

## **“The Ambiguity of Prayer”**

**4.5.20**

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Each morning they gave us a list of the patients who were requesting a pre-surgical prayer. It meant coming in early so we rotated who covered that shift. I was the chaplain on the heart and lung transplant unit, which was on the sixth floor at the University of Minnesota Medical Center. I typically only went to other parts of the hospital for emergencies or to do that pre-surgical prayer shift.

I think I gasped when our supervisor told us this would be part of our rotation - praying for patients as they got set up for surgeries. I'll admit I was actually more nervous about praying for people than I was about seeing people die. The thought of prayer caused a sort of existential crisis in me, much to the bafflement of my peers who were all Christian. I just couldn't make sense of what prayer was or which words to use or who I was supposed to be talking to.

The author Anne Lamott wrote a book called “Help, Thanks, Wow” in which she says that these are the only prayers we really need.

In it, she writes this: “Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union, even if we are bitter or insane or broken... Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite may be true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such miserable shape.”

I had a patient on the heart unit who was full of answers about how the universe worked - he had all kinds of theories about outer space and aliens and told tales of meditating so effectively that he would go days without sleeping. He was pompous and more than a tad creepy, such that after a few visits I asked a male colleague to take up the helm. But come the day of his surgery, I was the chaplain assigned to the presurgical patients and he had requested a prayer. I feared what it would be like, that his ill-placed flirtation would be on display. But what I actually found was a person who was scared and needed me to hold his hand. It wasn't about God and who knows what words I actually said. What mattered was lifting his fear out of the place of isolation and into the space between us.

Here's what I know about prayer, from meeting strangers in that place of tenderness and putting words to their fear, their hope, their exhaustion, their pain, and lifting it out of their solitude into the space between us. In praying, we bridge the gap between ourselves and something else. We open ourselves for connection. We cry out in the hope that we are somehow heard, known, held. We succumb to the truth that we are not in control and we say *please*. Or *thank you* or *why*. Or *how is this possible*. And in moments of great suffering, sometimes the weight of holding our fear or anger alone is simply too much, so we pray. Even if we don't know how or why or what it means.

But it is also something that can only be done willingly.

My singing professor in grad school had dark curls and a brilliant smile, the kind that radiates warmth and joy. I had grudgingly, panic-stricken at

the thought of it, registered for her class hoping it would help me get over my fear of singing. This was clearly evident to her, because one day, out of the blue as I was leaving the dining hall, she stopped me in the hallway and asked if she could pray over me. As one of the very very few UU students at Yale, I was used to feeling like a fish out of water, but this was a different level. I froze. I felt more like prey than someone receiving prayer, despite her best of intentions. I have no idea what she said, but it didn't really matter. It felt like being forced to put my inner world on display and I left the interaction rattled and wanting to hide.

As Anne Lamott writes, "Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence."

But as with all things of tenderness and power, prayer loses its magic if it is forced. Or if the relationship being offered is one that we aren't open to. Having grown up in a family that didn't pray, or talk about God, when my classmates recited the Lord's Prayer it left me with an intense desire to run. Because the invitation was to a relationship I didn't know or want. That Father in heaven felt like a stranger to me and not a very trustworthy one at that. It wasn't until that summer on the heart unit that I even learned the Lord's Prayer - it was, until then, something foreign to me. And it was only in reciting it for patients and families who said it was a comfort, in holding hands and bowing our heads that I understood what it meant. Not the words, but the action of praying.

"You're not alone."

After the prayer with my heart patient, I left his curtained off room, checked my list, and reached for the hand sanitizer. I moved to the next

person on my list and knocked on the wall to let them know I was outside the curtain. It was a husband and wife who were fairly young. They assured me they weren't really religious - they sometimes went to the Unitarian congregation near them - but having a prayer before surgery just seemed...nice, or right, or something. The man pulled out a worn and broken rosary with an amused, almost guilty, expression. He said it was his grandmothers and he didn't know how to use it, but it had seemed like the kind of thing you want before a surgery. I agreed and told them that I was actually training to be a UU minister, which both excited and relieved them. I told them I didn't know how to pray the rosary either. Who knows what words I said, if I used some name for God or not. By then I had learned that showing up in this way mattered. That holding someone's hand, closing our eyes and turning inward together, naming fear and hope and pain, that it mattered. There was some magic in it that was beyond me. And when the moment ended, when we let go and opened our eyes, there was relief in the air, like they had put down the burden that was too much to hold alone. That's how it always was.

By the end of that summer, I was no longer afraid of praying. Nor was I concerned with understanding what it meant. By then, I was comfortable holding the ambiguity of prayer. It had ceased to be a concept that existed solely in my mind. Because by the end of that summer, I knew how much it mattered to call out into the ether from the depths of our hearts, to take the hardest thing into the light, to lean into the belief that we will be heard, that we can be known and loved as we are, even in the moment of deepest despair.

The minister emeritus at King's Chapel in Boston says that his favorite translation for the word God is Reality. As Unitarian Universalists, we don't have a consensus about God - that's part of the beauty of our coming together. But it also adds to the ambiguity when we talk about prayer. For some of you the idea might be comforting, like that old and broken rosary, and some of you might hear the word and feel frozen or want to run. Prayer is, after all, a thing of tenderness, a thing that cannot be forced, a thing that calls out into the silence hoping to be heard.

*Please. Help. Thank you.*

Maybe that's enough. Because it's not the words that matter, not the direction you face, or the name you use. It's the act of pausing to plumb our depths and remembering that we have never been the biggest thing in the universe, leaning towards the truth that we are forever connected in the great unfolding of life.

In this time of collective grief and trauma, exhaustion and anxiety, I hope you take moments to feel and to let it out. To name whatever sits heavy in your heart and release it into the space outside yourself. Maybe you call that prayer, and maybe you don't. Most of all, I hope you know, no matter what happens or how you feel, that you're not alone.

Amen.