

The Shepherd's Prayer

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Today we're talking about spiritual practices, including but not limited to prayer. In some ways, spiritual practice puts us in a vulnerable position, one where we might need to acknowledge that we don't control the universe, or one where we admit that we need help, or one where we dare to hope. That takes courage. When I was a teenager, there was an elder in my community who modeled this courage.

Fear Not

I settled into the folding chair, straining my eyes under the fluorescent lights in the church social hall. The accordion walls and room dividers crossed paths to form four classrooms. My brothers were doing arts and crafts in the religious education building. I had "graduated" from the children's program, so I "got" to choose an adult class for the new Learning Community Hour. I looked around at the adults, all at least twice my fifteen years.

Millie led the class. She had been the church organist and choir director for as long as I could remember. She invited us to open by repeating the Lord's Prayer together. I sat right next to her, so I heard her clearly as she said:

Our Father who ART in heaven, HALOWED by thy name

Thy kingdom come, THY will be done on earth as it IS in heaven

GIVE us this day our daily bread, and FORGIVE

us OUR trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against KUS.

Lead us NOT into temptation, but DELIVER us from evil,

For THINE is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

I couldn't believe my ears. Millie used INFLECTION as she prayed. I had learned this prayer by rote. I had always heard the line break in the middle: "Thy will be done/ On earth as it is in heaven."

Millie said the prayer like she meant it, not like she was reading words off a page. She sounded like she really thought the name was hallowed.

I cocked my head to look at Millie. I had always thought she was a calm, respectable person. I had never known her to erupt into fits of religious fervor. Could it be that this pillar of my mainline, liberal, Protestant church was a fanatic? My ears roared with fear of this small woman with a big prayer.

Luckily, I did not react out of my fear in that moment, but sat through my discomfort. And, in later years, I lived and learned about neighbors with all kinds of religious and spiritual traditions. I learned to appreciate it when someone shared a moment of prayer that gave comfort. I eventually tried it for myself. I learned to love rolling the words of a prayer in my mouth, experiencing their meaning while the prayer flowed through my voice.

It seems like every once in awhile those of us who find value in organized religion find it necessary to remember the value of disorganized religious experience. We gather in religious communities in order to be held accountable, lest our spiritual practices become stale and meaningless. In this morning's story, the scholar is reminded by the shepherd that the prayer of the heart is the true prayer. It brings comfort and hope to all who hear it. The prayer completed without care is a word without wings.

At this point, I want to stop and do some translating. This is a pluralistic community. We have a lot of ways of expressing our Unitarian Universalism. Some practices are contemplative, like chanting or meditation. Service is very important in our tradition, and I know many here concentrate on service as their prayer. As I think about the UU's I know, I can count the practitioners of at least a dozen embodied traditions: Tai Chi, Yoga, Aikido, Nia dancing, labyrinth walking, and others. Some of us pray to God or a divine force, others don't find ideas like god or divinity useful. For today, let's try defining prayer as a deliberate practice that reconnects us with the source of blessing as we understand it and that reinforces positive intention. Whether it's community service or Yoga or talking to God or chanting or any other practice, prayer is a deliberate and spiritually connective practice that reinforces positive intention.

Courage asks us to remember that, in prayer, it is often a good idea to let go of outcomes. In prayer or meditation or other kinds of spiritual practice, we can express a

hope, but even the most faithful do not get exactly what they pray for every time. Spiritual practice asks us to sit with the discomfort of not knowing and not controlling, leading with the heart rather than with fear. Prayer, for me, is a way of opening up awareness, holding people and the planet in love, and reconnecting with the understanding that I am held by the Source of Love. Whether or not you believe that God or the Universe makes changes in response to requests made in prayer, spiritual practice changes us, and changing us can help us get ready to change the world in positive ways. Prayer helps me to notice and act on opportunities to be better, to do better, and to organize with other people doing the work of justice and compassion.

Connection with transcendent mystery and wonder comes to us in many ways. Sometimes we cultivate it by a regular spiritual practice. Sometimes that connection comes to us spontaneously, such as in nature or while listening to sacred music. The prayer of the heart seeks out and draws from the source of blessing as we understand it to be.

Love the Incarnate

This time of year, it's hard to ignore another story of shepherds who were out in the fields, "keeping watch over their flock by night."

In both the nativity story and with the folk from this morning, shepherds represent simplicity. They are people we can identify with: they have jobs, they don't necessarily understand what's going on most of the time, they feel vulnerable to the elements.

In the nativity story, the shepherds find transcendent wonder. Last week, I talked a bit about the intersection of awe and fear, noting that a sense of awe and wonder can spur us to action. In the cast of the shepherds, their course of action leads to a human baby in a trough meant for animal feed. And this is the pinnacle of their religious experience.

The incarnate world, the physical world of babies and domestic animals and shepherds and fields, is divine. The shepherd in the folk story notices the divinity of wool, a grassy field, a clear stream, and the starry night. Direct experience with the physical world inspires the shepherds in both stories. When I remember to connect with the physical world, I am inspired to give thanks for that sense of wonder.

The prayer of the heart is a grounded prayer. It fosters a love affair with the physical world, a sense of transcendence rooted in immanence. The prayer of the heart teaches us to love the incarnate.

Pray like you Mean It

Flour and salt and water squish through our fingers, being transformed from pantry items into a craft project. My partner is telling me about the Sunday School curriculum she's writing on prayer.

“There's this idea in Judaism about kevah and kavanah. Kevah means the set text of a prayer, the words as they are written in the prayer book. But the words of the prayer, the mechanics, are only half of it. There's also kavanah, the intention. You mean to do the practice, and you're actively engaged in it. I'm going to have one bowl with crusty, dry salt dough. That dough has a lot of kevah. The salt and the flour represent structure. Another bowl with goopy, slimy salt dough has a lot of kavanah. The water represents a spiritual intention, lots of overflowing love. If you mix the two together, you get dough that's not too dry and not too goopy.”

I had heard before of kevah and kavanah, and it hadn't occurred to me that it was a useful concept for most people, including third-graders. But why not? The balance between structure and spirit is a dynamic that affects a lot of us.

Spiritual teachers like my family and children in the Religious Exploration program remind me to notice where I am on that balance. I look back on times in my life when I didn't want to conform to a method or open myself up to a faith community, I just wanted to have my groovy personal experience with whatever spiritual experiment that was bringing me comfort or fun. I could have used more kevah in those moments to help me stay grounded in responsibility. I can look back at service projects, martial arts classes, and rituals when I just wanted to get the technique right or rush through the motions, not allowing the experience to settle into my heart and soul. I could have used more kavanah in those moments.

Some days I need one more than another. I have a daily earth-centered prayer practice. There are mornings when my heart is too heavy to be fully present. On those days, I hang on to the structure. Keeping up my practice on uninspired days opens the way for

those other times, when the intention of the prayer affects my outlook on life and allows me to appreciate the interdependent web.

If I have too many days in a row of all kevah and not enough kavanah, I start to get cranky. I forget about cooperating with the natural flow of things. My back droops with the weight of resentment. My body tenses as I cling to ideas and goals that have outlived their usefulness. My throat closes up, guarding against the eruption of laughter.

Lately, I've connected with kavanah again by remembering Millie and her heartfelt prayer. I learned from her that praying from the heart shines like a multitude of angels. And just when I'm sore afraid, I remember: Have courage. Love the incarnate. Pray like you mean it.

I spoke earlier about all of the ways Unitarian Universalists pray. If you walk the labyrinth, walk like you mean it. Be mindful of your intention to walk in the ways of the UU tradition. If you chant, remember that your voice is joined with others in this congregation. If service is your prayer, remember that service is your prayer, and that you have a faith community that backs you up. Whatever your practice, pray like you mean it. Let your prayer be simple and true. Let the words and actions bring comfort and hope to all who witness them.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.