**Five A.M. in the Pinewoods** by Mary Oliver

I'd seen their hoofprints in the deep needles and knew they ended the long night

**under the pines, walking like two mute and beautiful women toward the deeper woods, so I**

got up in the dark and went there. They came slowly down the hill and looked at me sitting under

**the blue trees, shyly they stepped closer and stared from under their thick lashes and even**

nibbled some damp tassels of weeds. This is not a poem about a dream, though it could be.

**This is a poem about the world that is ours, or could be. Finally one of them — I swear it! —**

would have come to my arms. But the other stamped sharp hoof in the pine needles like

**the tap of sanity, and they went off together through the trees. When I woke I was alone,**

I was thinking: so this is how you swim inward, so this is how you flow outward, so this is how you pray.

**Meditation and Prayer**

In my congregation, we have a ritual way of doing our meditation and prayer time, and I invite you to try it out with me this morning. We begin with words to lead us into the meditation, and sometimes a reading. This morning the reading I’ll share with you is from my book of meditations, called Reaching for the Sun. I don’t usually choose readings from my own book—it seems a little self promoting. But this reading relates to the sermon this morning, and anyway, I wrote the meditations for the purpose of using them in church!

After the reading, we have silence and then a spoken prayer. At the end of the spoken prayer, we have a traditional blessing. Some of you may recognize it from other churches you’ve been part of:

I say “Peace be with you,” and the congregation says…[anybody know?] “And also with you.” This reciprocal blessing is one of my favorite times in the service.

OK, let’s begin.

Begin by breathing, settling in. Really come into this space. If you are holding anything in your hands or lap, maybe lay it down. Anything in your mind, lay that down too. You can pick it up again later. Tension. Breathing.

Here is the reading, “A Laying On of Words”:

*I know you are wicked busy, but I need a prayer right now. I’m going into emergency surgery*, my friend texts. I picture her on the hospital bed with her stomach in knots, casting prayer requests into the 4-G network.

I see the pre-op unit in my mind: rows of beds and blue curtains bent around corners; staff taking vitals, handing out pills, putting in IVs; student chaplains making nervous rounds, having been on-call all night, having seen some of yesterday’s pre-ops sipping juice, and having seen some dead. Exactly what use is a prayer?

I text a blessing back: *Love is all around you. I am holding you in my heart*.

And careening through cyberspace, it tumbles together with the blessings sent by her other friends at the exact same moment—all the words weighty with friendship histories and intimate knowing: the loves-hearts-God-protects-safe-prayers-healings. Picture them pouring into her hospital room, sparkling through the air, landing all over her: a laying-on of words.

See her brow un-knit and peace sweep through her body. A prayer is love in motion.

…We continue in silence…

Holy one,

Nameless one,

How shall we address you? You who are without form, and yet are everywhere, and are everything.

We call you spirit, ground of being, love,

We call you nothing, we call you mystery,

We call you mover, source of peace.

We speak to you in metaphor,

We speak. We are made for language, for connection, and so we say “You” but this is only another approximate guess.

How shall we address you?

And how shall we look upon you?

We whose hearts long to know you, who were formed according to the trajectory of stars to love the mystery, to be filled with awe, and to look for you but it is

like looking into the sun

and you are known by inference,

in poetry, you cast your shadow forms

in music, you flow over us like rays.

Standing before you in search of words,

We bring all that we have for your name,

And all that we have within us to lay at your feet:

Beauty and curiosity,

Anger, fear, and confusion,

And when we have laid it all out,

When the earth and sun, the moon and stars have borne witness

And we come to the place of silence,

Receive, O Holy one, our gratitude.

For the light and fall,

For the earth spinning from season to season,

For the wild places, in the world and in us,

For the conversation,

For the pause,

For being.

Amen.

Peace be with you.

**What Does Prayer Do?** The Rev. Angela Herrera

September 6, 2014 UU Fellowship of Taos, NM

A man was looking for a parking space. He circled the block again and again with no luck. Finally he prayed in exasperation: “Look, God. I’ll do anything for a parking space. If you give me a space, I’ll start going to church. I’ll pray every day and be your faithful servant.” Just then a parking space appeared. So the man said, “Never mind, I found one.”

That’s the third image of what prayer is or does this morning. The first was “A Laying on of Words.” A woman in a hospital requests prayers, and the feeling she gets or the energy that comes from everyone sending her their love, eases her experience.

The second image was in Mary Oliver’s poem[[1]](#footnote-1) about watching deer in the woods… many of you relate to this kind of image. “You swim inward,” and “flow outward” she says. This is the kind of prayer that happens in the “church of the great outdoors.”

But this third image is a joke about the kind of prayer that is probably closest to the pop-culture image. The “ask and ye shall receive” version. According to that version, prayer as *asking* for something, and on some level expecting to get it. Or at least, expecting it enough that when our prayers go unanswered—meaning, they are not answered by our getting what we want—we feel slighted, or unworthy, or doubtful about the existence of God. Either we expect that prayer will work, or we expect that that’s how prayer is *supposed* to work, and so we are either disappointed or we just find that prayer is not useful—not in the way we think it should be—and so we don’t bother.

Prayer is one of those religious practices that many of us were taught to do in a particular way, either in church, or by our parents or grandparents, or maybe we just picked it up from the culture around us. How many of you were raised in different religious tradition, not Unitarian Universalist, or no tradition? If you became a Unitarian Universalist as an adult, if you are one of our converts, then it’s likely that, at some point in your life, the way you learned to pray stopped making sense to you, and so perhaps you let go of the idea of praying altogether.

Do we have any lifelong UUs? Even those of us raised in Unitarian Universalist or other liberal religious households probably found that—if we prayed as children or young people—we also outgrew the way we were praying. This is natural. As our capacity for spiritual ambiguity and complexity grows, and as we become more able to sit with uncertainty, our childhood impressions of God, or ultimacy, and prayer, also change.

And so, I am guessing, most of us here do not believe in the power of prayer to secure parking spaces or winning lottery tickets, or to make us taller or shorter or otherwise rearrange the physical realities of our lives…. at least, a prayer in and of itself cannot do these things. We are pretty sure.

Some of us may have a vague notion that there is more to prayer than that—after all, why would humans carry on a practice with such a poor track record? But if there is more to prayer than speaking and being heard, asking and being rewarded, well, it’s hard to explain.

We’ll come back to this in a little while.

For now, we see that so far in these examples--a laying on of words, a deer in the woods, a parking space--we have images of prayer as something that may express love, express awe, or get us what we want.

I have a couple more short readings for you. Think about how prayer is functioning differently in these.

Here’s the first one, an excerpt from the Autobiography of Malcolm X:

The hardest test I ever faced in my life was praying. You understand. My comprehending, my believing the teachings of Mr. Muhammad had only required my mind’s saying to me, “That’s right!” or “I never thought of that.” But bending my knees to pray—that *act—*well, that took me a week. You know what my life had been. Picking a lock to rob someone’s house was the only way my knees had ever bent before. I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up.

You could read a paternalistic, condemning God into this. One who would demand a bended knee, and whose judgment would make us ashamed. But Malcolm X doesn’t actually describe his God in this passage.

This passage really resonates with me. What it reminds me of *most* is times in the past when I have tried to meditate, but couldn’t bring myself to sit still. I couldn’t bring myself to sit still for fear that difficult truths would present themselves to me, and I would no longer be able to avoid them.

Have you ever been through a time like that in your life? When you were afraid to slow down, because deep down you knew there was some stuff that was going to catch up with you? Reality you had been avoiding. And once you were looking squarely at it, that reality was going to make some demands of you. That you do the hard thing, and change. Maybe that you stop self destructing. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Most people have been there. Some of us may be there right now. There’s something in the background of your life or something tugging at your soul that you wish would just go away, and you’ve been busily avoiding it. It might be merely uncomfortable, or it might be a real game changer.

Some of us have been though it, some of us are going through it, and all of us *will* have this experience at some time in our lives because we are all good at running away. We may have a hard time walking from point A to point B in our daily lives, but we are all spiritual *sprinters* when it comes to avoiding what we don’t want to deal with. We have that capacity. So one of the things prayer can do is slow us down and make us see ourselves and our situation with clear eyes. Malcolm X’s testimony is an example of that.

*Bending his knees* would mean giving up his power to pretend he had everything under control, including his self image.

I know a Unitarian Universalist minister, a good friend, who does full body prostrations—lies all the way down on his stomach on the ground—as part of his spiritual practice. This has been very powerful for him. He’s a Buddhist UU and he is not bowing down in submission to some all-knowing God. He is remembering that

along with being powerful creatures with our consciousness and our capacity for innovation,

along with being beautiful children of the universe who are already holy and who are capable of great healing and worthy of love, every one of us,

we are also very small, and humble,

we are capable of self delusion and we are in need of surrendering to what we cannot control,

and so he does prostrations.

Another minister reminds us that, “Whether or not we believe in God, we must recognize that we ourselves are not God[[2]](#footnote-2).”

Whether or not we believe in God, we must recognize that we ourselves are not God.

Prayer as expressing love, expressing awe, getting us what we want, or showing us what is true.

The next reading I have for you is an excerpt from “Eagle Poem” by the Native American writer, Joy Harjo.

To pray you open your whole self

To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon

To one whole voice that is you.

And know there is more

That you can't see, can't hear;

Can't know except in moments

Steadly growing, and in languages

That aren't always sound…

It’s striking how many ways there are to pray. A text message. Standing in the woods. Speaking out loud. On our knees, or in full prostration. And now here is Harjo, whose poem conveys that prayer is more a way of being than a form of doing.

“You open your whole self…”

Frederick Buechner, a writer and Presbyterian minister, says that

everybody prays whether they think of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad... Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing with over your own life. These are all prayers in their way…spoken not just to yourself but to something even more familiar than yourself and even more strange than the world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What is that something? What is “even more familiar than yourself, and even more strange than the world?”

This sermon began as a conversation with one of First Unitarian Albuquerque’s new humanist groups. They invited me to come and speak. I love it when a group forms to take a particular piece of our theological pie and go deeper with it, whether its humanism, paganism, Christianity, or something else, so I was excited to visit.

Now, I know that prayer can be a challenging concept for the atheists among us, and since its something we do every week in worship, I wondered whether they would agree that there might be a definition of prayer that did not depend on God. It was after the Harjo reading, that one of the folks in the group said, “Well if you define it that way, anything can count as a prayer.” And another asked, “Why use the word prayer at all?”

Why use the word prayer at all? Good question.

It’s helpful to consider what religion and spirituality are fundamentally about, and that’s the *depth* aspect of being. In the human experience, there is the observable aspect of being. The earth, sea, and stars. Orangutans and weather systems and cells with their nuclei and phospholipid bi-layers. What is observable is one part of being.

There is the observable, and then there is the *observing*. Our thoughts. If you tune your awareness to it, you can observe yourself observing, almost like you’re hanging out in some upper corner of your mind. And then, you can observe yourself observing yourself, and if you keep going with that you can really wind up with your head in the clouds. This is the reasoning part of us.

But then there’s another aspect of being beyond the observable and the observing, and that’s the fact that there’s even more to life than meets the eye. There’s the sense of meaningfulness of it all. Meaning is more than meets the eye. This is the depth aspect. That’s the part that moves your heart. That’s where love and mercy and beauty live. That’s where stories get their power. The depth aspect of life is what religion is about.

Prayer is about connecting ourselves with that.

When I was a hospital chaplaincy intern and a physician asked just what we chaplains did, I explained that, “We try to take care of the part of people that is not made up of parts.” Depth aspect. I discovered there were many ways to pray with people, often without reference to God. Sometimes it was expressed as a blessing or a wish for the person at the end of our visit.

“May the healing energies of your body overwhelm all suffering.”

Another time I was visiting with a young, single mother, who was trying to balance full time school and parenting when she suddenly needed surgery. She was used to keeping so many balls in the air, and here she was powerless and stressed out. Sitting at her bedside, I said, “There is so much that you carry. The weight of the world is on your shoulders, and here you are flat on your back.”

I invited her to take a deep breath and switch her awareness from all that is undone to the feeling of the bed beneath her, pushing up against her as gravity drew her toward the earth. Bearing her weight. (You can do this right here in the pews, too.) I invited her to let herself be held in this way, and let the weight she carries be laid down, too. It was time for her to be held and be healed. Whether she felt she was being held by something more than that bed or my compassion for her, I don’t know. I don’t think it matters very much. The change in her was visible.

There are lots of ways to pray.

As for the heart of a prayer, though, they say there are four classic types: Giving Thanks, Listening, Confessing, and Intercessory. Sometimes they blend together.

Under the category of thanks, of course, are our mealtime blessings. A family favorite in our household goes like this: For food that stays our hunger, for rest that brings us ease, for homes where memories linger, we give our thanks for these. A simple affirmation.

We can also give thanks by slowing down and paying attention. By experiencing awe. By praising the beauty of creation. By standing with our arms outstretched and faces tipped back in a rainstorm. Giving thanks.

Listening prayers are the ones we do when we open our whole selves. I’m talking about the kind of deep listening that we can’t do with our ears—it’s more of a posture. An internal posture. We assume that posture when we are meditating. Or hiking in silence. On bended knee, or sitting with nature, or even while driving without the radio on. Any time you turn down the distractions and tune into your heart, receptive to new wisdom, or the movements of the holy in your life. Listening.

How about prayers of confession? These are not about ticking off a list of technical violations. “I missed church. I went to Starbucks when we’re supposed to be on a budget. I let my mother’s call go to voice mail.” To truly confess is to name those things that might keep you from praying in the first place. The truths that might rise up and make demands of you.

Confession is not about guilt, but about honesty. We cannot be whole as long as we are hiding part of ourselves from ourselves. We cannot be healed if we don’t tend to the places that are weak or wounded within us. We cannot be in honest relationship with God or Truth if we are not truthful with ourselves first. Confession is not about guilt but about authenticity and courage.

To get that courage, you might try intercessory prayer. Help me. You might offer a prayer like this up to God or the universe, or you might articulate your need for help or comfort as a way of focusing your own wild heart. The thing about praying for help or strength or comfort is that it gets you looking for those things. And, lo, they just may appear… from within you and from friends and loved ones, and from perfect strangers whose temporary role as angels you might otherwise have overlooked.

We can also offer up intercessory prayers for others, as in the reading about the woman having emergency surgery. It is a way of loving them, of sending them love. Or we can pray for someone who is difficult to love, and that will nurture compassion within us, and free us from the oppression of anger.

Thanks, listening, confession, and intercessory. I don’t know who came up with this version of the “classic prayers” list but there’s one missing, and that’s anger. “Forget you, God!” Have you prayed one of those recently? Have you ever told the universe to go fly a kite? Maybe using more indelicate terms? Anger, and lamentation. Why me? How could this happen? The bible is full of these, in the book of Job, and in the psalms, so when you find yourself doing it, don’t feel bad. It’s a time-honored tradition.

And a sweet older couple in Albuquerque pointed out one more kind of prayer that’s missing from this sermon: imprecatory prayer. When you pray for misfortune to happen to someone else. All I’m going to say about that is don’t do it. That’s not good for you!

Whatever kind of prayer we do, I’d make the case that prayer is probably not *for God*—at least not for atheists, and not for people who believe in an all knowing God. If you believe in an all-knowing god, the idea of prayer being for that god makes no sense, because an all-knowing god would already know your prayer before you utter it. So even in its most old fashioned, old school sense, it is problematic to think of prayer as being something that needs to be heard by God’s metaphorical ears.

So what is it for? What does it do?

When I lead prayer for a congregation, it’s about articulating something of what is in our hearts, hoping that you or the person next to you will “hear” something you or they need to hear. It isn’t just about the words I say. There are no perfect words. It’s about inviting you into that listening posture. Creating the space for giving thanks, listening, confessing, or acknowledging a need for help.

A chance for you to listen to the still small voice, wisdom, your subconscious, your own wild heart, or perhaps for God whispering into *your* metaphorical ears. Whispering to you.

If some past impression of what prayer is still seems to be in your way, I offer you the words of the thirteenth century mystic, Theresa of Avila, who said: “the biggest obstacle to your experience of God is your last experience of God.”

The biggest obstacle to your experience of God is your last experience of God. If we replace the word God with Mystery, or one of the other thousands of names for the depth aspect of being, then this is a statement about what you think you know being a barrier to the knowing that is still unfolding itself before you. The biggest obstacle to your experience of Mystery is your last experience of Mystery. Because you thought you had it figured out last time.

My prayer for you is that wherever you are in your life’s journey, you make space in your life for your own kind of prayer, that you make time to be in the listening posture, and that you hear what you need to hear, for the transformation or peace, wisdom, courage, or comfort, that you are seeking now.

May it be so.

1. “Five A.M. in the Pinewoods.” You can find the poem here: <http://www.panhala.net/Archive/In_the_Pinewoods.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Rev. Barbara Merritt, qtd. in Simply Pray, by Erik Walker Wikstrom. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From Buechner’s Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC [↑](#footnote-ref-3)