

“Prayer for Atheists”

Joanna Lubkin | Arlington Street Church | May 25, 2015

The door was closed, but I knocked anyway. This was a hospital room on one of the cardiac floors where I served as a chaplaincy intern. The roster I held in my hands gave me the patient’s name, age, and religious affiliation. This patient hadn’t requested a chaplain, but I was assigned to this floor to offer companionship to all the patients, so I knocked. I heard a man’s voice call out a muffled, “Come in!” So I went in.

“Hi,” I said. “My name is Joanna. I’m one of the chaplains here. It’s one of my joys to get to stop by and visit with the patients on this floor. How are you doing?”

The man inside was in his sixties, and I’ll call him Michael. He introduced me to the two middle-aged women in the room with us as his daughters. Michael was cheerful, but looked a little guilty as he said, “You know, I was raised Catholic, but I haven’t believed in God in a long time. Religion isn’t important to me. I’m sorry, no offense.”

“Hey,” I responded. “You don’t need to apologize to me. Tell me, what is important to you?”

His family, Michael responded. He was in the hospital for a relatively minor procedure on his heart, but one that still had risks and that might force him to change his day-to-day life. Michael told me he wasn’t afraid of dying, but he was worried that he wouldn’t be able to keep up with his grandchildren anymore.

I said that it sounded like while he wasn’t afraid of losing his life in this procedure, he was afraid of losing the life he knew. What would it mean for him if he wasn’t able to play with his grandkids in the same way he had before the procedure?

He responded: “I’m afraid that it would mean I’d become an old fuddy duddy, someone who wasn’t fun to be around anymore. I’m afraid they won’t want to keep hanging out with this old man.”

“Oh, Pops,” one of his daughters said. “The kids are going to love you no matter what.”

There was a silence for a few moments. Then Michael said, quietly, “You know, what I’m really afraid of losing is being able to run. I feel selfish saying it, but it’s true. Running is like my church. I run everyday, no matter what, and it’s when I feel most at peace. I’m signed up to run this half marathon in a few months, and what if I can’t?”

We talked for about twenty more minutes, a really moving conversation. As we wrapped up, I said, “So, often at the end of visits, I’ll offer a prayer for the patient if they want it. It’s totally fine if that’s not your thing. Shall I offer a prayer today?” I felt uncomfortable asking, since Michael had already said that he wasn’t “into religion,” but my chaplaincy supervisors encouraged us to give people the option.

Michael looked a little uncomfortable, too, shifting a little in his bed. Looking aside, he said, “Well...”

“Oh, go for it, Pops,” his daughter said. “It can’t hurt.”

“Whatever you want, Michael,” I said again.

“Okay, sure. A prayer would be nice,” he said, still not making eye contact.

“You got it,” I said. And I took a breath, closed my eyes, paused for a moment, then began. “Holy One, mysterious source of compassion and healing, be with Michael as he undergoes this procedure. May his caregivers’ hands be skilled and gentle. May he feel the love of his family holding him up like a buoy, and help him to see that they love him for who he is, not for what he is able to do. Grant Michael patience in his healing, and resilience as he adapts to the changes that may come. Guide his feet while he runs this race. And let us say: Amen.”

When I opened my eyes, I saw Michael looking deeply into my face, with tears in his eyes. “Thank you,” he said, sounding choked up. “You really saw me. Thank you.”

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This moment has stuck with me since I did my summer chaplaincy internship not because of anything I think I did exceptionally well as a chaplain, but because it was a moment that transformed my relationship with prayer. And because it was a transformative moment of prayer that didn't involve the word 'God.'

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Here today, there is a beautiful theological diversity in this room, like so many other rooms of Unitarian Universalists, from proud theists to avowed atheists and everywhere in between.

I think many of us UUs have a complicated relationship, at best, with prayer. Because we are rational beings, our first question about prayer is often, "Well, to whom are we praying?"

And that gets interesting. Some of us who believe in God may not believe in a personal God who hears and answers prayers. Some of us turn to our rational minds and what our senses can tell us, and prayer may seem irrational or superstitious. Some of us have emotional baggage from carrying around other people's expectations of what prayer is or can be.

When I started my summer-long hospital chaplaincy internship, prayer was one of the things I was most intimidated by. And let me tell ya, when you do are a chaplain in a hospital, you do a lot of prayer and you do it on the spot. It seemed to me, and this is where I got uncomfortable, that prayer had a lot to do with God. And as a humanist, someone who cares most about how people treat each other and other beings, I had always felt a little uneasy about praying (at least in front of other people). And here I was, walking into rooms of people who sometimes did believe very strongly in God and in God's power to answer prayers, and I was expected to go in there and pray *for* them. I felt a little bit like a fraud.

What I experienced in my visit with Michael was that when it came time for us to pray, God was beside the point. In that moment, the addressee of the prayer didn't matter so much -- instead of starting out the prayer with the words "Holy One," I could have started with "To Whom It May

Concern.” The point was: Prayer was a vehicle for human connection. Prayer allowed me to express my best wishes for Michael. Prayer allowed me to reflect back the things he’d shared with me in a way that showed I had heard him. Prayer allowed me to companion him on a journey that was his to take.

Prayer can be an incredible spiritual practice and a powerful tool of social connection, regardless of whether we believe in God.

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UU minister Laurel Hallman is a non-theist who spoke about her experience of learning to pray with her congregation. In her 2003 Berry Street Lecture, called “A Language of Reverence,” she remarked that:

Every once in a while, someone would ask her ‘who’ she thinks she’s praying to. She would respond, “I recall the good advice from twelve-step programs: ‘Just take care of your side of the street.’ ... And that’s what I do with prayer,” Hallman says. ‘I take care of my side of the street -- with my gratitude, amazement, praise, fear, anger, and hurt -- and the side of the street my congregation is on. I figure the other side of the street [-- God or not God --] can take care of itself and we can save the theological discussions for later. It answers the question of ‘who’ by saying the question is not [essential] to this relational approach to prayer.”

As part of her developing prayer practice, Rev. Hallman began directing her prayers in congregational worship to, “God of many names, and mystery beyond all our naming...” Slowly she began to pray for help and comfort and wisdom and strength. Slowly she began to name individuals who needed their prayer, and with whom they were celebrating. She gave thanks for new babies and grieved over lost loved ones -- naming parents and siblings and friends who had died. Slowly, she began to pray about her congregants’ inadequacy to face the pain of their days.

Rev. Hallman said that for her, this prayer “...is not a rational posit to a responding deity. It is not a posture of groveling. It is an expression of our yearning, our grief, and our gratitude.” It [had] become an expression of her congregation as a whole.

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And prayer can be so many things. Prayer can be relational, like it was with Michael in that hospital room. Prayer can be a way of naming our deepest desires, fears, and hopes. Prayer can be a way of letting go of things to which we're clinging tightly. Prayer can be an act of humility, a call to awe and reverence, a reminder to practice gratitude.

Another way to approach prayer is to think of liberal Christian writer Anne Lamot's distillation of the three prayers that humans say: "Help. Thanks. Wow."¹ That's prayer at its essence.

I'm convinced, like Rev. Hallman was, that "our congregations need a vocabulary of yearning, and that is prayer. [We] need an opportunity to name [our] relationship with life in relational words, in poetry, in metaphor. [We] need to pray.

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I want to circle back around to the G-word. Because, while it's true that one can have a perfectly full and meaningful prayer life without ever mentioning the word 'God,' there's no avoiding the fact that if we're going to be in a time of prayer with other people, odds are, the word 'God' will come up. In our beautiful diversity, some of us will feel more comfortable than others with praying using the word 'God.' For those of us on the less-comfortable to downright twitchy end of the God-spectrum, I invite us not to shut the door: let's keep our hearts open as we explore what we could mean when we say 'God.'

UU theologian Rebecca Parker says that the question of whether or not God exists doesn't have to be an intellectual exercise but rather, could be this existential question: "Is there reason to trust that there is any help available?"² The spiritual practice of prayer, then, is as an act of trust that help is available. At times, we call that help 'God.'

¹ Lamott, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. New York: Riverhead, 2012.

² Buehrens, John A., and Rebecca Ann Parker. "A Home for Love" in *A House for Hope the Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 2010. Print.

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Rev. Kate Braestrup is another one of the writers I turn to for inspiration, guidance, and comfort. Rev. Braestrup is a Unitarian Universalist chaplain to the Maine Warden Service, the agency that polices the state's roughly 17 million acres of wild land. She accompanies game wardens to accidents and drowning, and on search-and-rescue operations in the Maine woods. Braestrup writes, “[Such a] chaplain doesn’t have a leisurely hour in which to explain God. The suffering is right there, and its urgency demands an immediate response. We don’t give a lot of sermons out in the field, or in the woods or streets. Instead, we are called upon to offer the spiritual equivalent of triage. We’re asked to pray.”

In moments of crisis, that urgent sense of yearning, fear, or hope can cut right through the mental red tape we put around prayer or God. Sometimes, in those moments, we can’t do anything but ask for help -- from The Universe, from each other, from something called ‘God.’

But the rest of the time? Those more leisurely times when our mind is free to play with theological puzzles? Like many of us, Rev. Braestrup had some issues using the G-word.

In her book *Beginner’s Grace*, Rev. Braestrup tells her ‘God’ story:

“In my youth, I was an agnostic. Then I decided I’d go for broke and be an atheist. Later on, when I realized that neither of the A-words fit, I still tried to avoid using the word ‘God.’ It carried so much patriarchal baggage, and the feminist alternative, ‘Goddess,’ sounded too much like ‘stewardess’ or ‘actress,’ a demeaning diminutive of a ‘real’ word reserved for men.”

She eventually came back around to using the word ‘God,’ because saying the word ‘God’ out loud always gave her a bracing little jolt of humility. She wrote, “Until I no longer feel that jolt, I shall have to assume I’ve still got ego moles to be whacked, although I am glad to report that the moles, like their whacker, seem to be slowing down with age. They pop their grizzled heads up a little less often and with a tad less vigor than they once did.”

Rev. Braestrup offers a little game to play for those of us who have issues with the G-word, especially if the word ‘God’ only evokes “an image of that cranky Caucasian senior citizen lounging on a cloud, occasionally bestirring himself to hurl a lightning bolt at some unsuspecting sinner. It is extremely difficult,” she says, “To pray to such an unhelpful deity as this.”³

So here’s the game. In your own head, fill in the blank:

Nothing matter more than _____ or:
The character trait I value most is _____.

When you have filled in that blank, see what happens when you address your prayers in that way.

Is that a source from which you can trust help will come?

... ..

In the name of that which we hold most dear,
let us pray:

May we hold each other in love, letting our prayers reflect back that love.

May we take care of our side of the street, offering up our deepest yearnings and hopes.

May we keep the window open to reverence, awe, and gratitude.

Our prayer concludes in the way that Laurel Hallman ends hers:

“We pray in the names of all those, known and unknown, present and absent, remembered and forgotten. We pray in the names of all the helpers of humankind.”⁴ So may it be. Amen.

³ Braestrup, Kate. *Beginner's Grace: Bringing Prayer to Life*. New York: Free, 2010.

⁴ Hallman, Laurel. "Images for Our Lives." in *A Language of Reverence*. Ed. Dean Grodzins. Chicago: Meadville Lombard, 2004.