

“The Case for Prayer” by Jim Foti  
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People sometimes ask me whether becoming a minister was something I’d always longed to do. And the answer is actually no. A lot of the signs were there my whole life, but they just didn’t all come together. My call to ministry turned out to be more like a light bulb appearing over my head, one of those “a-ha” moments. More than one minister hinted that I might want to find the light switch and turn that bulb off. But my gut and my heart told me to do it, to make the leap, to go to seminary. If I could take a leap of faith, maybe I’d make a decent minister.

The leap of faith turned out pretty well pretty quickly. I discovered that I loved seminary and the community I found there. And my lifelong love of language was soon blossoming in new ways, in sermons and essays and poems. It was all going rather wonderfully. And then one day, when I was not terribly far into my ministerial formation, I had a chilling realization:

Oh dear. They’re going to make me pray.

The whole idea of having to pray made me anxious and uncomfortable. And I knew there were plenty of other Unitarian Universalists in the same boat. I’d heard lots of prayers in church and participated in them, but I hadn’t initiated any prayers myself in probably twenty years. With so many other ways for me to be a minister, and with so many other ways to experience the holy, why did I have to pray?

Initially, seminary did not quell my anxieties, but actually heightened them. One of the first courses I took was a preaching class – preaching boot camp, we called it. Our professor was the Reverend Dr. Bill Schulz, whom many of you heard right from this very pulpit this past December. Bill is head of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and he used to be president of the entire denomination. So he’s quite familiar with pulpits, and preaching, and the general life of being a minister.

So our preaching class was meeting in a hot, un-air-conditioned chapel with loud whirring fans and no microphone or sound system. And we had to get up and give sermons in front of a professor who is known as one of the best preachers in all of Unitarian Universalism. And as if all that weren’t stressful enough, here’s what Bill would do during the breaks between our sermons. He would hand each of us a white envelope. They were all blank on the outside, but one of the envelopes had a piece of paper in it. And if you got the piece of paper in your envelope, guess what happened. No, you did not get an extra glass of ice water. No, you did not get an automatic “A” on your sermon. And no, you did not get a trip to Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. You got none of these things. Rather, if your envelope had the piece of paper in it, you had to do a spontaneous prayer in front Bill and the whole class!

And it could not be just any prayer. Our beloved professor had cooked up complicated scenarios for us. One situation involved being suddenly asked by the mayor to give a benediction in the town square. Another situation involved saying the blessing at a Thanksgiving dinner attended by both intolerant atheists and equally inflexible Christians. This prayer exercise was enough to make a seminarian wonder whether it was too late to turn off that light bulb. But we all got our professor's point, which was this: Whether or not we were personally predisposed to pray, people of all kinds were going to turn to us as ministers for prayer. And we therefore needed to pay attention to whatever obstacles were getting in our way.

So I stand before you today as a minister-to-be who has struggled with a serious case of prayerphobia. On the one hand, prayerphobia makes me an unlikely person to be up here making a case for prayer. On the other hand, who better to make a case for prayer than someone who has had to make the case to himself.

For most of us, when we're not at church, prayer can be something of an optional activity. This congregation is very comfortable with prayer here during worship, such as the words we hear during our weekly embracing meditation and the minister's prayer. But how often do we take the idea of prayer with us when we walk out the sanctuary door? To be sure, some of us are blessed with rich prayer lives. But for those who aren't, what are the obstacles to prayer? What are the obstacles to creating prayer from our hearts? What are the obstacles that keep us from praying at all?

When I take a close look at my prayerphobia, I see three main obstacles. These obstacles are interconnected like a tangle of thorny vines choking a garden. It's hard to examine each one separately, or figure out where one vine ends and the other begins. I tend to take a "why not?" approach to life – if presented with the option of doing something or not doing something, I'll ask myself "why not?" And when I've asked myself "why not pray?" here are the reasons I've come up with:

Praying doesn't work.

I don't have anybody to pray to.

I don't know how to pray.

I think these objections resonate for a lot of people. And you can probably see pretty quickly how the three objections are intertwined. How can you know how to pray when you don't have anybody to pray to? How can prayer work when you don't know how? And you might not have anybody to pray to because you stopped talking to God when prayer didn't work.

I used to avoid this tangle of vines entirely. I took comfort in the school of thought that defined prayer more broadly – prayer as how we live. And to this day, I still like that perspective, that deeds can perform many of the traditional functions of more verbal

prayers. Actions done with intention can center us, comfort us and others, and connect us with the sacred and a larger whole. Actions can be a way of addressing our needs and hopes and be an expression of what we find to be good.

When I think about the important relationship between prayer and action, I'm reminded of a little scene I witnessed the summer before last. It was a perfect evening, warm enough to have a late dinner outdoors, so my partner and I and one of our friends grabbed a table on the sidewalk at a diner near our house. The service at this diner was happening at a very leisurely pace, so there was time to take in the sights along the street. As we were waiting for our food to come, I noticed a group of about a half-dozen women and men standing near some motorcycles that were parked just down the block. They were starting up their motorcycles, and the sound was impossible to miss. As they were getting ready to get on the road, they paused and stood in a circle. They bowed their heads in prayer, held hands, and shared words that I could not hear over the noise. When they were done, I saw them exchange hugs and handshakes of goodbye. Then they jumped onto their bikes and rocketed off down the street.

They had been dressed in T-shirts and shorts – no leather jackets, helmets, or other protection. This struck me as something of a contradiction – because I thought that if they really wanted to get home safely, they should do more than just pray. They should take action. Actions and words are two ways of expressing our hopes and intentions, and I tended to put more weight on action.

This was the same summer that I worked as a hospital chaplain intern, so the role of prayer was very much on my mind. For someone with prayerphobia, being a chaplain seems like the worst possible job – every room in the hospital was like the white envelope with the piece of paper in it. But being a chaplain was actually one of the best possible jobs. That's because the hospital posed a challenge to my belief that action was always preferable to a verbal prayer. When you go into a hospital room and the patient is expecting you to say a prayer, there may be nothing else you can do. A chaplain can't go out back and dig a well and tell 'em that that was your prayer. In many medical situations, a prayer of words may be the only step left for anyone to take. I learned that my job as a chaplain had less to do with deeds and more to do with being and giving voice. And the hospital is where I saw vivid examples of how prayer could work.

I had to break out of the traditional model of what I'd been taught about spoken prayer. That model is what my partner, who was raised UU, calls "the Santa Claus" approach. A prayer is like a request to Santa – you ask or perhaps beg for what you want, and maybe you get it, and maybe you don't. And if your request is denied, you may never feel like you understand why, and you were supposed to be OK with that.

I realized that, if I were going to accept prayer, I had to unlearn the "Santa Claus" approach. I would forever think that "prayer doesn't work" if I stuck with that perspective. There were too many examples in the world of good and faithful people

praying for things that were not to be. The rain doesn't come soon enough to save the crops, or the rain doesn't stop before everything floods. The relationship isn't saved, the illness isn't cured, even though everybody prayed and prayed. So many hopes voiced, and so many hopes dashed. If I was ever going to be able to think of prayer as something that worked, I was going to have to redefine the meaning of effective prayer.

And the hospital, even with its deaths and losses and dashed dreams, turned out to be a good place for me to see how prayer could work. A couple of times during my chaplain internship, I had to work the morning surgery shift, which could start as early as 6. I remember going to the area where patients got prepped for their operations, each one behind a curtain, in hallways that were warrens of medical equipment, with staff in pale blue scrubs moving in every direction. To me, doctors' and nurses' whole lives were a kind of prayer, a prayer of service. But I was there, in my ordinary dress clothes, to provide another kind of prayer. I was there to represent a larger love, and to help patients feel connected to that love through my presence and words. I remember stopping into one of the pre-surgical rooms and meeting a woman who was there with a few members of her family, one of whom was holding her hand. She was having an operation to find out just how serious her cancer was. I listened to their hopes and fears, and then said a short prayer for a safe surgery and a good outcome. Our whole time together was probably no more than two minutes. And I wish I could show you two pictures of this woman, a picture before prayer and a picture after prayer. Because her anxiety was so visibly reduced by our simple moment of prayer. The point of the prayer was not whether her "request" was going to be "accepted" or "denied." Because of prayer, she and her family felt connected to a larger love. It was a prayer that worked.

I saw this over and over again in the hospital, the power of prayer, not to bring about certain outcomes, but to change moods and spirits and outlooks, in individuals and in entire rooms of people. The prayer could be the 23rd Psalm, with its visions of green pastures and still waters and a lifetime of goodness and mercy. The prayer could be the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, which connected people to familiar ritual when the comforts of their church home seemed so far away. Or it could be a prayer created in the moment for the crisis at hand, with whatever words came to mind. No matter what form the prayer came in, no matter how it was prayed, the point, for me, was the same. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, the 20th century liberal theologian, "Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people change things.... Prayer is not hearing voices, prayer is acquiring a voice." And I think that by giving a voice to what's in our hearts, prayer can work.

But what about the obstacle of not having anybody to pray to? As Janne explored in her sermon last week, not everyone can pray to a traditional God and feel authentic about doing so. We are a church community that includes theists, agnostics, and atheists. I don't hold a traditional view of God myself. And there's the old joke about how Unitarian Universalist prayers have to begin with "To whom it may concern." How might we pray when we don't know whom we're praying to?

One way is through metaphor. Instead of thinking of a prayer addressed to God as a request being made *of* God, we can think of the word “God” as a symbol for a larger love. We can think of it as an acknowledgement of our often humble and vulnerable place in the universe, and the humble and vulnerable places in which we find ourselves within our own lives. We can think of praying to God or the Spirit of Life or to the Holy One as a way of putting our hopes and dreams and fears into that broader context, of acknowledging our relationship to mystery and the infinite.

Another way to pray is what can be thought of as a more horizontal prayer, a naming of wishes for each other or our world, and doing so in a way that does not include a reference to a deity. The children’s recessional that we sing every week at some of our services is this kind of blessing. We say to the children, “May your mind be open to new learning” and “may your lips bring truth into the world.” “May” is a great first word for a prayer.

So, as a person still overcoming prayerphobia, I wish I could stand before you today and tell you that prayer had transformed my life. I’m afraid that I don’t think it has, at least not on its own. But I want to tell you what a spiritual practice of spoken prayer has looked like for me, and how it has had power in my life, and maybe it will open some ideas for your own prayer life.

One of the main challenges, of course, is finding the time to pray. In his book “Simply Pray,” Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom recounts a story about Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, who was said to have set aside an hour a day just for prayer. And when Luther was asked what he did on days when he was too busy to pray for a whole hour, Luther responded that, on such days, he prayed for two hours. The case that Luther was making for prayer was that it was even more essential in times of stress, and that it’s good to make it a habit.

As is so often the case with me and Luther, I agree and I disagree. Prayer can indeed be a beneficial and even live-saving habit, but as I learned during my visits to the surgical unit, two minutes of prayer can be as worthwhile as two hours of prayer.

So I’m going to share with you the prayer habit I developed over the past few years. It’s not very sophisticated. It’s quite simple, really. But I’ve taken to heart some other words from Erik Walker Wikstrom, who says that we should not shy away from prayer practice because we worry that it’s one more thing we’ll end up failing at. I suppose there is some small chance that prayer could be a form of failure. For example, if you substitute prayer for actions that are readily performed – if you pray instead of wearing your motorcycle helmet – prayer could make your life worse. But it’s unlikely to. Prayer is a “why not” kind of thing. Once you’ve disentangled those pesky objections to prayer, why not proceed?

So here's what I do. Here's how I practice the art of blessing the day.

When I get up to start my day, I go over to my patio door. It's one of the wider ones, with a big curtain that I close every night and open every morning. And as I'm pulling the cord and opening the curtain on my day and looking out at the morning sun, I say the following things:

I greet this day with gratitude, and may gratitude be with me throughout the day.

May I accept the things I cannot change, change the things I can, and have the wisdom to know the difference.

May I remember that there will be nothing today that I cannot handle with the support of the people I love.

I will remember to ask myself, "What's the best thing that could possibly happen?"

At least one of those may sound familiar. The one about accepting things I cannot change is a variation on the Serenity Prayer, originally written by Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian I mentioned earlier, the one who says that prayer changes people, and people change things. The line about the day giving me nothing I can't handle is an adaptation of a prayer that was Scotch-taped on the inside of the back door of the house I grew up in. My mom put it there. We saw it every day when we headed out into the world. The line about gratitude I simply created myself, because gratitude is perhaps my most important theological practice. And the reminder to ask myself "What's the *best* thing that could possibly happen?" is a response to my age-old habit of being Mr. Worst-Case Scenario, always preparing myself for the worst thing that could possibly happen, instead of focusing on the beauty and abundance of life.

I know that these prayers are a little self-focused, a little bit pep talk. I know there are people who get up early in the morning and do devotionals, calling to mind the faces of the people they love and holding them in their hearts. I have great respect for that discipline and find it very beautiful. But if you ever saw me first thing in the morning, you'd think, "that guy needs a pep talk." My prayers about others come later in the day, and in this line of work I'm in, I constantly have the opportunity to think of and serve others.

You know what else comes to me later in the day? Little bursts of gratitude, more gratitude than came before I started doing my morning prayers. More serenity, too, as my morning Serenity Prayer echoes back at me when I'm trying to decide what I can and cannot change, in my life and in the world.

And more and more, I've been noticing just how often the best thing that could possibly happen actually does happen. Which leads to more gratitude, and more serenity. And a whole lot less prayerphobia.

May I, and you, and all of us, find the best possible relationship to prayer in our lives, and see it for the gift that it can be. May it be so, and Amen.