

Does Prayer Make a Difference?

Religion has long been important to me. It seems to hold out a promise of richness, of meaning, of fulfillment for which I yearn.

Although my father was a minister in the United Church of Christ, a liberal Protestant church, Christianity always seemed absurd to me. I could never convince myself that Jesus died for my sins. I could never connect, intellectually or emotionally, with the rituals of the church. The few sermons of my father I heard were interesting, even stimulating, but the ones I heard weren't about Christianity. They were about social problems, personal problems, in short, the kind of sermons you might have heard from the pulpit of a Unitarian Universalist Church in that time.

I remember reading the Bible as a child and youth and being attracted to many of the stories. The stories of Jesus defying the hypocritical religious leaders of his day and reaching out to those on the margins of his society were particularly attractive, but I couldn't get past the dark apocalyptic warnings alongside the stories.

I fastened on ideas as a substitute for religion. Ideas about the nature of humanity, the limits of progress, ethics, intimacy, love, and will.

I remember feeling that if I only read enough, thought enough, learned enough--that I would discover the secrets to living a fulfilling and satisfying life.

At an early age I had learned that people could imprison themselves in bitterness and resentment. I understood what Henry David Thoreau had meant when he wrote, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." Living in such a way has long seemed to me to be the equivalent of hell. On the other hand, I knew people who lived extraordinarily fulfilling and meaningful lives, the equivalent, it seemed to me, of heaven on earth. What made the difference? What were their secrets, what did they know that would enable me to be one who knew how to live like that?

At first I believed that I would discover these secrets in the fields of philosophy and psychology. I aspired to become the next Erich Fromm or Rollo May, an intellectual's intellectual, broadly educated in the humanities and sciences. I imagined I could become a psychiatrist or a psychologist and, then, on the basis of that privileged vantage point on the human condition, I would be able to write authoritatively and profoundly on what it means to be human. I wanted to be a healer, a healer not just of the broken lives of individuals, but a healer of society.

But, then, while I was in college, I discovered Unitarian Universalism. As I listened to the sermons of Bill Houff, the minister of the Spokane Unitarian Universalist Church, I soon realized that the Unitarian Universalist ministry might offer me the opportunity to be a healer. Indeed, it had an advantage over a career as a psychologist in that the role of minister would better allow me to heal not just individuals, but society. In my senior year of college I applied and was accepted to two graduate schools: one in psychology, the other in ministry. I chose the ministry.

But along the way I discovered something I never suspected when I began. The person I most want and need to heal is myself. I am wounded. I am not whole. My primary motivation in my quest to learn the secrets of life is to heal myself. I learned that all healers are wounded. I am just another wounded healer seeking the balm of Gilead.

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I wasn't one to pray in those days. My father didn't talk to me about prayer nor did I remember discussing it in church school. I was taught to pray as a child. I remember saying my prayers at bedtime as a very young child, but I don't remember continuing that practice past early childhood.

I didn't pray when I was in seminary either, or for years afterward. Prayer, when I thought about it all, seemed like some silly superstition. I don't understand God to be a person so, to whom would I pray?

Ann and Barry Ulanov in their book *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, write that the....*images of God that we erect and pray to are of a God fashioned out of what we need and what we wish for. Our pictures of God come from the memories of real experience of dependency on our parents and their responses to us. They come from our own fantasies about our parents' responses, in which we endow them with better or worse actions than they performed. Our pictures of God come from longings still with us, as for a strong ally who will protect and comfort us.....We need someone larger than life who understands us and our fears. We want a God who will guarantee that life will be fair in the end, that the wicked will be punished and the good rewarded. Above all, we need an intermediary with the unknown.*

Freud attacks such pictures as deceptive. there is no god except the one we make out of own wishes....In short, our images of God personify the unknown we fear. Through them we attempt to control the unknown by turning it unto a person like ourselves, only bigger, kinder, and all wise. Smash those mirrors, says Freud, and grow up.

Freud's critique of God is one I accepted for most of my life. Furthermore, I think that Freud was quite right for most of his analysis. The only part I take exception to is his conclusion that such images are deceptive and delay or prevent maturity.

I think that our imagination is the only way we have to come to some kind of terms with the fact that we are part of something larger than ourselves, that the earth peoples as a garden flowers, that the universe and all life arose out of some natural process that has spanned billions of years. Each of us is somehow related to that apparently infinite process, each of us feels challenged to make sense out of the fact of our consciousness and self-awareness. We are alive, yet know that we will inevitably die. Yet, the universe will continue.

The use of symbols and metaphor to reflect our sense of belonging and participation in this cosmic process is not only necessary and inevitable but desirable.

Instead of rejecting our projections why not befriend them? What would happen if instead of rejecting our image of God, we were to follow it? Where might it lead?

Many of us value the images that come in our dreams. Why not value the images that we project onto the meaning of existence? It can be a path of growth so long as one doesn't mistake the image for the reality. The Ulanov's suggest that we cannot simply turn our back on otherwise escape from our childhood images of God. We will always carry them with us. However, they go on to suggest, that

When accepted as images, these pictures of God may become ladders of ascent and descent, as in Jacob's vision, where we meet God meeting us.

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As I've learned that the image is not the reality, the map is not the territory it has freed my ability to imagine. As my understanding of what God could be has changed so has my understanding of what prayer could be.

Forrester Church, a Unitarian Universalist minister and well known author, writes that God is not God's name. God is just a word we use for convenience.

God to me is the word we use to point to an aspect of existence that can't be captured through words. We can only point to it though symbol and metaphor. I believe God is the word we use to point to the system of which we are but a part, the hand of life from which we come and by which we are sustained.

When someone tells me they don't believe in God I'll often ask them to tell me about this God they don't believe in. When they're through, more often than not, I will agree with them and say something to the effect of, "I wouldn't believe in that God either". Too often the only difference between a fundamentalist and an atheist is that the fundamentalist accepts a literal image of God while the atheist rejects it. Fundamentalists and atheists often share the same limited image of God.

Just because you reject a flawed and limited image of God, doesn't mean that you have rejected God. Rejecting a flawed and inadequate map, doesn't mean you reject the territory it was supposed to represent.

Even though God is not God's name, though, we seem to need some image, some metaphor to use to relate to God. The skeptical might point out that one's image of God is more than likely a projection of one's fears, needs and desires. That may be so, but it doesn't mean that one can't benefit by working with it.

I don't know who or what God is. I know that I am just one small part, though, of a larger chain of being. I know that the love I sometimes feel, the moments of inspiration and the sense that I am responsible to more than just me and mine seems to come more through me more than it comes from me.

I know that sometimes, when I respond imaginatively to my image of God by speaking my deepest hopes and thoughts and fears out loud, not to my wife or a friend or a therapist, but just to the air, so to speak, that I am telling my truth in a way unlike any other.

I have learned that it helps me to unburden my heart, to speak my mind, to give voice to my deepest hopes and share my concerns. This is prayer.

I've learned that prayer makes a difference for me. I pray for courage and serenity. I pray for wisdom and understanding. I pray for patience and understanding. I pray for my wife. I pray for my enemies. I pray out my troubles and worries and fears and insecurities.

I pray best when I am alone and feel free to pray out loud. I don't plan what I will pray for or how I should pray. I just pray. I begin by confessing my broken-ness, my incompleteness. I list my shortcomings. It's not a terribly long list, but, on the other hand, it's not a short list either. I will then pray for what I feel I need. I often ask for wisdom, for patience, and to better accept others.

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I pray to God. That is to say, I use the word God when I pray. Other times I will address my prayers to “Thou of whom I am but a part” or “Holy one, blessing of all creation.” I don’t think it matters what I call God when I pray. God is not God’s name. I use whatever name, whatever image works for me.

At the beginning of *Song of the Soul*, Cris Williamson starts off with these words from an old hymn,
Open my eyes that I may see, visions of truth thou hast for me. Open my eyes, illumine me...Spirit divine.

An essential part of *opening my eyes that I may see* is looking at the light, lifting my eyes to the stars, to the hills, seeking to be enlightened, to be strengthened, to be moved.

A few years ago, Mark Belletini, the chair of the commission that assembled the hymnbook we use, was the theme speaker at SWUUSI, the Southwest UU Summer Institute which takes place each summer at Lake Texoma. During his theme talk, he demonstrated how what we focus affects the way we feel.

First he read a long list of headlines from the newspaper and asked how we felt after hearing them. Then he read a long list of titles of hymns and then asked how we felt.

Let’s try an abbreviated version: First the headlines from today’s New York Times and Star-Telegram.

- U.S. Allies See New Terror Attack
- Anthrax found on third letter from Trenton
- Destroy Bin Laden, CIA told
- Neighbors contend bar a nuisance
- Women’s Shelter offers haven for domestic violence victims.

How are you feeling?

Now some hymns:

- Come, my way, my truth, my life.
- Blessed Spirit of my life
- Joyful, joyful we adore thee
- For the earth forever turning
- Life is the greatest gift of all

Now, how do you feel?

Obviously, what we attend to affects how we feel. The facts of what is happening in the world haven’t changed, but our feelings have. I’m not suggesting we avoid the bad news that is out there. I am suggesting that it’s equally important, though, to focus on our highest aspirations, the good news, the best news we can imagine.

When I pray I am putting myself in the way of change. I am naming my deepest desires. I am seeking to be moved, to be changed, to be transformed. I am stretching out the wings of my spirit, hoping to be lifted out of my fears and resentments. I am turning my face to the sun, so to speak, hoping to be warmed, seeking the energy and direction I need to grow. Through the discipline of prayer I cast off my pretensions and cut through my denial, thus opening myself to new ways of seeing and living. When I pray I am lowering my defenses. I am making it possible for the winds of grace to fill my sails.

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I am still wounded. But I have found, through prayer, a way to comfort myself, a way to ease the discomfort of my broken-ness. I don't know all the answers, but prayer helps me live the questions, to keep on looking.

Every Sunday in our order of service, we include a reading by Rabbi Abraham Heschel:

Prayer invites God to be present in our spirits and in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water and arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

Prayer may not change the world, but it does change me and enables me to change the world. Prayer cannot mend a broken bridge, but it can mend my sore and troubled spirit.

Prayer makes a difference in the way I live.

“Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The artist never entirely knows. We take leap after leap into the dark.”

--Agnes De Mille

Faith is dancing in the dark.

--Sam Keen

Prayer has helped me learn to dance. It helps me go forward, even when I am in the dark.