

Preparation for G92 – Do We Pray?

“I am a Unitarian, and we pray to ‘Whom It May Concern.’”
-- Adlai Stevenson

“We have within our congregations a rich diversity of opinion and belief about prayer and many other religious matters. We invite you to join with us and bring your own perspective to our ongoing dialogue.”
-- Catherine Bowers

At General Assembly in Boston this year, a movement to address ways to reclaim, and re-envision, religious language (and practices) came to the forefront — concepts such as “God,” “holy,” “worship,” “sacred,” “spirituality,” “religion,” “soul,” and “prayer.” We decided to open our own dialogue on the often controversial topic of prayer.

Preparation will really help you to fully participate in this session. Think about the following questions, and read the following quotes from various sources (most are UUs). Do you strongly agree or disagree with any of the quotes?

In our small group sessions, we’ll share our personal experiences and views without needing to justify them or to influence others.

Questions:

- Did prayer have a place in your previous religious or spiritual experiences?
- How did your past experience, or lack of experience, with prayer influence your view of it now?
- Do you ever pray? If so, why? What form do your prayers take?
- Do you think there is a place for prayer in Unitarian Universalist congregations?

Quotes:

“I am a humanist — I believe that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now. Yet I am a humanist who prays. Why do I do this? I need a quiet time. I need to express my gratitude. I need humility. I pray because — alone — I am not enough and also I am too much. I express gratitude for the gift of aliveness. I assert my oneness with you and all humankind and all creation.”

“I don’t pray. My mother spent a long, frightening month in the hospital, so I tried praying again but it didn’t help. I have found my spiritual disciplines—walks in nature, deep conversations, reading ancient and modern scripture, love—or they have found me. Prayer doesn’t happen to be one of them.”

“My own favorite definition of prayer was from an African-American theologian. She said prayer is any expression of the human longing to draw closer to the sacred.”

“Researchers have argued for years over whether or not intercessory prayer (literally, a prayer that intercedes between God and humankind on behalf of someone else) has any value. There have been several studies that found that critically ill patients who were prayed for had fewer illnesses and complications after hospitalization than patients who weren’t prayed for. In a recent study at Duke University, those who were prayed for had a 50% reduction in heartbeat abnormalities and a 100% reduction in clinical outcomes such as heart attacks and heart failure.”

“Prayer is theological reflection and social strategy, as in the wonderful Universalist affirmation which I love to recite... ‘Love is the doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament, and service is our prayer.’ Service, especially the prophetic, artistic, dogged work of systematic change for economic justice, is my prayerful response to all I have been given.”

“We have so many people in our congregation that worship differently — that respond to their inner callings without naming the experience. I have not been involved in the church in ways that call for heart-type responses. I do however, feel a commitment and a heart calling — I just have strong reactions to putting me in

boxes, especially the ‘prayer’ box. I do not want to go the way of organized religion—I want the freedom to search, and land where it seems natural, important, and in a way that contributes to my community.”

“A dear friend had been diagnosed with leukemia. He asked that his friends neither visit him nor call him, but rather that we simply pray for him. And people prayed — even many who had never before given prayer a thought. My friend is now well on his way to recovery. I am far too scientific to say that our prayer healed him, but I know that those of us who prayed found a deeper connection to him, to each other, and to the world we live in — and I know that this connection was as tangible as the medical treatment he also received.”

“Prayer is embedded in so many of our rituals of worship — our call to worship, our Candles of Caring, our shared silence, our responsive readings, our benediction, and many of our cherished hymns. In small group ministry, many readings and songs are forms of prayer. Yet so few people in our church seem willing to talk openly about prayer. It’s as if it’s become the P-word, never to be mentioned for fear of being presumptuous or offensive, or for dredging up painful memories of past encounters. Notice how common it is in our community for people to say to someone who is going through a difficult time: ‘I’ll keep you in my thoughts.’ I wonder how often that person really intends to keep the other in his/her prayers, but is afraid to say it!”

“Prayer for me is taking time to be present for that gracious spirit and aware of the gifts that come to and through me simply because I am alive.”

“When I was in my thirties, I was stricken with a mysterious illness. My world turned upside down. I was too frightened to pray. I asked my friend to pray for me. He did. I was astonished at its power. I felt the tears, the release, the comfort, and the assurance that the world and all that was sacred would wait for me, would hold a place for me, when I could not do the work of holding it for myself.”

“Struggling with prayer is part of a larger struggle within myself to decide whether or not I believe in a higher power. It’s a tough subject for agnostics!”

“Prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this Mystery to dwell. Prayer is a way of living with the very questions that perplex us.”

“The minister asked if I’d tried prayer. I squirmed. Here was the kind of talk that made me nervous. The only prayers I knew were the Lord’s Prayer and the one I had recited kneeling next to my bed in my jammies with my hands pressed together: ‘Now I lay me down to sleep.’ She taught me two simple prayers. I started saying them in bed in the early morning and whispering them in the gym when my anxiety got particularly pitched. At times I felt silly and self-conscious, as though I were asking to win some emotional lottery. But sometimes we want deliverance—and what’s wrong with that? I’d find, a few minutes after praying, not the voice of guidance or the erasure of all worry, but a sense of expansiveness, a letting out of tight seams. I began to stay in the present. I began to stumble into quiet corners. I began to feel less alone.”

Resources

- “Unitarian Universalist Views of Prayer,” Catherine Bowers, editor. A UUA Pamphlet Commission Publication, also available on the web at http://home.attbi.com/~rkamlet/view_prayer.htm
- “Let Prayer Save Your Life,” Prevention.com, www.prevention.com/cda/feature2002/0,4780,sl-4096-P,00.html. “A new study suggests that asking someone to ‘say a little prayer’ for you might help you heal.”
- The UUA Bookstore (1-800-215-9076 or at www.uua.org) has many beautiful and inspiring books of meditations and prayers by UU ministers and writers. (We get a lot of great quotes from these!)
- *The Power of Prayer* edited by Dale Salwak. New World Library: 1998.
- *Life Prayers from Around the World: 365 Prayers, Blessings and Affirmations to Celebrate the Human Journey* edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon. Harper San Francisco: 1996.