

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Expanding the Spirit Through Prayer

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

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A Prayer for Difficult Conversations—*Rev. Meg Riley*

May our shared values be our compass,
Helping us to remember why we are on this spinning planet,
Helping us to navigate here in this dense thicket.
I know we are both struggling, so may we have compassion for one another.

May our shared memories be our sustenance,
Nurturing us along as we are weary and wary on this rocky road,
Providing strength to go on.
I know we are kindred, so may we overcome this obstacle to kinship.

May our shared commitments point to our destination,
Imagining a place big enough to hold us all,
Desiring to live where love casts out fear.
I know we both want to be there, so may we touch it now.

May every word I speak be filtered through my heart.
May every word I hear be filtered through my heart.
May my inner judge sit this one out.
May I breathe into lovingkindness, for myself and for you.
And may I accept that we will both do this imperfectly.

Composite of voices from the *Simply Pray* class held in July at White Bear UU Church

Each person comes up with their own To Whom Do I Pray. Mine is the Golden Warm Light of Unconditional Love Holding the Universe.

I pray in many ways. I send a “Blessed Be” as an ambulance, fire truck or police car speeds to an emergency. I stop during the day to check in with myself – trying to center myself for a few moments and listen to my body. I pray as I watch the news, sending thoughts out to those in pain, and to our broken world.

I say the Prayer of Loving Kindness—praying that I may be safe, healthy, happy and live my life with ease—then pray my loved ones have the same, then extend that prayer out to my friends and acquaintances and, the hard part, pray that prayer for those who have hurt me, for those I disagree with, for those who hurt others. This latter practice helps soften my heart, develop more compassion and forgiveness.

I have many new ideas about what prayer is and how a person can pray. I am working on seeing moments of joy during my day as a prayer. I am also looking for the right prayer book so I have new prayers to read each day. I will also continue to say the prayers I have used my whole life because they are comforting to me.

I was praying by reciting the Our Father and Hail Mary (as I have done for years as a previous Catholic). I now have many new ideas about what prayer is and how a person can pray. I am working on seeing moments of joy during my day as a prayer.

I am still developing my prayer practice, and am awed by the fact that I have been praying for years – I just didn’t know it, because I thought that prayer had to be rote, resembling the Lord’s Prayer. Now I find that I can create my own prayers.

I committed to setting aside time in the morning and evening for meditation—sitting on my cushion and being aware of the Now and my breath. Thus far, I have done that and it has become something I just get up and do, don’t even consider it, don’t argue with it, just go do it. I am becoming more calm, satisfied, aware of an inner spiritual growing somehow. Actually, words I use don’t really explain what is happening.

Sermon

Carolyn McDade is an activist who has worked tirelessly for social justice. The night she wrote the prayer *Spirit of Life* she recalls saying to a friend that she felt “like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the door, and I’ll be dust.” Weary from the world and the weight of the endless work for solidarity in Central America, she describes arriving home that evening: “I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out. It was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement.”ⁱ Her prayer, *Spirit of Life*, has become a central hymn for Unitarian Universalists.

During the years I spent working on the front lines for marriage equality in Minnesota, I often felt the same weariness. A prayer, known to many of you in this congregation, written by Rev. Meg Riley, titled *A Prayer for Difficult Conversations*ⁱⁱ was my “go to” text to start the numerous trainings I did in various faith communities. Her words reminded me of the humility required in justice work and the courage required to speak one’s truth in love. The prayer ends with:

May every word I speak be filtered through my heart.
May every word I hear be filtered through my heart.
May my inner judge sit this one out.
May I breathe into lovingkindness, for myself and for you.
And may I accept that we will both do this imperfectly.

Prayer can help sustain us in our justice work and name our boldest vision and deepest longings. Through prayer we cry our laments and lift up the pain of others. Prayer is also a gift, freely given and powerfully received. Yet, it seems to be something many Unitarian Universalists are uncomfortable with. This summer, a number of people in this congregation joined in a class which focused on the book *Simply Pray*ⁱⁱⁱ. You heard the reflections of several of the class attendees earlier in the collage of voices. It feels like this is a congregation which freely explores the topic of prayer and that many of you have some form of daily spiritual practice.

I enjoyed reading *Simply Pray* and especially noted the openness of the author and the invitation to grapple with many questions I we have about prayer. The question of “To whom do we pray?” can often be the greatest stumbling block. I spent a full semester in seminary writing down the object of people's prayers. The more I paid attention, the more paralyzed I became as I felt unable to comfortably name anything.

It was during my ministerial internship when Rev. Justin Schroeder, the senior minister at First Universalist, turned to me at the end of a staff meeting and asked, “Laura, would you like to lead us out in prayer?” I was in such shock that I could only giggle with nervousness and decline. But as the months evolved I learned to live into a language and a presence of prayer that not only made me comfortable with, but actually begin to long for, more prayer.

I discovered I could open prayer with a range of names for the holy or simply through naming that which we were experiencing—calling forth the sacredness of the moment without pointing

to a specific source. For instance, I may pray like this...“Grateful for this time we have spent together, knowing the tenderness of our thoughts and our words. May we all return to our daily lives mindful of this sacred community, touched by its joyful embrace and held in love.”

I also discovered that prayer was a place I could bring my tender heart, my irrational fears and doubts, my love and my gratitude. The more hectic things became the more space I made for personal prayer and it changed me. Just as one of our *Simply Pray* class participants said, “I am becoming more calm, satisfied, aware of an inner spiritual growing somehow. Actually, words I use don’t really explain what is happening.”

William Ellery Channing, a renowned Unitarian minister of the early 19th Century said, “The True spirit of prayer is submission of ourselves to the good of the whole, to the purposes of Infinite Love.”^{iv} Prayer is guided by many world religions and can look quite different in varying contexts. At the same time, the essence of prayer—an attitude of reverence, humility, and wonder shares a similarity across faiths. My friend, Rabbi Michael Latz, describes prayer like this,

“Prayer is the response, the visceral, tender, cellular, radically absurd perspective that we are more than a mass of cells, that this life means something, and our great spiritual responsibility is to seek out that meaning and hold it and shape it and demand it grow!”^v

Prayer can offer a clearing, a pause, a breath that takes us away from ordinary time and invites us into an ageless time and wisdom. My daily prayer practice is a calming and illuminating companion which reminds me of the pain and promise in my life, our lives, and this world. It opens my heart and spirit to others.

Our faith has not prescribed prayers or prayer rituals. Instead, it invites each of us to create meaningful spiritual practices. This allows for incredible creativity and personal meaning making. In a recent visit with Charlotte Preston, one of our beloved members, she described a prayer she does which uses the framework of the circle of the sun. This is a full-body prayer, engaging physical movements and intentional turns toward the east, south, west and north. Each direction brings in different elements and she holds herself and others in each cycle of the prayer. The sun rising in the east brings warmth and color, it calls forth blessings. The south brings illuminating heat (sometimes too much) which brings clarity about the world, its needs, and our role in creating and resolving them. The west brings the lengthening shadows as the sun sets. The shadows show the world within. And the north is the sun below our feet—traveling to light the other side of the world—giving us permission to rest in safety until the sun rises again.

I was so struck to hear Charlotte speak of this practice as a way of holding herself and others. It reminded me of when I was sitting in the pews at Unity Church Unitarian many years ago and listening to Rev. Janne Eller-Isaacs preach. At one point in her sermon she spoke of her morning prayers. She shared that she often holds specific individuals from the congregation in her prayers. I was shocked. Shocked and moved. "She prays for us?" This was a revelation to me. It shifted my sense of her congregational ministry into the intimacy of her own home in the sacred silence of each morning. I don't know if I've ever been among those she named, but I felt held in a love at that moment that touched me deeply.

Here at White Bear UU Church we begin our staff meetings by writing names of congregants we are holding in our thoughts and prayers on small strips of color paper. The strips of paper go into a large ceramic bowl with a lit chalice in the middle. After we have all written, we each pull a random strip out of the bowl and read the name out loud. It serves as a tender reminder of all of you who are this church and grounds us in the shared ministry that keeps this church alive.

After a class in Buddhism, I became interested in the Prayer of Loving Kindness mentioned in the collage of voices. This prayer is one that expands from the individual out into the world. Although I deviate from the specific words of The Prayer of Loving Kindness, I've adapted my practice to include those I know and can name to those I do not, and may never, know. This week, for example, I have been praying for those impacted by the death of a young St. Paul kid who was shot and killed when committing armed robbery. He attended the same elementary school as my son. I pray for the teachers who loved and guided him and held such hope for their funny, creative, young student...teachers who now grieve. I pray for his friends and family, who I imagine are stunned by the finality of his death, which no longer offers the opportunity for repentance or redemption. I pray for the man who shot him, a victim of a prior assault, struck by fear and armed with a weapon our state has allowed him to conceal and carry—a man who went to the young man's assistance but could not save him.

Then, I pray for all people who, in a moment, lost a child, a sibling, a friend, a student and those who have been responsible for someone else's death. Finally, I open it wider and pray for all who have gone astray, who have found their way back, who have died violent deaths, and for those who have loved them. It feels significant and profound.

I've also brought prayer into my night time. I weaned myself from a several decade-old addiction of listening to Minnesota Public Radio before I dose off to sleep or when I wake in the middle of the night. After losing my prayer beads, an instrument of prayer described in the book *Simply Pray*, one too many times, I have moved to using my four knuckles as guides in my prayer practice.

I start with the first reciting a known prayer or hymn such as *Voice Still and Small*. This is a way to quiet myself and enter into a state of listening. My second knuckle calls me into reflection on where I have seen the holy in my day. This can be small as remembering catching the eye of someone at Target, the laughter of the neighbor's child playing in the sprinkler, or the sun on my dining room table. It can also be as large as a friend reaching out when I needed them, a touching story I read in the paper or through social media, or a change of heart. The third provides a time to consider where I fell short. This is not a moment to reflect on what items still linger on my "to do" list or of some other sort of self blame. Instead, it is a time to reflect on actions that take me further from love, joy, and compassion such as, "I had a profound conversation with a friend and immediately following thought of all I *should* have said" or "Today, I focused on all the weaknesses of my ministry instead of my strengths." The final knuckle serves as a prompt for prayers for others—those I want to hold in a loving embrace. I have to admit that it is rare that I make it through this without falling asleep, but it gives me a prayerful grounding at the end of the day and throughout the night.

To be held in prayer may not change an outcome, but it can remind us of our inherent worth and the beauty of our connection with a greater spirit and each other. I imagine the people in the pews of First Unitarian Church of Dallas as their minister, Daniel Kanter, distributed index cards to each of them. At the end of his sermon he asked each of them to write down a prayer need. I imagine for some, the need poured out onto the card with a sigh of relief. Others may have struggled with this request. After prayers were written they were placed in baskets. These cries of the people had no names attached. When the service was over, each person took a card and was instructed to “consider seriously that someone in the sanctuary would be asking for their prayers.” In an article in the UU World,^{vi} Rev. Kanter shared how congregants were affected by this sacred ritual. Connection, strength, courage, compassion were some of the words that were shared as a result.

I know that, as a student in clinical pastoral education at a local hospital, total strangers would reach out their hands and hold mine as we entered into prayer. Sometimes we spoke ancient and familiar words together such as the Lord’s Prayer. Other times I offered a spontaneous prayer given as the patient willingly waited to hear the words of love and care that I called forward into those sterile hospital rooms and challenging medical times.

I was also personally touched by prayers that were shared. I remember when I was on call one Sunday afternoon, I decided to visit a patient in the psychiatric unit. The woman I visited had a file citing multiple diagnoses and was experiencing a tremendous amount of grief. As our time together came to an end I asked if she wanted to pray. She said, “Yes,” and that she wanted to offer a prayer from her Native American tradition.

I lowered my head, closed my eyes and held my hands together on the top of the table as she quietly sang a prayer in the language and rhythm of her ancestors. When she finished she looked up at me and she said "This is what my prayer means in English—Love your great grandmother. Love your grandmother. Love your mother. Love your home. Love yourself..." Beautiful.

For all of us who are a part of this complicated and often broken world, prayer can be a wellspring. Prayer can be a source of strength and invite a posture of humility. It can be a container for our rage, a moment of peace, and also wake us up to the needs of the world and our own agency as part of it.

May we sing our prayers, may we silently hold others as we sit in daily prayer, or walk our prayers surrounded by nature or on the city streets. May we say prayers at bedsides, in the company of those who we deeply disagree with, or in recognition of time spent together making meaning of our lives. Let the spirit of life and of prayer sing in our heart all the stirrings of compassion. Let our hearts and souls be transformed by a greater love that will not let us go.

May it be so, Amen.

Footnotes on reverse side.

ⁱ French, Carolyn. "Carolyn McDade's spirit of life," August 8, 2007. *UU World Fall 2007*. www.uuworld.org/life/articles/35893.shtml [Accessed on October 2, 2014]

ⁱⁱ Riley, Rev. Meg., "Prayer for Difficult Conversations," distributed in paper copy, July 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wikstrom, Erik Walker. *Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005.

^{iv} Ebook,
www.forgottenbooks.com/readbook_text/The_Life_of_William_Ellery_Channing_1000648738/659, Page 648.

^v Latz, Rabbi Michael, Rabbi Jason Rodich, and Wendy Goldberg., "High Holiday Sermons: Why We Pray," Rabbi's Take Rosh Hashanah. <http://tcjewfolk.com/rosh-hashanah-sermons-pray/> [Accessed, October 28, 2014]

^{vi} Kanter, Daniel. "Praying for each other," February 15, 2013. *UU World Spring 2013*. <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/283999.shtml> [Accessed October 3, 2014]