

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Our Native Language

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING**DIFFERENT WAYS TO PRAY** *Naomi Shihab Nye*

There was the method of kneeling,
 a fine method, if you lived in a country
 where stones were smooth.
 Women dreamed wistfully of
 hidden corners where knee fit rock.
 Their prayers, weathered rib bones,
 small calcium words uttered in sequence,
 as if this shedding of syllables could fuse them to the sky.

There were men who had been shepherds so long
 they walked like sheep.
 Under the olive trees, they raised their arms-
Hear us! We have pain on earth!
We have so much pain there is no place to store it!
 But the olives bobbed peacefully in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.
 At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,
 because there was also happiness.

Some prized the pilgrimage,
 wrapping themselves in new white linen
 to ride busses across miles of sand.
 When they arrived at Mecca
 they would circle the holy places,
 on foot, many times,
 they would bend to kiss the earth
 and return, their lean faces housing mystery.

While for certain cousins and grandmothers
 the pilgrimage occurred daily,
 lugging water from the spring
 or balancing baskets of grapes.
 These were the ones present at births
 humming quietly to perspiring mothers.
 The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,
 forgetting how easily children soil clothes.

There were those who didn't care about praying.
 The young ones. The ones who had been to America.
 They told the old ones, *you are wasting your time.*
 Time? The old ones prayed for the young ones.
 They prayed to Allah to mend their brains,

to speak suddenly in a commanding tone.

And occasionally there would be one
 who did none of this.
 the old man Fowzi for example,
 who beat everyone at dominoes,
 insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats,
 and was famous for his laugh.

SECOND READING *from a 4th century desert monk, whose name has been lost*

A lively person filled with joy prays one way.
 A person brought down by the weight of gloom or despair prays another way.
 One prays another way still when the life of the spirit is flourishing,
 and another way when pushed down.
 One prays differently, depending on whether one is seeking the gift of some grace,
 or the removal of sin,
 or requiring forgiveness.
 The prayer is different again when one is sorrowing,
 or when one is fired by hope,
 when one is in need or in peril,
 in peace or in tranquility.
 It is one thing to pray when one is hemmed in by aridity and staleness in one's thinking, another
 when one is flooded by the light of deep mysteries.
 We need to discover our own language,
 our own silence,
 our own prayer.

THIRD READING Pray for Peace (adapted) *Ellen Bass*

Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
 Jesus nailed to his wooden or marble or plastic cross,
 his suffering face bent to kiss you,
 Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
 Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
 that she may lay her palm on our brows,
 to Shekinhah, Queen of Heaven and Earth,
 to Inanna in her stripped descent.

Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, Record Keeper
 of time before, time now, time ahead, pray. Bow down

to terriers and shepherds and Siamese cats.
Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries.

Pray to the bus driver who takes you to work,
pray on the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus
and for everyone riding buses all over the world.
If you haven't been on a bus in a long time,
climb the few steps, drop some silver, and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,..
each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

Making love, of course, is already a prayer.
Skin and open mouths worshipping that skin,
the fragile case we are poured into,
each caress a season of peace.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.
Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.
Pray to the angels and the ghost of your grandfather.

... if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheel chair, each revolution
of the wheels a prayer that as the earth revolves
we will do less harm, less harm, less harm.

... With each breath in, take in the faith of those
who have believed when belief seemed foolish,
who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace,
feed the birds for peace, each shiny seed
that spills onto the earth, another second of peace.
Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
around your VISA card. Gnaw your crust
of prayer, scoop your prayer water from the gutter.
Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
your prayer through the streets.

Our Native Language

Some years ago I travelled to Scotland with my family, to the Orkney Islands in the North Sea, a desolate, rocky, sleet-soaked, ice-bound place, especially in February when we were there. It was beautiful (if you like grey water, grey stone, grey skies – which I do) and it wasn't crowded. We saw more sheep than people, and we understood that there are more cows than people there as well, though we never saw them. The cows are kept inside in winter to protect the fragile soil from their heavy hooves. We never saw them, but everywhere we went we heard them: the lonely lowing of thousands of deep voices in barns all around us everywhere, just under the roar of the wind. There's a church there that I went to several times, smaller than this one and only one room, a sanctuary made of stone blocks two or three feet thick, the great walls supporting arched windows maybe ten feet tall, four on either side between the front door, which faced the sea, and the chancel. But there was no glass in those tall windows; the wind roared through, and bits of paper and birds came through, because the church was a ruin. It had no ceiling. It was open to the sky, day and night. Whatever roof had been there, made of thatch or wood or tile, had blown away or burned away or fallen in. Dry weeds grew in patches through the stones on the floor, but you could still see the faint outline where rows of pews had been; you could still see the footprint of the altar, and the front door was still a wooden door – you had to open a latch to come inside. Exposed as it was, to rain and stars and sea eagles, still the space seemed self-contained and sanctified - made holy not by the presence of God, a presence which I believe is everywhere if it is anywhere, no less outside a church than in. Open as it was, that space still held between its walls and in the breath of its air *the prayers of the people*, spoken and unspoken, into the silence and out of it. It was dignified by the echoes of devotional prayers, confessional prayers, prayers of forgiveness and contrition, the memorized prayers of ritual religion *on earth as it is in heaven*, and the wild, wordless prayers of people wracked by grief or fear, people smitten by gladness or wonder or awe. Out-loud, grateful prayers were held in that space, and whispered prayers of supplication: *May my daughter's baby be delivered safely. May my husband (or my father or my brother or my son) come home safely from fishing. May the dying of my parents be peaceful. May my brother or sister or neighbor or me, myself, by grace and by will, quit drinking. May the rain please stop, or the drought please stop, or wind please stop or the war please stop. May I find in the days ahead sufficient courage, strength, resilience, compassion. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free from suffering. May our leaders be worthy and wise, guided by honesty, integrity, morality and a vision for the common good. May peace dwell within our hearts, and understanding in our minds.* God only knows what people prayed there and to whom, to what God or no God each person was speaking, but you could almost hear the invisible voices, deeply lowing just under the wind.

Not far from that church, and everywhere on those islands, are Neolithic standing stones, sacred circles, ancient altars, earthworks, where the same kind of presence abides, the presence of sacred intention, the invisible remnants of old conversations, maybe spoken, maybe not: anguish, wonder, terror, love, confusion, humble thanks- all the things that people everywhere and always say to God, or to the air. Sometimes in new member classes here, when we go on the grand tour of this building, we step into the Social Hall and remember for a moment that beneath the bustle of coffee hour or the scraping of dishes on Wednesday night, abides in there the memory of long ago services held in that room, not only by this congregation but by the Methodists who built it. There abide the remnants of prayers spoken at weddings, christenings, funerals, memorials,

dedications, and hundreds, thousands, of Sunday mornings. The air holds the weight of many hearts, hopeful, joyful, fearful, tearful. This is a haunted house in a haunted world, and the names we speak on Sundays here, and all the poetry and singing, all the not-empty silences, are part of a timeless chorus. William James, philosopher and early psychologist of religion, said famously, “Many reasons have been given why we should not pray, whilst others have been given why we should. But in all this, very little is said of the reason why we do pray. The reason why we pray is simply that we cannot help praying.” I believe that’s true, and that prayer is in fact our native language, older and more essential, more universal, than any other human speech.

Karen Armstrong, theologian, says prayer is not about theology, nor even necessarily about God. *Practice* comes before *belief*. Just as in breathing, you don’t have to understand the entire human respiratory system before breathing in and out, so also in prayer: you don’t need to know anything about religion before breathing in and out. “When people pray,” she writes,

they are in some profound sense talking to themselves. We live in a frightening world and we are prey to injustice, cruelty, disasters, human evil, and mortality. From a very early date, people have invoked and described these things in prayer (as well as in art, a related activity), and in so doing, we manage to reach beyond ourselves. Prayers lighten the darkness in the depths of the self. Similarly, prayers of praise and thanksgiving strip away the veil of familiarity that so often obscures mystery and beauty, which are all around us but rarely acknowledged in our busy, empirical lives.

She goes further, to say that prayer at its best is similar to science at its most pure- it is the practice of staying awake and alert to the magnitude of all we cannot know, all we did not make, infinite, eternal, utterly beyond us and hidden in plain sight. *Pray for peace*, says poet Ellen Bass:

*Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
 Jesus nailed to his wooden or marble or plastic cross,
 his suffering face bent to kiss you,
 Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
 Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
 Hawk or Wolf,
 terriers and shepherds
 Fields of artichokes and strawberries.
 Pray to the bus driver who takes you to work,
 pray on the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus
 and for everyone riding buses all over the world.
 If you haven't been on a bus in a long time,
 climb the few steps, drop some silver, and pray.
 Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
 Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
 around your VISA card. Gnaw your crust
 of prayer, scoop your prayer water from the gutter.
 Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
 your prayer through the streets.*

It is the practice of staying awake, of noticing that you're alive and not just going through the motions, taking the trouble to speak gratefully (even if you don't yet have every single thing you want); to practice articulate awe; to give brave, strong voice to the fears we might rather submerge or deny (fear unnamed is a terrifying toxin). Prayer actively names our neediness and vulnerability and confusion in an age that prizes self-sufficiency, the illusion of self-sufficiency, more than almost anything else. Prayer speaks our smallness out loud, and puts us back in our place; it locates us, for a moment, in time and space, and puts us back in right relation to our ego and our work, to other people (near and far), right relation to what we love and hope for and desire, right relation to eternity, mortality, right relation to our own souls. You can pray an old, dusty, formal prayer half-memorized in childhood, the archaic language linking you to millions of others (long dead and still practicing), or you can use other words, or you can simply sit, and listen for the voice of God, or the voice within, which are and are not the same thing. Listening, I so easily forget, is the other way to be in conversation and it is just as active.

Sometimes people ask about prayer. People (some of you) will call or write or come in and say, "I'm not religious. I don't know what I believe about God. I don't know who to pray to. I haven't prayed in years, or ever. I don't know what to say. It's all a little embarrassing. I'm fine with meditation, yoga, journaling, silent retreats, speaking the names, but prayer feels really weird," – yet there they are, and asking about it, expressing interest, maybe longing, maybe desperate need, and so I'll say, "Start really small. Make a little bit of time, make a little space. Breathe in, breathe out. If you are moved to speak and don't know what to say, you could try four sentences:

In this moment, I am thankful for _____.
I am afraid of _____.
I hope for _____.
I wonder _____.

And then breathe in and out again."

We're not talking about theology here. It's about giving one drop of undivided attention, on purpose, to the part of you that is the spark of you. It's tending to the light within.

So often our own answers to those simple sentences surprise us. We had no idea how much fear we were holding; how much love for the world; how much or how little hope in our hands.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish teacher, said

*To pray is to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings,
 the divine margin in all attainments.*

Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.

It is all we can offer in return.

Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time?

Here we are-

amidst the meditation of the land, the songs of the water, the humility of the flowers,

*flowers wiser than all alphabets –
 here we are, hating, hurting.
 Suddenly we feel embarrassed,
 ashamed of our complaints and clashes in the face of tacit glory.
 How strange we are in the world!
 Only one response can maintain us:
 gratefulness, even in the midst of sorrow.
 Only one response can maintain us:
 gratefulness for the gift of our unearned chance to serve, to wonder, to love life and each other.
 It is gratefulness which makes our small souls great.*

Heschel also said, in a passage that's quoted in our hymnal, "Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."

Prayer does not do a single bit of tangible good – beyond the claim of scientists and doctors that almost any kind of meditation is good for your heart rate, your blood pressure, your general physical health. But prayer does not make things happen. Whatever God there is, if God there is and God's listening, that God most surely isn't any kind of customer service representative taking your call in the order it was received, directing it to the right department and then sending out a confirmation email. Prayer is *our* native language, a partial response to holiness and mystery, but silence broods over the face of the waters as surely now as ever, and holiness does not talk back. Any answers to our prayers are within us and among us, all around us.

A colleague whom I respect very much and deeply love told me last week that she is praying now for our country and our President. I was surprised, and spoke more quickly and more dismissively than I should have. I said it seemed overly-generous and utterly futile. I said I could never do it. She said, "I have to do it. It centers me; some days it's all I can do; and it strengthens my resolve for the days ahead. I have to do it." I was chastened then, and maybe learned something. And I recalled the words of AJ Muste, the philosopher and historian of nonviolent resistance, who was asked during the Vietnam War whether he really thought his little solitary candlelight vigil would change the President or his policy. He said, "I don't know, but that's not why I'm here. I'm here because I have to pray that they will not change me." Prayer reminds us who we are, what we're made of, what our lives are for, in the oldest language we know, which is the language of the heart.

After the election, Sarah Kenzidor, a journalist, posted on her blog,

I want you to write about who you are, what you have experienced, and what you have endured. Write down what you value; what standards you hold for yourself and for others. Write about your dreams for the future and your hopes for your children. Write about the struggle of your ancestors and how the hardship they overcame shaped the person you are today. Write your biography, write down your memories. Because if you do not do it now, you may forget. Write a list of things you would never do. Because it is possible that in the next year, you will do them. Write a list of things you would never believe. Because it is possible that in the next year, you will either believe them or be forced to say you believe them. We are heading into dark times,

and you need to be your own light. Do not accept brutality and cruelty, the unthinkable and the obscene as normal even if it is sanctioned [Listen to the] voice that is your conscience, your morals, your individuality. No one can take that from you unless you let them. Protect the vulnerable and encourage the afraid. If you are brave, stand up for others. If you cannot be brave – and it is often hard to be brave – be kind. But most of all, never lose sight of who you are and what you value. If you find yourself doing something that feels questionable or wrong a few months or years from now, find that essay you wrote on who you are and read it. Ask if that version of yourself would have done the same thing. And if the answer is no? Don't do it.

This also is a kind of prayer: fierce prayer in a ferocious time. A quiet, steady practice in a noisy, unsteady world. What do you love, where is your faith, and what in the end, is sacred? To write it, to speak it, to sing it, to whisper it, to argue it, to struggle to live it out, to live by some kind of principle, with some kind of courage or kindness or both, day by day, to be true to your heart and your God – that is the practice of wide-awake prayer.

From Linda McCarriston, poet of Alaska, a prayer-poem to rest on:

At dusk, everything blurs and softens.
From here out over the long valley,
the fields and hills pull up
the first slight sheets of evening,
as, over the next hour,
heavier, darker ones will follow.

Quieted roads, predictable deer
browsing in a neighbor's field, another's
herd of heifers, the kitchen lights
starting in many windows. On horseback
I take it in, neither visitor
nor intruder, but kin passing, closer
and closer to night, its cold streams
rising in the sugarbush and hollow.

Half-aloud, I say to the horse,
or myself, or whoever: *let fire not come
to this house, nor that barn,
nor lightning strike the cattle.
Let dogs not gain the gravid doe, let the lights
of the rooms convey what they seem to.*

And who is to say it is useless
or foolish to ride out in the falling light
alone, wishing, or praying,
for particular good to particular beings,
on one small road in a huge world?

The horse bears me along, like grace,
 making me better than what I am,
 and what I think or say or see
 is whole in these moments, is neither
 small nor broken. For up, out of
 the inscrutable earth, have come my body
 and the separate body of the mare:
 flawed and aching and wronged. Who then
 is better made to say *be well, be glad*,
 or who to long that we, as one,
 might course over the entire valley,
 over all valleys, as a bird in a great embrace
 of flight, who presses against her breast,
 in grief and tenderness,
 the whole weeping body of the world?

SILENCE

Benediction

That Which Holds All *Nancy Shaffer*

Because she wanted everyone to feel included
 in her prayer,
 she said right at the beginning
 several names for the Holy:
 Spirit, she said, Holy One, Mystery, God
 but then thinking these weren't enough ways of addressing
 that which cannot be fully addressed, she added
 particularities, saying, Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love,
 Ancient Holy One, Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know,
 Gracious God, and also Spirit of This Earth,
 God of Sarah, Gaia, Thou
 and then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming
 superlatives as well: Most Creative One,
 Greatest Source, Closest Hope ---
 even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her
 probably redundant; but then she couldn't stop:
 One Who Made the Stars, she said, although she knew
 technically a number of those present didn't believe
 the stars had been made by anyone or thing

but just luckily happened.
One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion, she said,
and no one laughed.
That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning,
she said, and the room was silent.
Then, although she hadn't imagined it this way,
others began to offer names:
Peace, said one.
One My Mother Knew, said another.
Ancestor, said a third.
Wind.
Rain.
Breath, said one near the back.
Refuge.
That Which Holds All.
A child said, Water.
Someone said, Kuan Yin.
Then: Womb.
Witness.
Great Kindness.
Great Eagle.
Eternal Stillness.
And then, there wasn't any need to say the things
she'd thought would be important to say,
and everyone sat hushed, until someone said
Amen.