

There are two kinds of people in the world. There are people who read the instruction manual and people who think the instruction manual is for wusses; people who, when “some assembly” is required, lay out all the pieces of the chair and sort the different size screws into little piles according to the directions for assembly... and those who just grab the allen wrench and go for it.

I’m the first type. When in doubt about anything, read a book about it. That’s my motto. But the truth is, when faced with the prospect of learning to speak Spanish or learning to swim, to play the piano, or make love... while it certainly doesn’t hurt to read up on it beforehand, there comes a point when you can’t put it off any longer and there’s nothing for it but to do it. That’s pretty much true for praying, as well... or so the books say.

But for us cautious analytical types, suspicious of anything that can’t be explained, predicted and controlled, prayer doesn’t come easily. And a lot of us are perfectly fine with that. We can dismiss prayer as infantile superstition, something for the ignorant or the complacent. But for others of us... for me... Others of us sense that we need something – something -- that is available through prayer. That we’re missing out on something that would make life richer, would bring more intensity and color and beauty to experience, would add new depths of meaning to our days.

In my case, I long to start and end my days with a sense of comfort, a sense of rightness, or belonging to something larger – a sense of connection to the universe, to the Ground of Being, to the Source, the Tao, the Interdependent Web of All Being... however I understand the Transcendent on that day and whatever name I choose to give it. I long for the sense that I have my place within it, within this holy or God-like thing, this Mystery. I want to be reminded that it can be trusted, that it is not up to me to control it, that I am held in its embrace. I long to open my spirit to this intangible Something, to be awed by its majesty. I long to praise, to thank, to worship. This is what prayer does for people.

But here’s the problem: I do not believe there is a supernatural Being out there, a supreme entity of some kind with whom I can experience this kind of connection. I don’t believe in a personal deity. And how can you pray to an abstraction? To an idea?

This was my dilemma as a good humanist UU, raised with a distaste for emotionalism and with the idea that actions should be consistent with beliefs and beliefs should be able to stand the acid test of reason.

But what to do with the longing? And so I went to seminary in search of answers. After all, when in doubt, read a book. Among my many other questions, I wondered if my faith in reason condemned me to live without a spiritual practice. And so I began to experiment, not always willingly, and not often with conclusive results.

One of my first experiences with prayer happened during my first year in seminary. I was walking back from my class in the New Testament. Meadville Lombard requires students to take a certain number of courses at the University of Chicago, with which it is loosely affiliated, and we Meadville students all fulfilled our requirement for Biblical study there. So I was walking back to Meadville from the University on a typically miserable winter Chicago day, when I decided to go into the chapel of the Chicago Theological Seminary, the United Church of Christ seminary that is part of the same consortium of schools.

The chapel was empty and dim. The winter light entered in through the stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Bible. I sat down to study them and was amazed to realize that I could recognize the figures and the stories in the windows. Me, the UU who had had, until recently, the scantiest knowledge of those stories. There were Abraham and Isaac, and the burning bush, and Jesus raising Lazarus. Not that I had come to believe in the literal truth of these stories, but I had come to feel an understanding and a kinship with those who did, a respect for these ancient traditions, a friendly kind of connection with the figures I now recognized.

And I was suddenly struck by the enormity of what I was undertaking – the realization that I was placing myself in a profession, a calling, shared by thousands of others, joining a chain of others who had chosen to make religious service their lives, stretching back 3000 years. The chutzpah to think that I might belong in that chapel of stone and colored sunlight, that I might belong in this profession!

Without stopping to censor myself, I found myself praying. I prayed for wisdom to know the difference between truth and self-delusion; for courage to tell the truth as I saw it; for a sense of curiosity, a willingness to risk; for indifference to the judgments of others; and for an openness to joy, wherever and whenever it appeared. These were not the things I would have said I wanted if you had asked me. These were the things I had not known I needed.

This was an experience of something real, something authentic, but one I'd never had before, and, quite naturally, I wondered if I was losing my mind. So I stopped in to talk to one of my favorite professors, a fellow died-in-the-wool humanist. "I think I just had a religious experience," I told him, "and I'm really upset about it." I told him what had happened. "Who did I think I was talking to?" I wailed. "Don't worry," he said. "You were talking to yourself."

I've thought about this a lot over the years since. He was right, of course, I was talking to myself. But I talk to myself all the time, and this was different. If it's true that there is a spark of the divine within each of us, it was that that I was connecting to. At the very least, I was talking to some wiser self than I normally have access to, to some aspect of my subconscious that knew me better, that was, in some sense, my best or most authentic self, my potential self.

I had many experiences with prayer during my required chaplaincy training in two hospitals over the course of two summers. There, I met daily with patients who were in crisis. Many of them asked me to pray for them. To pray extemporaneously was a challenge for someone as new to prayer as I was. What's more, my personal beliefs about God and the efficacy of prayer were at odds with the traditional Christian faith of most of the patients. In particular, I struggled with my reluctance to say what are called prayers of petition or intercession, in which God is asked to fix whatever needs fixing. Even if I could suspend disbelief in a personal God, I couldn't manage to convince myself that this God was at the beck and call of us humans, awaiting our bidding.

I understood that I was there for the patients, not myself, and that to withhold as a matter of principle the words they longed to hear would be self-indulgent at best and maybe even unethical. As the months wore on, I managed to develop a pattern of praying that worked. I would begin with an expression of gratitude for another day, gratitude for the skills and caring of the medical staff. I would ask that the patient be allowed to feel the presence of the Holy that was always with him or her and that this awareness would bring comfort. I would pray that the patient be free from fear and able to accept with courage whatever outcome there might be. I would close the prayer with the words, "We ask this in the healing spirit of Jesus." The patients would often have tears in their eyes by the end of the prayer, but here's something odd: so would I.

Gradually, I came to understand why these prayers could be heartfelt and on a deep level, true. The words really didn't matter. The patient and I were connecting through the common human experiences of pain, fear, need and hope. The longing that the patient felt was one I knew very well and could honor and speak to with authenticity, meeting that person on the level of shared emotion.

And now I continue to learn to pray. As I've mentioned, I've been reading up on the subject and I've learned that, at least in the Christian tradition, there are different kinds of prayer. One of these, the easiest for me, is the prayer of gratitude, in which we name and praise the Sacred. When I remember, I count my blessings, literally. I review the instances of grace throughout the day, of unearned goodness and of disasters averted. When I see this blue sky filled with blossoms and feel the warmth of the spring sun on my face, I am filled with praise for this wondrous beauty, for the beauty of the earth, which is enough to keep a person alive.

Contemplative prayer is another kind of prayer. This is the prayer of mindfulness, the discipline of bringing oneself to full awareness, of being fully awake to the object of one's contemplation. A variation of this is meditation or centering prayer, in which the mind is focused on a mantra or an image. This keeps the mind minimally occupied in order to silence our anxious and distracting intellects, allowing us to experience a feeling of profound peace, of connection to the universe, beyond words and beyond thought. This is the way I am learning to pray when I need to calm myself and prepare to enter into the day with a sense of serenity and confidence. I address the universe, or God, or Life, as I inhale and exhale. "Thou art mine," I say to myself as I inhale; "and I am thine," I say to the Spirit, to Life, as I exhale. I feel secure, purposeful, at home in the world.

The hardest kind of prayer is the prayer of confession, the process of “making a searching and fearless moral inventory” of one’s shortcomings, large and small. The object is not to reduce the self to a despairing mass of guilt; the object is to know oneself, to seek the truth. We can try to make amends for our failings, try to be better and do better, but self-torment is not the goal. The goal is a kind of radical love – an acceptance of self as imperfect. We are saved from arrogance and our harshest judgments of others are kept in check. At the same time, we are assured that we, flawed as we are, have worth and are deserving of love and compassion – our own. That we are enough. Not as good as we would wish, not as wise or kind or brave, but enough.

And the prayer of intercession? Is there a way that a skeptic can ask God for favors? I don’t think so. But there is the prayer of loving kindness. The prayer of wishing peace and wholeness for those you love, for those around the world who are suffering, for those you find irritating, who have injured you, for those whose principles and actions you find repellent. This is the prayer that reminds us that justice must be merciful. This is the prayer that reminds us of the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the healing power of compassion.

This is what I have learned about prayer: that I pray when I listen with an open heart; that I pray when my spirit lifts in gladness when we sing together; that I pray when I seek the wisdom of my deepest and most authentic self; that I pray when I give my best effort and also when I acknowledge that I have not done all I could; that I pray when I admit I don’t understand, that I don’t know all the answers; that I pray when I am thankful for family, for language, for music, for beauty, for learning, for this work, for this community.

Mary Oliver writes: “Each pond with its blazing lilies is a prayer heard and answered lavishly, every morning, whether or not you have ever dared to be happy, whether or not you have ever dared to pray.”

In fact, we are praying all the time. With or without a supreme being, to be human is to feel longing, loneliness, fear. To be human is to feel gladness, awe, humility and wonder. To be human is to seek connection. To be human is to pray; to be alive is a kind of prayer.