this
I'll just throw it in the wind
And wonder where it lands
But I know that it will reach you somehow
I know that it will be received
I must believe

"I hope we'll be alright with you
I hope we'll be alright with you
I remain your faithful servant..."

Prayer does involve faith that it will be received, despite not knowing where it will land or how it will get there. Our tradition has long believed that no mediator is needed between the holy and us. No intercessor is required. Each of us has a direct line to the ultimate.

We affirm that there is one source. We call ourselves Unitarian to signal our belief that *all is one*. *Edge az Ishten* as our Transylvanian brothers and sisters say in Hungarian — God is One. We

covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, thus declaring our connection with the source.

Lest we get too cocky about our unity with the divine, let us not forget that we are but one part of that vast web. Systems theory tells us that because it is an interconnected web with an astonishingly large number of linkages and interdependencies, how we are, what we think, and what we do impact the other parts of the web in ways we can't ever fully comprehend, and in turn we are affected by each of the other entities. Who we are, how we are, what we think, and what we do are influenced by our relationships with other entities and events.

In the tradition of Martin Luther, we affirm the priesthood of all believers. The radical protestant churches that are part of our tradition arose from the Anabaptist movement, and with them, we affirm the authority of the individual in matters of faith. Each of us has inherent worth and dignity as another of our principles affirms. The Universalist part of our name signals our affirmation of the ultimate expectation that all of us comes from and will return to the same source. Or as some imagine it, we are all connected to one another and to the cosmos. *All are one*. We affirm that the source is benevolent, loving, and filled with compassion.

We are Unitarian Universalists because we affirm that there is one source and that we are all intimately and ultimately connected to it. "*All is one, all are one*" might well be our mantra and chant.

Another of our most fundamental tenets is that revelation is not sealed. By that we mean that as new evidence comes to us, we reexamine and adapt our theological understandings in an ongoing process of making meaning.

The process theology and metaphysics of Unitarian philosopher Charles Hartshorne and others claim that the physical world is the manifestation of events and that every moment — every entity — represents the opportunity for novelty and creativity as new events unfold from the past, informed, but not fully determined by it. As creative agents, we have free will and our choices matter.

For Hartshorne, there is a force that wants us to make good choices and that acts by allurements — by urging us to choose the path that leads toward more of what he names 'enjoyment' in the world. You might substitute 'love' for 'enjoyment' or simply think

of the allurements as being toward making the world a better place. I learned in Boy Scouts to leave the campsite in better shape than I found it, and in a way that's what Hartshorne means.

He names that force of allurements God. In Hartshorne's metaphysics, God is not omnipotent, but depends on the material world — including us — to create the unfolding chain of events.

What does all that have to do with corporate prayer, the prayers we make together?

We long, do we not, for deeper connection and a sense of being a part of something bigger than ourselves. Prayer helps us to invoke awareness of the presence of the holy, to remember that we carry the spark of the divine within us always, and to stand in awe at the wonders of this world we are a part of. When we pray together we invite an experience of the holy that is present within us, among us, and beyond us. We open our hearts to that deeper connection. We long for the knowledge that we are not alone. We need that.

Prayer helps us to express gratitude — to say 'Thank you' and 'Wow!' and 'Ahhh!' out loud. That helps us stay humble and remember that we are not the source of all good things. Expressing gratitude helps us to be happier, healthier people. If we learn to say 'thank you' and practice it, perhaps we'll remember to offer meaningful thanks to those who bring joy to our lives and who work to make the world a better place — and that will very likely inspire them and us to do more. We need that.

Prayer helps us to stay connected to each other, to deepen our relationships with one another. When we name those who are suffering, when we bring to mind and picture in our mind's eye family members, friends, colleagues, and all sentient beings, and when we wish them well, we establish channels of connection with them, even if they are "only" in our own minds, and we open the possibility of directing compassion toward them. The evidence that prayers for wellness have efficacy is tilting toward affirmation that indeed our intentions for others can make a difference in their healing, even if they don't know that they are held in our prayers. How this works is a mystery, but some transmission of energy and intent seems to occur. And with it healing may take place. We need that, too.

Prayer can also help us pay attention to the lure to choose the

path of love and compassion, to seek to bring about more enjoyment. Some would name this God's will and through prayer seek the awareness of the allurements to choose love, the wisdom to understand how best to bring that about, and the courage to take action. Naming the qualities we hope for — strength, courage, wisdom, attention — and invoking them helps us draw on those inherent powers, develop them, and use them in service to others. We need that.

Prayer can help us confess our shortcomings, the mistakes we have made, and the ways we have mistreated others and the planet around us. By naming our sins with the intention of not repeating them, we can set them down and stop carrying the burden of failure to act from our best intentions. And surely no one here is free of the need to set down some burden of shame or guilt. We need to do that.

Prayer can help us find forgiveness, both for ourselves and for others. In this way we make room for reconciliation of broken relationships. Setting down our grudges and our resentments frees up our life energy for more important things — for responding to the needs of the world. And we need that.

Prayer can help us to step back from the fray, to still the chaos that swirls around us so that we can focus on what really matters. In today's world I see more and more evidence that many of us are operating at the brink of being overwhelmed — and sometimes just over it. Staying grounded in what matters and keeping our attention and energy focused on it is an almost constant challenge. We need help.

You may have noticed that the audience for prayer is not so much "out there" (or "up there") as it is "in here." Much of prayer is self-talk. Its benefits come to us through self-fulfilling prophecy, affirmation, focus, and deepening relationships. Through clear intention and the power of community as we join together in common purpose.

Like the benefits of other spiritual practices, the benefits of prayer are multiplied by an ongoing and regular praxis of both private and corporate prayer. With practice, our corporate acts of prayer become more than the words that are spoken or the thoughts that are lifted up on any particular Sunday morning. The ritual itself takes on value and through its connection with the ongoing, living and transforming community, it gains power and

efficacy. It begins to realize its potential power to effect our transformation, to change us for things as the epigram suggests.

In a blog entry, the author of Jess' Journal, who is a musician and the spouse of the newly called Unitarian Universalist minister in Los Alamos NM, writes,

"I want to hear the phrase 'Let us pray' in our churches. Here's why: I see prayer in church is an act of community intention rather than a private, individual reflection. We need not bow in supplication to a higher being or personal image of God in order to pray, which is the (I think) knee-jerk fear that many Unitarian Universalists have when they think about the concept of prayer, but to me, meaningful prayer is that which acknowledges that we are but small pieces of a greater, more beautiful whole.

"I've heard a number of different prayers over the last month or so, from the mumbled, apologetic, "is this really church?" type to a lengthy and eloquent, yet strident, response to a sermon, to pastoral recognition of joys and sorrows in the community, to simple, declarative grace said over meals with dear friends. And I've come to feel that what I need from prayer, and what I think our religious community needs from prayer, is the deliberate drawing together of that which we are together that is more than we are as individuals. It's about stating our intentions as a community, the very reasons we come together in community, and it's about gathering those intentions into our collective highest resolve that can then make a very real difference in this broken world of ours."

When you hear the invitation to join in prayer, I hope you will do it with enthusiasm and expectancy. If not that, at least with an open heart and an open mind that allows you to set aside any resistance to the idea of invoking the holy, expressing gratitude, setting down failures, seeking and offering forgiveness, and asking for grounding in the midst of chaos. And that you will seek the deeper connection and intent that lies beyond the imperfect form

or the words and metaphors.

Our mission calls us to transform lives and to care for the world. In prayer we gather those intentions into our collective resolve, and thus make one more step toward actualizing them.

May it be so. Amen.

Closing Words

Philippians 4

Finally, beloved, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are pleasing, whatsoever things are commendable, if there be any excellence, if there be any virtue, and if there be anything worthy of praise, think about these things.