



February Monthly Theme

PRAYER

the practice of staying awake

The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: wbuuc.org/themes or sign up for a circle at wbuuc.org/classes.

QUESTIONS

Toward what do you turn when you seek to find balance, or seek to name or honor a significant experience – silence, poetry, ancient words or your own?

How do we practice staying awake – to our inner self, to the present moment, to the wider world - amid all the shifts that take place in our lives on a day-to-day basis?

What practices in your life are, or could be, a prayer?

QUOTES

The most important matter for a practitioner is to be able to break through the veil of the material plane in order to enter the ultimate dimension and see the interconnection between us and all other phenomena in the world around us.

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*

How we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the character of our experience and, therefore, the quality of our lives. Mystics and contemplatives have made this claim for ages—but a growing body of scientific research now bears it out.

- Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*

If the only prayer you said was “thank you”, that would be enough.

- Meister Eckhart

POETRY

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

- Mary Oliver

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the door sill
Where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.

- Rumi

Be awake to the Life that is loving you and sing your prayer,
laugh your prayer, dance your prayer, run and weep and sweat your prayer,
sleep your prayer, eat your prayer, paint, sculpt, hammer, and read your prayer,
sweep, dig, rake, drive and hoe your prayer, garden and farm and build and clean your prayer,
wash, iron, vacuum, sew, embroider and pickle your prayer,
compute, touch, bend and fold but never delete or mutilate your prayer.
Learn and play your prayer, work and rest your prayer, fast and feast your prayer,
argue, talk, whisper, listen and shout your prayer,
groan and moan and spit and sneeze your prayer,
swim and hunt and cook your prayer, digest and become your prayer,
release and recover your prayer, breathe your prayer, be your prayer"

- Dr. Alla Renée Bozarth

May *I* be peaceful, light and happy in body and in mind.
May I be free and safe from accidents.
May I be free from anger, unwholesome states of mind and worries.
May I know how to look at myself with the eyes of understanding and love.
May I be able to recognize and touch the seeds of joy and happiness in myself.
May I learn how to nourish myself with joy each day.
May I be able to live fresh, solid and free.
May I not be caught in the state of indifference or be caught in the extremes of attachment or aversion.

May *you* be peaceful, light and happy in body and in mind...

May *all beings* be peaceful, light and happy in body and in mind...

- Thich Nhat Hahn

That Which Holds All

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.

- Nancy Schaffer

READINGS & EXCERPTS

What it can do – what prayer, at its best and at our best, has always done – is help us to live consciously, honorably, and compassionately. Because I am not stronger, more self-sufficient, smarter, braver, or any less mortal than my forebears or my neighbors, I need this help. As long as prayer helps me to be more loving, then I need prayer. As long as prayer serves as a potent means of sharing my love with others, I need prayer.

- Kate Braestrup

Getting the words right should never be an overriding concern. It is, rather, the attitude one brings to prayer – the honesty and authenticity, the openness and vulnerability, the courage and commitment. In other words, simply pray. Pray without any preconceived notion of what you're doing or why. Simply do it, and see what happens...repetitive prayers "sink" into a person...they move from the head to the heart...the rhythm of the prayer descends into you...becomes part of you.

- Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Simply Pray*

So I like to point out that in all Asian languages — at least I've been told this; I don't know all Asian languages — but in all Asian languages the word for "mind" and the word for "heart" are the same word. So when you hear the word "mindfulness," if you're not in some sense automatically hearing the word "heartfulness" you're misunderstanding it. And mindfulness in any event is not a concept; it's a way of being. And it's a way of being awake.

And so the practice of mindfulness, whether you're doing it in some formal way, meditating in a sitting posture or lying down doing a body scan or doing mindful hatha yoga, but the real practice is living your life as if it really mattered from moment to moment. The real practice is life itself. And coming to all of those senses in hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and also we could say minding. Which is another way of saying awareness-ing. OK? And it puts us in touch with a whole different dimension than thinking.

And so we're so stressed that we're stressing out the children or whatever it is. But it actually — and the mind says, "I don't have any time. I don't have any time. I don't have any time for this." But actually that's all you have time for, is this because there's nothing else than this.

And the more we can sort of learn these lessons the more we will not be in some sense running towards our death, but in a sense opening to our lives. And there's a huge distinction between the two. And all the scientific evidence is suggesting that when you choose life in the way I'm talking about, your brain changes in both form and function, your immune system changes, your body changes. I mean, we start to really take care of what's most important and there are very, very tangible results at the level of the body, the mind, and the heart, and most importantly our relationships with the world and with our loved ones and with our own bodies.

- *Jon Kabat-Zinn in an On Being interview called Opening to Our Lives. He speaks regarding his book, Science of Mindfulness*