

Can We Pray Here?

Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern

[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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Reading:

from *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok

[The setting of the reading is the beach house of world-famous sculptor and painter Jack Kahn. Jack has taken a young boy, Asher Lev, under his wing. Each summer they spend months painting and sculpting together -- a young, observant Orthodox artist and his secular Jewish mentor. In the reading, the boy talks about his experience of prayer and his mentor's experience of it.]

Often in the early mornings, I came out of the house and walked across the dunes to the beach. The dunes were cool then from the night. I wore sandals and shorts and a shirt and had on my tefillin. Those mornings, the beach was my synagogue and the waves and gulls were audience to my prayers. I stood on the beach and felt wind-blown sprays of ocean on my face, and I prayed. And sometimes the words seemed more appropriate to this beach than to the synagogue on my street.

One morning, I finished praying and came back across the dunes and found Jack Kahn on the porch.

"I was watching you," he said quietly. "I used to pray once. Do you talk to God when you pray?"

"Yes."

"I have lost that faculty. I cannot pray. I talk to God through my sculpture and painting."

"That is also a prayer."

He smiled faintly, the morning sun on his face. "The Rebbe said precisely that. You are following the party line, Asher Lev. But we know it is not the same thing, don't we."

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Prayer:

"Prayer of and for Those Who Do Not Know How to Pray"

by Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern

God, of whom I am not entirely certain,
Or who has left me behind or disappointed me beyond belief,
Literally, beyond belief. God of my rejection.

Or God who doesn't make sense or whom I don't entirely know I've met or know I'd
know if I did meet,
God of mystery and paradox and shrouded in unknowing.

Or God whom I once knew, but got away from, not from anger or disaffection, but just
the way life sweeps you along and certain old friends get left behind.
God, who was once close and dear, but who now seems a distant memory, an estranged
companion. God of nostalgia and quiet longing.

God whom I begin to sense, unfamiliar, new, but beckoning, drawing me out of myself
towards something larger, grander, more intimate. God of new whisperings in the silent
night.

I, we, don't know how to pray to you. What words do we use -- how is a God addressed
properly? Is it Mr. God or Ms. or Dear One or Lord (that old antiquated word) or is it
something I've never been told? I don't want to insult you by using the wrong name, that
would be a bad way to get started, wouldn't it?

And what do I tell you: those formulaic prayers of old -- "Our Father, who art in Heaven"
... or "Lead me not into temptation" -- is that what I should pray to invite you out to listen
and to speak back?

Or can I use my own words, as they come trippingly off the tongue or stumbling and
starting, colloquial words -- or is that too familiar? I mean no disrespect, but it's easier to
speak the language I use every day. Is that language okay to use when speaking to God,
when speaking to You?

And if I'm even not sure that you are what they say you are, or that you are at all, should I
be praying, or is that absurd?

There are a few things, however, I want you to know -- and, if you do not exist, then
things I want to say to the universe itself, to say out loud.

Perhaps this is where to begin -- my speaking what needs to be said, and you, if you are
out there, you listening. And if my words are not the right style or formula, I suppose I
can trust you to see beyond that impediment, especially if you are the God they say you
are. And if you choose to respond or not, I guess that is your business, but at least I will
have said my piece about life and about my hopes and dreams for it and pains in it.

So, here we go. Powers that Be, Spirit of Life and Love, Great Mystery -- here I am,
baring all to the universe. Hear my prayers. Amen.

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Sermon:

I must confess before I begin this sermon that this was an incredibly hard sermon to let go of. I felt like Jacob wrestling with the angel last night, and I got smote many blows before I finally let go at 4 a.m. (an unusually late hour for me). I wonder whether I had such a hard time with the sermon on prayer because we UUs talk too little about prayer. Or because talking about prayer involves a whole lot of other theological issues that are difficult for us. Or perhaps I had trouble because I myself have gotten away from the practice. Whatever the reason, I consider this sermon not nearly done, prayer hardly covered and certainly not wrapped up with a bow. I hope this is part of a much larger conversation. So here goes ...

As a young girl, I was sent to spend a couple of summers with my grandmother in Hobbs, New Mexico, where she lived at the time. Grandma was and still is a Southern Baptist, and so every Sunday she'd plait my hair and spray me down and clean me up, and she and I would go to church. She even tried one summer to send me to summer Bible camp, but the story is that I started talking about reincarnation and freaked out the leaders of the camp and they asked her to keep this child of Satan at home (actually, I don't think those were the precise words they used, but I'm sure that was the gist of it).

It was at my grandmother's knee that I was taught the ritual of evening prayer. Every night before I went to sleep, she would sit on the edge of my bed as I said my prayer, the one most of us know whether or not we've ever had to pray it -- "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep..." I'd end by naming those I loved most and asking God to watch over them.

As I entered young adulthood and started to question the whole notion of God, this nightly ritual became a subject for personal debate. I wasn't sure there was a God, or if there was, what was his or her nature and how could I pray if I didn't know if there was a God or who or what she was. It was at this time in my life that prayer became a difficult thing for me to do. Yet I loved this evening ritual of mine.

I don't think my story is unique. I think there are many of us who did or still do struggle with the notion of prayer. Some of us do so because we grew up unchurched or in Unitarian Universalist congregations dominated by secular humanism that didn't have a place for prayer in their worship life. Others of us have difficulty with prayer because we learned to pray in such a radically different theological framework than the one in which we now find ourselves and are not sure how prayer can fit with our new beliefs.

I think also there are some for whom prayer is painful because they have prayed for things in the past, with all their hearts, and been denied, and so have abandoned prayer as a result. I think of a poem printed years ago in the Atlantic Monthly under the heading "prayers unanswered." This poem by Patricia Hooper reads:

Lord, I call to you --
There is someone
I want you to follow home.
The night is cold.
The wet leaves hide the edges
of the dark path. He
is lost. I would
Go with him if I could
put my arms around him,
share my coat. He is
three hundred miles
away. No one else
sees him. Do you
see him, his step hurried
through the black rain?
Or are you
still busy, as you were when,
before he harmed himself
the last time, he was the one
who called?

I hear this poem as a mother praying for her adult child, a man who once prayed for himself at a very critical time in his life, but who stopped when his prayers went unanswered. In her cry is the essence of prayer, an honesty, a vulnerability, so honest that you can even hear the veiled sadness and anger towards the very God to whom she is praying. She prays because she has no other option but despair. This is a pained prayer.

It is hard to know whether prayer is something we UU's have a place for in our individual and our collective religious lives, given our notions of God, our religious journeys and our beliefs about the world. However, I believe there is a human desire, despite reason or past hurt or disappointment, to pray. There was for me.

As I struggled with the issue, I came to my tentative step back into prayer, not out of some great faith, but, I'm sorry to say, out of a kind of Pascal's wager. If there was a God, I reasoned, and I stopped praying, I would be in worse shape for not having prayed than if I prayed my whole life and found out there wasn't a God listening. So I decided I would pray. How noble is that!

However, the larger question remained for me of how to pray in a way that honored my doubts and the faith in life and its source that I did have. What I came to, at the ripe old age of 12 or 13, was that I would pray a simple prayer each night. This prayer would be a prayer of thanksgiving in which I would simply name and give thanks for all the blessings in my life. What ill could such a prayer do, I reasoned. And so this was the prayer I said every night for almost a decade. It was my day-end ritual.

What the prayer did do was make sure I didn't forget life's gifts amid its struggles. It kept me grounded in what a preacher in D.C. once called "an attitude of gratitude." Indeed, through this prayer each night, I made sure I didn't take a piece of what was good about this life for granted.

How we each come back to or come for the first time to pray will be an individual decision, based on discernment and maybe even some trial and error. However, the good news is that although there aren't rules about how we pray, there are some clues. Our reading this morning offers a few, as does one other reading from the work that I will share also.

First is that, for us just like for the boy Asher Lev, it clearly doesn't matter where we pray. Even Asher, an Orthodox boy, knows instinctively that prayer can be said anywhere. "Those mornings," he says, "the beach was my synagogue and the waves and gulls were audience to my prayers ... And sometimes the words seemed more appropriate to this beach than to the synagogue on my street." Prayer can be said on the subway, in our living rooms, anywhere at all. It is not place that makes a prayer a prayer.

Jack and Asher in the reading also subtly touch on the notion of what is prayer. Is Jack's painting his prayer? Well, that in particular is a more complicated question, but what is important to note is that Asher points out that Jack's painting could be prayer. Indeed, men and women have communicated their prayers through all forms of word and action. They have chanted them, as we did this morning. They have danced them, as the whirling dervishes do in the Sufi mystic tradition. And they have yelled them toward the heavens in words of rage and pain, as Job did in the Bible. It is not the words we use or the wordless means by which we communicate that makes a prayer a prayer. We pray in whatever language comes to us.

So what is it that is at the core of what makes a prayer a prayer?

"Do you talk to God when you pray?" Jack asks. "Yes," replies Asher. "I have lost that faculty. I cannot pray," says Jack. For both Asher and Jack, there seems to be an agreement: Prayer, at its core, is about whether you are talking to God. I would agree and not agree. I would say that prayer at its core is about whether you are reaching out with your innermost thoughts and feelings, yearnings and pain, to that which is beyond you and perhaps deep within you as well. Whatever it is you call that which is beyond and within you, reaching out beyond yourself to that force, opening yourself to it, in turn, is for me what prayer is. Do you need to know what that thing or force beyond us is in order to pray? Do you have to have that all worked out? I don't think so. For years I sent that prayer of gratitude out, and even today I when I pray it, I don't know if someone or something is listening, but it seems enough to be sending it out. For me, it is enough to acknowledge that if there is something beyond me, I am making a way in for it.

Asher's own father at one point describes what is at the core of all of his life's work. To me, his words also could be describing what is at the core of prayer. And frankly, I'm

sure such a man, devoted to his faith as he is in the story, would say that all life, well lived, eventually does become a prayer.

He says to his son, "Someone once asked how it is possible to establish a connection between man and the Master of the Universe. The answer was that man must take the first step. In order for there to be a connection between man and the Master of the Universe, there must be an opening, a passageway, even a passageway as small as the eye of a needle. But man must make the opening by himself; man must take the beginning step. Then the Master of the Universe will move in, as it were, and widen the passageway. Asher, we have to make passageways..."

We might not want to use Mr. Lev's term, "Master of the Universe." We might prefer Source of Life and Love, Great Mystery -- but his point is well taken. We have to make passageways all the time to that which is larger than ourselves. Prayer is just one way we do that. Prayer is about reminding ourselves of the higher self that we are called to follow, and that by its nature serves the larger world, not just its own selfish ends. And prayer is also about opening ourselves to that which is beyond us even though we hardly understand, but which other traditions and even our own experience sometimes tell us moves through this world.

We Unitarian Universalists, of late, have had as our Achilles' heel being open to issues that are about all that is mysterious and beyond us. Say the words "God" and "prayer" and we rational, scientifically minded folks toss the scientific method out the window. We want proof before we even begin the grand experiment. It reminds me a bit of a friend of mine who insisted she was open to having a richer love life, and whose therapist said: "Ridiculous -- you work so much, a man would have to throw himself onto the hood of your car during your commute home for you to meet someone." We can be a bit like this friend of mine, saying we're open to the holy moving through our lives but making no passageways for it to enter.

Prayer also takes practice and risk. I stopped praying at night when I got married. And I think it was because I didn't want to feel silly, hands folded at night, saying my words of gratitude, but I miss it. However, sometimes when I wake in the middle of the night, it is that prayer I say when I am sure no one is listening. And it is wonderful to say it, whether or not anyone but me hears it.

Prayer, writes Ann Lewin, is like watching for the Kingfisher:

... All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear, and
Wait.
Often, nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible sign, only the
Knowledge that he's been there,

And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But sometimes, when you've almost
Stopped expecting it,
A flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.

Prayer, then, is about preparation and waiting. We have to be willing to give prayer, just like any other endeavor, a good college try. In reality, we have nothing to lose. Sometimes perhaps all we will hear is ourselves. Maybe for our whole lives, that will be the full fruit of a practice of prayer. But I would say that even that would be enough.

In the end, we cannot count on prayer to change the world, though perhaps we will find it can. And we UU's hardly believe prayers will move a God to do our bidding. However, in connecting us with the deepest parts of ourselves, prayer cannot help but change us. Maybe it grounds us in gratitude as my evening prayer did, and thereby staves off cynicism. Maybe it reminds us that we had bigger plans for life than the details that often distract us from those plans, and helps us to make greater headway towards them. Maybe it helps us acknowledge we need help and readies us to invite into our life the resources we need to make it through. And maybe, just maybe it creates an opening that allows into our lives a force we don't understand, and which doesn't look at all like the God we were raised to believe in, but which is a force worthy of making passageways for.

The good news is that, if we so choose, there are reasons for even UU's to pray and ways we can do so that honor our own faith, whatever that faith is. Whether prayer changes us or how, that is for us to see. That is the mystery only we ourselves can unfold. In essence, wrote Brother David Steindl Rast, "prayer is communion with mystery."

O spirit of life, ground of all being, force of love and justice, whoever and whatever you are, within or beyond us: Hear our prayers.