

Unitarians and Prayer  
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson  
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UCV

*This is a true story.* One night, at the beginning of this New Year, someone broke into the Anglican church of St Mary's in South London. Arriving early in the morning, the church custodian discovered a side door wide open. Break-ins, thefts and vandalism at St Mary's are fairly common—it's a tough neighbourhood. Turns out that when the custodian entered the church, she discovered nothing had been taken, defaced or broken; instead, every candle in the building had been lit, and for a high church establishment like St Mary's—that's quite a feat. Surveying the illuminated chapel, she saw a solitary man sitting in a pew near the front, his head bowed in prayer. A quiet conversation ensued; he apologized for the door, and then left.

Later that evening, a handful of congregants gathered with their priest for evening prayer. They agreed there was something admirable in a person who'd gone to such lengths to get into a church to light all those candles and pray. And then the question came up: "Vicar, was he...um, OK?" (as in a bit unstable, unhinged—you know what I mean.) To which the priest replied: "Are any of us OK? I'm certainly not OK, and never have been; that's one reason I need to sit alone in church and pray."

Sometime later, the priest went on to write this:

*"Of course you can do it elsewhere, but there are places set aside for prayer. Here the silence wells up and settles into me...not the silence of empty nothingness but the silence of sitting...with a friend. And into that silence I bring all that is not OK with me. The chemistry of prayer,"* he writes, *"is the meeting of these two elements: one—that [voiceless sound in speech tucked away] in the hidden desperation that some...of us carry around with us, often without owning up to it,*

*and two—the vast expanse of purposeful silence, the shorthand for which is God. In my experience these two elements are drawn to each other. And the slow reaction between them is worth breaking into any church to find....The key to the reaction is silence and time. For both of these eat away at our excuses, our false hopes, our lack of reality. Self-serving BS doesn't easily survive the rigors of time and silence. And in this fantasy-busting environment I am lent the courage to open the most defended parts of me to the infinite love of God* (Giles Fraser, "A man recently broke into my church. Good on him, I say," *Guardian*, January 5, 2017)

We're not Anglicans, though I imagine much that we do as we live out our religious lives has a lot in common. We, too, gather in worship and learning, in community and in service to one another and what we believe are the most meaningful values, beliefs, and goals in our lives. We light candles, too, even though not as many as at St Mary's in South London.

But the prayer part...? Is that need to sit in the profound silence with all that may *not be OK* with us—is that something we share with those in other faith traditions? Or is this where we differ fundamentally? Is ours a religion, and are we a religious people unschooled, unpracticed and without prayer as part of our individual and collective life?

One look at this book—full of songs and readings used by UUs all over North America—and you'd have to say "No." I've counted over 65 hymns under the heading of "Prayer, Meditation, and Praise" in the indexes of these hymnals; and in the collection of readings at the back of our grey hymnbook?—scores of prayers from ours and other faith traditions. You can trace a direct line back in time from these hymnals to older U & U hymnbooks, sermons, meditation and prayer manuals, to works on liturgy, prayer, spirituality and theology—trace them all the way back to the very beginnings of our religious tradition in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From that abundant printed evidence, you would conclude that Unitarians have been writing about, singing, and offering up prayers for almost 500 years.

For centuries, Unitarians at prayer was a given, an essential of our religion, as it has been in communities of religious and spiritual practice throughout the world and down through the generations. For our ancestors in this religion, prayer was something you grew up into in the home, in church and community. The questions for them were not: do we pray in private or publicly? Or do we set time aside for it or some other prayer-like meditative practice? Or how can we *possibly* pray? Those weren't their issues. Rather, for Unitarians the big questions were to whom do we pray; in whose name; for what do we pray; and in what state of intention?

Turning principally to the Bible as their authoritative source, Unitarians of the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries looked to the teachings of Jesus to his Jewish companions in what has come to be known as the "Lord's Prayer," which begins: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." (*Today's Unitarians can't even get past those two words.*) And from it, concluded: they were supposed to pray; no other powers or intercessors were to be addressed; and prayers should have two basic features: a) praise and honour of the One God, and b) a petition, an "ask"—believing, hoping there would be a response: that a state of righteousness and justice would be established *now*, that those who prayed would be shown mercy and forgiveness by God as they forgave others, and that they would experience and partake of the daily necessities of life.

The intentional state of the person and community in prayer—the frame of mind and heart, the aim and purpose—was of great concern (to Unitarians). In the 1850s, James Freeman Clark talked about the "Prayer of Faith" versus the "Prayer of Form," criticizing the latter as all taste and show, covering up an "emptiness in our hearts." Whereas the "Prayer of Faith" was labour "like plowing a field;" it was the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed from which "dreams, visions and communing with the angels" would arise, attend and transform us. The

*Racovian Catechism* of our Polish ancestors, published in 1609, cautioned against “vain repetitions” as just “senseless babbling into the air.” There should be “a fervour of the Spirit,” says the *Catechism*, “humility,” “deep sighs,” an “absence of enmity” and a “withdrawing of our thoughts as much as possible from other things.”

Coming into this religion twenty years ago, I also discovered that in public settings, Unitarian ministers often wrote out their prayers beforehand and even had them printed in pamphlets and books. Now that was new to me; I didn’t know people did that!

One of my favourites is a prayer written by Theodore Parker for Thanksgiving Day in 1856. It starts out with an invocation: “Thou Infinite Spirit, our Father and our Mother on earth and in the heavens;” it’s full of praise and thanks for the bounties of the season, for health; it petitions for blessings for the living and remembrance of the dear, departed dead. And then,

BANG! :

*We remember before thee the great sins which this nation has wrought....We must mourn that we have blackened the ground with crimes such as seldom a nation has committed against thee.....We remember the millions of our brothers and sisters whom our fathers chained, and whose fetters our wicked hands have riveted upon their limbs....We pray that we may suffer from these our transgressions till we learn to eschew evil, to break the rod of the oppressor, and let the oppressed go free....We pray thee, on this day of our gratitude, that we may rouse up everything that is most human in our heart, pledging ourselves anew to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly before thee.*

As I’ve told you on other occasions, Abraham Lincoln and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew, carefully read and quoted from the sermons and prayers of the Unitarian Rev. Theodore Parker. And is it any wonder?

Parker’s prayers, and those of other Unitarians, expressed what Freeman Clark called wrestling labor like plowing a field, and they lifted up for intense criticism burning social,

political and economic crises of their day. Their prayers were grounded in the conviction that the Infinite Soul to which they lifted their voice could be sincerely addressed as our Father and Mother on earth and in the heavens; I pretty sure most of them believed they weren't just talking to themselves or whistling in the dark, but speaking to a transcending mystery and wonder that would actually hear human speech, discern the intent of a human heart, and, in due course, respond in ways manifest and mystifying.

But a strange thing happened to Unitarians at prayer as the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries unfolded. Fifty years ago, Jack Mendelsohn, a long-serving and revered Unitarian minister, said that “prayer is both a problem and a challenge [for us] religious liberals.” I think I get what he means. And that problem, that challenge, didn't arise just during our lifetimes.

We may think of the Victorian era as a time of social restraint and cultural prudery; it was far more than that. It was also a period of profound religious and spiritual doubt. The authority of the Bible, and hence that of the churches, their institutions and practices—and I can't underline this strongly enough—were undermined, first, by historical and literary critical studies that called into question the veracity of scripture; and second, by physical and biological sciences that showed that the earth was of unimaginable age, its features the result of natural forces, and that all life on this planet was the product of the impersonal laws of evolution by natural selection.

If you took those things seriously, and people did, especially religious liberals, then belief in the Biblical account and centuries of church teachings about the special creation of this planet, *and us*, by a Providential deity orchestrating the whole spectacle and responding to us for our special benefit—well, all of it began to look and feel increasingly incredible and unreal.

Just one example. We met William Stanley Jevons in our “Encountering Our Ancestors” service back in October. He was a world-class economic and political thinker in the High Victorian era. He was also a devout Unitarian who wrote about his own private thoughts about prayer. Here’s a passage from his journal from the late 1870s-early 80s:

Is not any prayer, is not any petition, tendered by the soul...vain and useless when the course of events is irrevocably bound by causes and effects? Can any reasonable person ask that a mountain shall come to them? And is it not equally absurd that in a drought we shall meet to pray for rain....A single ounce of air or water cannot be diverted from its appointed course without breaking through the framework of nature....I must confess for my own part that to ask the Creator distinctly for any concrete object or service is not only vain and useless, but it is more—it borders on impiety. It implies an impeachment of his goodness and wisdom. It is as much to say that God has ordered things in one way and we think they should be otherwise...

And then a generation later, after Jevons death, came the First World War; prayers fervently offered up, in a Babel of tongues petitioning God to intervene to secure a favourable outcome—victory, the defeat of enemies, safety for loved ones in battle, deliverance from death.... And then another world war and genocide, and then more and more of it down to our day and time. If scholarly criticism of the Bible and the sciences of the 1800s made prayer for many people trying, awkward and incredible, it was history and the hectacombs of bodies and the silence of God that made it even more difficult in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

And today, now?

I have to confess that, *here*, I really struggle and have no easy, clear answers. But walk with me, if you will, for a time.

I cringe when people, especially from a position of power, pray publicly petitioning God to grant them some special favour—whether its victory in conflict, more abundant enjoyment in material things, or that nature—its weather, climate, and soil—will somehow be bent to specifically gratify, relieve and bless them and theirs.

I am humbled, and gravely recognize and affirm that during struggles for civil and human rights, and for the protection of the environment—from Selma to Standing Rock to Burnaby Mountain—prayers are an essential way to call forth solace, strength, resolve and blessing.

I know that in extremity, from the depths of our very being, most of us have and will choke out the words: *God. Help. Hear. Me.* I've said these words—what else could I do when things are beyond hope, beyond my reason and strength?

Some prayers, at crucial moments in my life, have been answered. While thankfully helpful—transformative really—*that* those prayers were answered is a mystery to me. But so too are the untold depths of power and connection that dwell within us and between us and all things. *That's* worth pondering over, and resorting to, with the utmost reverence, care, and gratitude.

Some of us have grown out of the beliefs and prayer-making of our youth; others of us arrived here without a religious upbringing. In both cases, the idea and practice of prayer may be problematic. We can't conceive or believe in a personal, transactional divine being who'd stop the world in its course, and listen in on and grant us special dispensation and favour. And we object to its debased use in public and private.

And yet something profound and good may be lost in thinking that what remains of prayer is confined to expressions of thanks or to personal “wishes” or “thoughts” for health and happiness that we extend to others—though fitting both of these are, and I do it myself frequently.

Think about the following: Theodore Parker, in the midst of his Thanksgiving sermon, cried out:

We remember the millions of our brothers and sisters...whose fetters *our* wicked hands have riveted upon their limbs....We pray that *we* may suffer from these *our* transgressions till we learn to eschew evil, break the rod of the oppressor, and let the oppressed go free.

For the Unitarian Parker, prayer was exactly the place and time to acknowledge that *all is not OK* with me and us; for all our education, self-possession and relative privilege, there is a brokenness about us and the world we live in, and that we need all the help we can call upon to “do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly” in this world.

A generation later, the Unitarian William Stanley Jevons mentioned earlier—he who’d given up on petitionary prayer—said this:

Prayer should express the resolution of the mind and heart to carry out something of moment and import. It is the effusion of feelings which come, *we know not how*, but which as they are, are not less certain than the blazing of a meteor....I do believe that there springs forth from the human mind and heart feelings which science will never analyze—hope and trust and self-devotion.

*That “all is not OK” with us... “effusion of feelings which come, we know not how...”*

If there’s still to be a place for prayer in addition to thanks and beyond good wishes, it goes back I think, to the beginning of this sermon, and the words of the Anglican priest in London: *The chemistry of prayer is the meeting of two elements: one—the voiceless sound in speech tucked away deep within us* (that’s Jevons’ “effusion of feelings” rising to the lips of the heart) *and two—the vast expanse of purposeful silence. The key to the reaction is silence and time.*

There’s the rub. Do I bring those elements and then make room for the chemistry of prayer to do its work?

Everyone tells me—I say it myself—our lives are full; we’re swamped; we’re glued to screens; we’re assaulted by noise and images. And time streams relentlessly away from us.

Unitarians and prayer? We’ve prayed for centuries, and they’ve changed over time as we have changed. What hasn’t changed is its power to welcome and hold our expressions of anguish, solace, gratitude and resolution; a place where we can ask questions clearly enough to understand them; a time of stillness in which to re-gather our strength, and then go forth into life.

Unitarians and prayer? Let me end where I began: from the Hebrew Bible and our meditation:

*A voice said: Go forth and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountain, and brake in pieces the rocks; but the LORD was not in the wind and the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.*

*And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice unto him, and said,*

*What doest thou here...?*