

“Like A Prayer”, November 10, 2013
Reverend Caitlin O’Brien

Do you remember the view from lying down in your childhood bed? I do. I would look at the door, seeing the hallway light creeping in. I would say my prayers to that view every night, listing the names of loved ones in a fast jumble, starting with Grandpa and ending with our cat, Frasier. I had come to believe that saying the “Our Father” prayer **three times** had a protective effect on these loved ones. I was actually afraid of what would happen if one night I forgot to say it. What a burden I put on my young self.

So after the list of names, I’d say

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who have trespassed against us
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

And then I’d say.....Times three. Amen.

In my middle school and high school years, I would pray in the treehouse we had built when we were younger. I would climb to the top floor and sit looking at the sun set behind my house. I no longer read that list of names. After all, two of the people on that list died young despite my prayers. I no longer really believed in asking for anything in prayer. I was more just seeking the company of God, a God I believed was endeared to me.

In college, I looked at God from a philosophical, sociological and scriptural perspective, and in my junior year, I lived in Spain and traveled all over. The world got so big for me that it was hard to find the words to speak to a God that could match it.

I remember sitting on my narrow bed in an apartment in Seville, looking out the window, trying to pray: “Lord, ...well I don’t really see you as a Lord, I mean that feels so hierarchical....So, Jesus, no, that’s not really who I’ve been talking to all these years...God, dear God, but is it really that personal? I mean isn’t it...Aaarghhhh!!! I had hit a wall. I started pounding on my bed in frustration because my brain was getting in the way...in the way of something that used to comfort me. I actually cried myself to sleep that night, and there was no Amen.

Did any of you leave off right around there, maybe not as dramatically? Along the way, did you stop asking for things in prayer, and then did you stop talking to **someone** in prayer? And then did you kind of stop praying?

And then maybe life got busier and busier and the only time you really thought about prayer was when you started to write in a sympathy note, “keeping you in my prayers,” and then wondered what you really mean by that now. Maybe you don’t write that anymore. Maybe you do, and maybe you do know what you

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mean by it. Wherever you are in this, my job as a minister is to tap you on the shoulder and say, so do you have a spiritual practice that works for you? And if I'm being real, I've got to tap my own shoulder too, bigtime.

So I'm tapping on your shoulder. I shared with you a bit of my journey – maybe you relate, maybe you don't. Now I'll chat with you as if we're at coffee hour. No pressure, just chatting: did you hear about that study in the 80's where 200 cardiac patients had someone praying for them and another 200 had nobody praying for them? The study found that 85% of those who were prayed for scored "good" on their recovery matrix, and 73% of those not prayed for scored "good." Hmm, not a huge difference, but hummm. Well, I looked into it more. Turns out, this outcome hasn't been replicated in other studies.

A really thorough study by The Mind Body Institute at Mass General Hospital in Boston in 2006 compared the recoveries of 1,800 cardiac patients. Two groups were told they may or may not be prayed for. Half were and half were not. And a third group was told they would be prayed for, and they were. There was no real difference in the outcomes for those prayed for and not prayed for. The only noteworthy difference was that the patients who were told they were being prayed for did 7% worse than all the others. Maybe they were thinking, "eh, I don't have to do my recovery instructions. Someone's praying for me!" I dunno, but not an inspiring result.

So it may or may not be that prayer has an impact on the prayed for. Scientifically, at least, it hasn't been well proven. Because I have a ticklishness for spiritual possibility, I still leave open the idea that maybe the impact just can't be measured in the ways we know how to measure. But because I'm a bit of a skeptic as well, I'm agnostic about the impact of prayer on others. That said – and this is a big "that said" - I've had personal experience of being held in thought and prayer by loved ones – knowing I was cared for in that way helped in yet another immeasurable way.

What has been measured and proven is that prayer does have an impact on the **pray-er**. That same MGH program that disproved petitionary prayer for the cardiac patients did an extensive study on the immune response of patients who were taught to do any form of practice that brings about what's called the Relaxation Response. Patients practiced meditation, Chi Gong, Tai Chi, or prayer, and this had a measurable impact on the expression of genes that are linked to immune response. In short, it's what we've all come to know, right?: stress hurts our bodies, and de-stressing has a protective effect. We can probably all say Amen to that! Right? AMEN!

Dr. Herbert Benson, who is behind all this research, encourages us to make time for bringing on the Relaxation Response as often as we can. To walk the body through a relaxation experience, and to think or speak a word, phrase or prayer that offers us grounding. He makes it clear that it doesn't matter what focus word or short phrase you use. It matters that it is firmly rooted in your personal belief system.

In Unitarian Universalism, we don't hand you that word or phrase. You've got to come up with it. And may I say, I think it's worth your time to do so. And if you have young children, I think it's important to help them come up with theirs. We now have scientific proof that having an internal anchor, a believed in phrase of grounding and comfort, matters. What doesn't matter is the content of the phrase itself, as Anne Lamott humorously points out in the reading earlier...Howard be thy name.

A close friend who is humanist was on an airplane going through scary turbulence, and he was surprised to find himself desperately whispering to himself the Our Father prayer. It was an imprint, one he hadn't yet replaced with regular practice of a phrase he really believed in.

For example, when I was younger and beginning a journey away from Catholic theology, I came up with a way to do the sign of the cross that would be authentic for me. I'd say in my mind, "In the name of love, peace, justice and family." Sometimes I wondered if I was being sacrilegious, but then, no! Those hand motions belong to me. They were given to me along with the color of my eyes and the way I walk....but the original words they came with no longer get me where I need to be. So I found words that would.

And I say again to you: find the practice and the words that get you there...I don't care how you get there. Just get there. Reminds me of a song...

*"You can reach me by railway, you can reach me by trailway
You can reach me on an airplane, you can reach me with your mind.*

*You can reach me by caravan, cross the dessert like an Arab man
I don't care how you get here. Just get here if you can."*

Together, let's try one way of getting there.

1. I invite you to sit quietly in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Take a deep breath and release it. With that release, notice your shoulders lower from your ears toward the ground.
3. Tighten and release the muscles in your feet. Tighten and release the muscles in your knees, your thighs, tighten and release the muscles in your abdomen.
4. Notice you are breathing easily and naturally.
5. Tighten and release the muscles in your chest and shoulders and neck.
6. And finally, tighten and release the muscles in your face.
7. Now say to yourself a word, phrase or mantra that you need to hear this morning.
8. Thank your body for this rest, and open your eyes to return to this space.

If you're like me, you may be thinking, I need to do more of this. I need to feel this way more than I generally do.

I sense in our UU congregations that some of us have thrown out the baby with the bath water. What was given to us for spiritual practice growing up may not work for us, but we haven't made the space for ourselves to really clarify and use what will work for us.

And I see how that ambivalence can trickle down to our children and youth. Often our children begin to answer a question about faith by saying what they and their parents don't believe. But I love when a child answers, this is what we say at mealtimes together, and this is what we do to take care of others, and this is what my mommy sings to me at bedtime. I believe that children thrive on tradition and repetitive value clarification. It gives them a compass to guide them and sometimes to fight against, but **something** is there. An internal anchor to hold when there's turbulence. It matters.

So when something is shattered, as in this case, my relationship to prayer was, you rebuild with the material still worth using. Here's what I got out of prayer in the tree house that I want to still get:

Time to relax (like we just did)

A place to put my joys, and my sorrows (like we just did)

A sense of perspective (yeah, when I sit in my silence, I can with my imagination take in the bigger view, the mountains, the oceans, the heartache in war torn lands, the sight of children laughing, I can see it all in my mind, and remind myself it's all happening, and it's bigger than me.)

I also got a sense of connectedness in the treehouse, and I can still get that today (I can contemplate my breathing, and I can practice sending Loving Kindness to my loved ones, and to ones I don't know, and to ones I do know and frankly, don't like. About all of these people, I can say

May they be free from inner and outer harm.

May they be safe and protected.

May they be free of mental suffering or distress.

May they be happy.

May they be free of physical pain and suffering.

May they be healthy and strong.

May they be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, with ease.

Oh, and then there's gratitude: because you're noticing your oxygen, noticing that the world is cycling through conditions that keep you alive. It's for you. I don't think my 2 year old daughter is being self absorbed when she searches the evening sky asking, "Where's my moon?" It is for you, and go ahead and say thank you. But if you're too busy trying to figure out whom you're thanking, or too busy doing all the things that life, work, Facebook and your kids' sports teams ask of you, you won't even notice it.

So gratitude...check. And lastly, but so importantly, moral formation. When you give yourself 5 or 10 minutes away from small detail- mindedness, you have given yourself the space, the breathing room, so to speak, to make the better choices. To take the higher ground. To take that split second to look at that woman in the drive through at Starbucks and see her for her struggles.

The author of the Starbucks story is on cloud 9 three minutes after being verbally assaulted. She knows that in her spiritual practice, she asked her God for perspective – to see others for the hurt within them, not the hurt they're putting out there.

I ask myself, do any of these things depend on a personal God who gives what is asked for? No. It's fine if that kind of God is in the mix, but not necessary. To relax, to express joy and sorrow, to gain perspective, to feel connected, to feel grateful...

This is my prayer, or my "like a prayer," in the name of love, peace, justice and family. Amen.

I need to do this more often than I do. And I think my children need to learn from me and my husband what that looks and feels like.

We've been through several forms just this morning: song, dance, reciting values, putting our sorrow somewhere, meditating, and sending out kindness. It's been a buffet of spiritual practice. I'm hoping you liked one of them, and might go back for seconds. And many of you, I know, already have an established practice.

As for me? I needed a tune-up. They say ministers write the sermons they need to hear. So I have set my phone alarm to 1:30 for me to take a brief break from my day to do my "like a prayer." I've also decided to create a peaceful place, a tree house if you will, for my children at home. It's in a small room that we use as an office. I am setting up a place of rest, with big fluffy pillows, a sand tray, a music source and a blackboard to draw or write what is on the heart. A place for touching deeper wells within us.

Since I stole Madonna's pop song title for this sermon, "Like a Prayer," in closing, let's consider a line from it. Hum along with me if you know it:

"Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone. I hear you call my name, and it feels like home."

Do whatever you can to regularly practice something that gives you -- both a view of the vastness -- and a feeling of home.

In whatever ways it interprets the word, Let the congregation say Amen.