

## 1/2/11 Sermon

"The Inner 'I'"

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Freeman Dyson tells a story of a scientist who, from early morning to evening, sat in his office, pounding away at his computer keyboard. Throughout the day, his office mate would look over his shoulder, but never did he ask any questions. Finally, quitting time arrived and the scientist didn't budge. His partner could no longer contain himself and blurted out: "What are you doing? All day long, you haven't moved. It's driving me nuts. Come on, it's time to leave."

"I can't, I have to finish," was the response.

"What are you writing?" his associate asked.

"Well," the exhausted scientist confided, "just in case I die during the night, I wanted to get everything down I know, just by chance that God might want to know the facts after I'm gone."

His partner was in disbelief: "What? Is that what you've been doing? Don't you think God Almighty knows the facts?" To which his colleague replied, "Yes, yes, of course God knows the facts, but not this version of the facts!"

We Unitarian Universalists all have our own version of the truth, guided by our own experience. We are free thinkers, unrestrained and unencumbered by creed and dogma – even God, for some. Given the opportunity, wouldn't we all like to tell the Almighty a thing or two about the way things really are?

We can do that through prayer, which also opens us to experience transformation and inner peace. Without taking time for contemplation we are soon distracted and alienated from our deepest feelings and needs. Our prayer facilitates connection to each other and the transcendent.

But what is prayer exactly? To ask that question is like asking an Eskimo about snow. It is said that they have at least a dozen words for snow because snow is so vital to their very existence. The word prayer is similar in that we have no universally accepted understanding of what it means. Unitarian Universalists seem to struggle with the whole notion.

Let's examine prayer as if we have little or no baggage around this issue. Greta Crosby writes that "prayer exists in the contexts of four basic human emotions and experiences: conflict, sorrow, peace, and joy."

She further offers three routes to navigate these emotions.

One is talking in quest, which is speaking while searching for the unknown, verbalizing the tension we feel from looking but not finding.

Another is listening in silence. We all know that ours is a culture that works overtime to fill the void of silence. My God, we even leave the TV on for the dog when we go out. If there's a silence, fill it! Why not listen in silence, to hear the small voice within. What are we afraid that we might hear?

And third, she says prayer is for letting go of the little self (ego) that gets caught up in the minor particulars of our daily lives. Prayer is an opportunity, in conflict, sorrow, peace, or joy, to experience something other than what we can see and feel in the immediate. Prayer allows us to nurture a broader vision of our lives and facilitates connection instead of separation and isolation.

But to whom do UUs pray to? We have been accused of praying "To whom it may concern," perhaps because some reject the idea that our prayer must be directed to God. We seem to get distracted by the mechanics, the how-to and to-whom we pray. Prayer, no matter how we define it, is fundamental to our faith. While we may not have all the religious language, structures and practices that our orthodox brethren do, we do have the same impulse to pray. What we long for is that certain spark, that motivation to offer our petition to the unknown. Our heart calls us to be engaged and open to whatever answer we receive.

The comedian Lily Tomlin talked about being open to prayer. "When we talk to God," she says, "we're said to be praying – but when God talks to us, we're said to be schizophrenic." So we might want to be careful about what we ask for. And who we say answers our prayers.

Prayer, when most fulfilling, connects us to the "Inner I" and can transform us. It reminds us to be grateful for what we have, even in the worst of times, even when gratitude is far from our minds. Prayer offers insight into our lives and relationships. It is the one place where truth flows through the bedrock of our souls, and all deception and lies are washed away. Through prayer we finally come to that place where we can no longer avoid our truth, no matter how painful. It reminds us of our limitations, loneliness, alienation, our powerlessness. In the words of the Jewish mystic, Abraham Heschel, "prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions, our true aspirations. It is an act of self-purification."

Prayer connects us to each other when experienced in community; while in solitude, we develop a deep sense of connection to the unknown beyond us. Communal prayer opens us to the need of others, to find common ground that can open our hearts and minds to the world in which we live. Prayer demands we address the question, "Can we be true to our best selves if we exclude others in our prayers who have less than us – less justice, less equity, less freedom, less peace?" I suspect not, if we are to resolve the conflict between the striving for inner harmony and concern and compassion for others. If we are able to include both in our prayers, we open ourselves to a great spiritual awakening.

We pray together because the stimulus – the spark of the gathered community – helps us articulate our inner yearnings. We pray together for the wisdom and the means to love more completely. If our prayers are not to be narcissistic, they must include others. Prayer connects us to the holy, the profound within us, and the link to the source of our strength in times of trial. It need not be God or anything outside us. Life itself can also be a prayer. When we look at our lives as a prayer, writes John Muir, "then all that you do, all that you are, all – in a deliberate and focused way. It is then that you are praying."

There is a wonderful Hasidic story that I want to share in closing.

"Late one evening, a poor farmer on his way back from the market found himself without his prayer book. The wheel of his cart had come off right in the middle of the woods and it distressed him that this day should pass without his having said his prayers. So this is the prayer he made: "I have done something very foolish, Lord. I came away from home this morning without my prayer book and my memory is such that I cannot recite a single prayer without it. So this is what I am going to do: I shall recite the alphabet five times very slowly and You, to whom all prayers are known, can put the letters together to form the prayers I can't remember."

And the Lord said to his angels, "Of all the prayers I have heard today, this one was undoubtedly the best because it came from a heart that was simple and sincere."

He had "the spark," a spark that caressed the essence of the moment, a moment to be addressed with simplicity, sincerity, and honesty. Anything less is not prayer, for prayer is about speaking from your depths. Any prayer from that place, the heart, is acceptable to whomever you pray.