

SOMEBODY PRAYED FOR ME

This year our church will go through the transformative process of exploring the way that we can make a difference in our world. This is called the mission/vision process. Some of you may be saying, Hey, we have a mission statement already, don't we? Why do we need another one?

The short answer to that question is that the church that created our current mission statement no longer exists. This church, the church that is made up of YOU, is the church that needs to define itself.

What is a mission statement? At its core it is a statement of our faith and of our values. It is an awareness of who we are as Unitarian Universalists and what our faith calls us to create in the world. Our mission and its defining statement will crystallize that call. It will guide our actions over the course of the next few years

What does it mean to vision? It is to ask ourselves how we want to evolve. What do we want to become as a church. It is a promise to the future.

I am one of the six members of the Committee on Ministries charged with planning the mission/vision process. We have been educating ourselves about this process. Since this is a defining moment for a church, our main goal is to convey to the community how important it is for every voice to be heard. Our church's mission must be **your** mission. Our vision must be **your** vision.

The fact that we are undertaking this process is a good sign for the church. An immature church, a church engaged in turmoil and conflict doesn't have the energy or resolve to look outward.

The members of the COM have been reading a book called Holy Conversations, which describes this mission process. The book says that the group charged with leading the process has to do four things: Listen. Talk. Pray. Discern. Listen to the congregation. Engage in holy conversation with the congregation. Discern our calling. And Pray.

It is that last one, pray, that stumped me. I can listen. I can talk. I can even discern. But pray? I haven't prayed in years. I'm not even sure I understand what the word means. What does it mean to me as a UU? What does it mean to me as a secular person? In truth, the word "pray" makes me feel queasy.

It turns out that many people are queasy when they hear that word. That is not surprising in a world that has co-opted and corrupted the meaning of prayer. We hear politicians who say that they prayed about running for office and that they pray about their decisions once in office as if they are instruments of the Lord's voice and wishes, just passive conduits through which God speaks – and speaks only to the American people. That isn't prayer. That is piety. Jesus had a name for this – he called it hypocrisy.

But if I were going to fulfill my promise on the COM, I needed to lay aside my prejudices and prayer and look deeper.

Discussions with people about what prayer means to them

I set out to learn about prayer. I used the very process that we will be using in the months ahead. I talked. I listened. And I discerned. And what I have come to see is that much to my surprise, I lead a prayerful life. And guess what, so do you.

In the last few months I asked scores of people from all different faiths, including “non believers” if they pray, if so, how do they pray, and what prayer means to them. I got a full range of answers.

Some people lectured me about prayer. The best lecture was from a friend I went to college with – a devout Catholic, a college professor, very involved in the charitable works of St. Vincent de Paul. He told me that there is a hierarchy of prayers; there are 4 levels; from “lowest” to “highest” they are: Prayers of Petition; Prayers of Contrition; Prayers of Thanksgiving; prayers of Praise to God.

Many scholars dismiss Prayers of Petition as juvenile and immature. They are “I” centric – asking God to do something for you. Matthew Fox, the defrocked Dominican Priest and author of *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear, Spirituality American Style*, wrote that “A child lives in the world of Petition: ‘I want, I need, I desire, you give’ are at the heart of his existence. Indeed, a child by definition is a dependent person. Cause and effect to a child are in terms of request and answer. But the child’s world is not his for

long; he soon grows out of depending on others and accepts his own capacity to affect his world. The child's prayer of petition cannot be the foundation of adult prayer."

I am not so quick to dismiss prayers of petition because I heard of the power that these prayers have for so many. I was especially moved by more than one individual who told me that they were alcoholics, or drug addicts, or had some disease, that they prayed and were saved.

In my friend's hierarchy of prayer, the highest prayer was prayer of praise to God. Matthew Fox calls this Prayers of awe or adoration. They are different than all the other prayers because all of the others prayers are about ME. I need, I want, I am sorry, I am grateful. Prayers of praise are about God. The holiest prayers in the world's religions are prayers of praise. The oldest of these prayers, the Shema starts: "Hear, O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One. Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever"; the Christian's Our Father starts: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be **your** name. **Your** kingdom come, **your** will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". This is a prayer of praise. It devolves into a prayer of gratitude, thanksgiving and petition. But it starts out with praise. The Muslim Fatiha makes it simple and explicit: "All praise is due to Allah."

These prayers used to move me. They seem universal and eternal. As a child I sang the Shema every night before I went to sleep. I don't know why, but I found it profound and moving. Then one day the power simply evaporated.

Many of the people that I spoke to, especially people who are motivated to action by their faith, like the nuns and devout Episcopalians that I vigil against the death penalty with, talked about prayers of intercession. Essentially this means putting focused energy into the world towards healing, peace and justice. Sometimes that means using words to articulate a desire for healing, peace and justice – and that is prayer. Sometimes it means acting to bring about peace and justice, by standing witness or attending a rally or voting. And that also is prayer. Speaking to these folks I realized that what I had been calling “political” work, was prayer. That change in semantics didn’t change what I did, but it changed how I viewed it and what it means to me.

In the final analysis what rang most true to me was Matthew Fox’s definition of prayer. *Prayer is a radical response to life.* Prayer is not saying prayers. Those rituals may give comfort, but that is not praying. Prayer is not withdrawal from the world to enter a “holy place”. Prayer is not acquiescence to a doctrine. Prayer is not causing God to change the course of the world through our petitions. Prayer is not talking to God, because god is not a person and there can be no conversation with god. Prayer is not Liturgy. It is not confined to churches or temples. Prayer is not an exceptional experience.

Matthew Fox writes, “In reality, prayer is useless. To rediscover the useless yet valuable in life is to recover prayer. Those who try to make use of prayer do not respect prayer at all but manipulate it. Prayer is not a means but a value in itself”.

Matthew Fox says that prayer is reconnection to and a deep abiding awe of the mystery of life. And that means life, with all its warts and blemishes. Just as beauty and love are part of life's mystery, so is death and evil.

Childhood memories

When I was a child, I was intuitively and intimately connected to the mystery of life. When I was in third grade one of my chores was to walk the dog. Often when I walked the dog at night I saw search lights moving in the sky. I knew that this was god, that he was revealing himself to me. I wasn't shocked, or alarmed or surprised. I didn't feel a need to tell my parents about it. It was nothing special or out of the ordinary. It was just the presence of god.

Of course, later I learned that these were search lights from car dealerships luring consumers. We grow up. We lose touch with the mystery. Prayer brings us back to the mystery.

Prayer is a radical response to life.

It is a response because to respond means to engage and commit, and prayer is a willingness to affirmatively engage with and commit to life.

It is a response to **life**, not a response to God. Matthew Fox calls this life force Providence. It is not a separate "being", it is not personal. It is everywhere and everything.

It is a radical response because it is rooted in principle. It calls on us to act as complete but flawed human beings.

So, to get back to the charge of the committee on ministry, it turns out that to Pray is the easiest thing of all. It is what we do when we simply go to the committee meeting. It is certainly what we do when we plan and organize and think about how to go forward. It is definitely what we do when we differ about how to go forward and then work to resolve our differences.

Many of you in this congregation know Lucy Crichton. About a decade ago Lucy gave up a career in law and went into the ministry. When I asked Lucy about prayer, she said when you think of the world as a spiritual place, everything you do in it is prayer.

You get a chance to pray immediately because now is the time in our service when we get to share from the bounty of our own lives with the life of the community. Today's community plate supports.....
The morning offering will now be given gratefully received

(offering. Somebody Prayed for Me)

May we be transformed by our giving.
May the world be transformed by our gifts.