

AUTHENTIC PRAYER

Second in a Series of CPE Sermons

by Lisa McDaniel-Hutchings

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Prayer is a challenging concept for many Unitarian Universalists, and I am no exception. When I went to CA last fall for a course, or a unit, of Clinical Pastoral Education I came face-to-face with prayer on a daily basis and struggled throughout that time with how to pray with integrity, with the patients I encountered, honoring their faith traditions and religious beliefs.

Clinical Pastoral Education is a twelve week internship as a chaplain in a hospital. It is the intensive course in pastoral care. Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE is a carefully planned series of experiences that train student chaplains to become more compassionate ministers. Over the 12 weeks we did various exercises in our group of chaplain interns, practiced putting theory into practice by visiting patients and their families, and then processed our experiences in the group. Successful completion of this experience is required for graduation from theological school and for interviewing with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to become a Unitarian Universalist minister.

I went to CA for CPE because that's the closest place I could find a full time program in the fall that I could complete within my sabbatical. It meant I had to leave behind my family and friends and find a place to live in the greater LA area where I'd never really been before. I was not really sure what I was in for in CPE. I could count on one hand the number of people I had visited in the hospital previously! I knew we would be meeting with patients, but I didn't really understand what that would involve or what would be expected of me. When I went the first day, I met the other five chaplain interns who would be in the program, in this unit of CPE, with me for the next 12 weeks. Overall, we

were a fairly balanced group—3 young adults/3 middle agers, 2 Asians/4 Anglos, 2 men/4 women, 3 first career ministers/3 second career folks...

5 Christians... (all from Fuller Theological Seminary (a conservative Christian seminary in Pasadena), three of them knew each other from school) and me!

Oh no! As the Unitarian Universalist, I **was** the theological diversity in the group!

That first week we had an intense orientation covering hospital policy, pastoral care theory, assignments and expectations for chaplain interns, how to find our way to the many different parts of the hospital. It was a lot to absorb. We got two binders full of information to help us understand what we were about to do!

Since we were a new group and trying to bond, and honestly we didn't know anyone else in the hospital, we all ate lunch together. The first day one of the chaplain interns offered a prayer before lunch. I respectfully listened. The second day they agreed there should be a prayer before lunch, and they nominated me! **Oh no!** Prayer is not really a spiritual practice of mine, so I felt quite intimidated and vulnerable, especially praying with serious Christians. I fumbled a moment, then remembered that for me prayer is about gratitude, so then I stumbled through something like this:

Spirit of Life and Love, Dear God,

We give thanks for this time together as colleagues and friends.

We express our gratitude to the plants and animals who gave their lives that we might live, and to those human hands that harvested, transported, and prepared this food for us to eat. May it strengthen our bodies to do valuable work in the world. Amen

My colleagues were all very gracious. I believe that my being vulnerable and risking this prayer led to a question at lunch one day the next week. They wanted to know about Unitarian Universalism and I was able to hold forth, offering UU 101 for the other chaplains. It brought us closer. They had a better understanding of me and my faith. I was out of the closet as a non-Christian. And, my experience with prayer was just beginning.

As a life-long Unitarian Universalist I have not had personal prayer as a spiritual practice. In worship, like you, I've experienced corporate prayer as a time for expressing joys and sorrows, or meditation, or considering issues within the larger congregation or world. Yet in CPE after visiting with a patient or a family member, I was expected to complete a form called *Spiritual Assessment & Pastoral Care Notes*. On the form "prayer" is listed third of nine "Sources of Spiritual Support" and third of six "Spiritual Resources" that we offer. It seemed important to offer prayer to patients and to be able to pray with them in their tradition. In my first week of seeing patients I had a meltdown; I was feeling helpless and hopeless about connecting with patients and finding meaningful ways to meet their spiritual needs. How could I pray with the overwhelming majority of Catholic and Protestant Christian patients in the hospital? I eventually wrote out what I thought I could authentically say, just to clarify my thoughts. I ran it by my colleague Andrew, an Anglican, for content.

Dear God, Heavenly Father, Spirit of Life and Love,
We give thanks for this amazing life you've given us. Please be with Mrs. Jones during this time of illness and challenge. Give her strength. Be a comfort to Mrs. Jones and her family and friends in this trying time. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I put in inclusive language for whom to address the prayer (God, Heavenly Father, Spirit of Life and Love) and I added Jesus at the end to honor Christians. Andrew said that it was similar to what he was praying with patients. You see, it was clear throughout our internship that the chaplain's role was to provide spiritual support to whomever we visited regardless of their beliefs. Our personal beliefs didn't matter; this was patient-centered care. And yet, I needed to reconcile this with what I believe for my own peace of mind. Here are some of my thoughts:

For me, the type of prayer appropriate to offer depends upon the God in which one believes. If I believe in a personal, anthropomorphic God, one who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent then I can say intercessory prayers and expect them to be answered, even with miracles. The problem with the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God is that I can also blame Him for letting my loved one die. I spoke with the sister of a 41 year-old woman patient in the Intensive Care Unit who blamed God for the massive stroke her sister suffered; she was very angry with God. I did not question or judge her belief, but as a chaplain I was concerned because her belief did not support and help her during this difficult time.

Historically Universalists believed that God is too loving and kind to send any of His children to Hell. Similarly I cannot believe that a loving God would have any reason to cause a tsunami to drown thousands of innocent people or Jews to be gassed in concentration camps or a bride to die in a car accident on the way to her wedding or a child to have terminal cancer. If instead fate brings tragedy, not God, then what kind of prayer is appropriate? In the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner writes,

“If we cannot pray for the impossible, or the unnatural, if we cannot pray out of a sense of revenge or irresponsibility, asking God to do our work for us, what is left for us to pray for? What can prayer do for us, to help us when we hurt?

The first thing that prayer does for us is to put us in touch with other people, people who share the same concerns, values, dreams, and pains that we do.” (118-119)

When praying with patients or families in the hospital, I find there is a remarkable overlap of values, regardless of faith tradition. People want to pray for pain relief, comfort, improved health, strength, and peace. In fact, is this not why Unitarian Universalists share Joys & Sorrows in our worship services? Because we want to bring our concerns, values, dreams and pains to this supportive community that shares those same concerns, values, dreams and pains. As Rabbi Kushner says,

“We don’t have to beg or bribe God to give us strength or hope or patience. We need only turn to Him, admit that we can’t do this on our own, and understand that bravely bearing up under long-term illness is one of the most human, and one of the most godly, things we can ever do. One of the things that constantly reassures [the Rabbi] that God is real, and not just an idea that religious leaders made up, is the fact that people who pray for strength, hope, and courage so often find resources of strength, hope, and courage that they did not have before they prayed.”

This is why, over time, I came to ask patients if there was anything they wanted me to be sure to include in the prayer. That way I could lift up their values and address their hopes and desires. I was trying to offer patient-centered spiritual care. [pause]

In terms of what to pray for, Rev. Forrest Church, Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, lived by a mantra, "Want what you have; do what you can; be who you are." (*Love & Death*, 111) During his lifetime he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, underwent surgery and chemotherapy, the cancer went into remission, and then recurred. He wrote about cancer and wanting what he had.

"Did I want cancer? Of course not, [Church said] but to obsess on the bad things that befall us squeezes out a just appreciation for the good. The time we waste on wishful thinking or regret, detracts from the time we might devote to being grateful for all that is ours, here and now, to savor and embrace. When I was sick I remembered to want nothing more than the caring affection of those who loved me. **Wanting what I had, my prayers were answered.** ...to long for what we lack—for things we have lost or shall likely never find—offers little save the sour pleasures of victimhood and regret. ... Wishful thinking is both sloppy and sentimental. We should think to wish instead for things a little closer at hand.

The courage to bear up under pain
The grace to take our successes lightly
The liberation that comes with forgiveness
The energy to address tasks that await our doing
The meaning to be found in giving ourselves to others
The patience to surmount things that are dragging us down
The joy to be gained in even the smallest endeavor
The wonder that lies between the sacred moments of our birth and death

I call this **thoughtful wishing** [Church said]—wishing for what is ours, here and now, to have, do and be." (112-113)

Since Unitarian Universalists (and others, of course) do not know what happens after we die, we put the emphasis of our theology on the life we are living. Like Forrest Church, I would want my relationships to be sound and healthy before I die. I believe it is as he says, "The one thing that can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we die." (110) Only once was I blessed by a conversation with a patient openly considering his impending death and the health of his relationships. As a result he was intentionally speaking with his loved ones, expressing appreciation for all that they had done for him and telling them that he loved them.

Meister Eckhart, the 13th century German theologian, philosopher and mystic said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." I am most comfortable with prayers of gratitude, which is why I began my patient prayers with, "We give thanks for this amazing life we have." Prayers of gratitude keep me mindful of my practical theology of the glass half full. It has also led me to keep a Gratitude Journal in which I list 5 things each day for which I am grateful. [pause]

So in the end, how did this all play out in prayer with patients in the hospital? The first thing I tried to do with patients was to connect at a personal feeling level and see what arose. Often conversation and attention were what patients, like all of us, were seeking. I said a prayer if the patient asked for it and sometimes I asked whether they would like a prayer if I thought they might.

To be in integrity with myself I did not pray for miracles; although I suppose I would have if it was really important to the patient. I included at least a line of gratitude. I included the sources of support and hope that the patient had in the here and now. And I remembered that this is the patient's prayer so I tried to tie it to his faith tradition and to pray for what he finds most important to include. The overwhelming majority of patients come from faith traditions different from mine, but I could pray with them because I can accept their faith even though I don't adopt it. I wanted to meet their spiritual needs as best I could. I looked for words to use that would resonate with their beliefs. One of the most exciting discoveries for me during CPE was that Unitarian Universalist chaplains have an advantage. Because we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of **every** person, we do not see those of differing faiths as broken, and therefore have an easier time of ministering to them. This is also a good thing because most patients are not Unitarian Universalist. In my twelve weeks at the hospital I met only one self-identified UU.

And for those patients who had "none" listed as their religious preference on the census or who presented that in our conversation, I decided to try Forrest Church's concept of "thoughtful wishing". I noticed that an offer of prayer often put them off. Instead, without using the "thoughtful wishing" words, I asked, "What do you hope for?" In this way I tried to identify their values and elicit their deepest intentions.

Now I am no longer involved with CPE. I'm back in Tucson with my family and taking a year to finish up my coursework for Meadville Lombard. I am not praying with others on a daily basis, yet I was surprised the other day. My favorite cat has been quite sick for the past week, not eating or drinking, becoming more and more listless, and losing weight. He has been to the vet every day and we can't identify the problem. About Wednesday it occurred to me that we might really lose him. I found myself intentionally hoping that he would get better, and when my friend, a devout cat lover, said she was putting kitty prayers out to the universe, I encouraged her to continue. What could it hurt, and it might even help, to put positive energy and intention out into the universe, the interconnected web of all existence.

Prayer, after all, is a form of spiritual practice. "The ultimate aim of spiritual practices is awakening; to know our true Self and our relationship to the sacred," says Dr. Roger Walsh, in his book *Essential Spirituality*. So prayer is just one way of expressing what's most sacred, and of grounding one's self in what sustains us and gives us hope. Since Unitarian Universalists are open to many sources of wisdom, some of the kinesthetic ones of us choose Tai Chi or yoga or hiking as our spiritual practice. One of my spiritual practices, especially at this time and temperature of the year, is hiking in the mountains around Tucson. Like Nancy Wood, from our reading this morning, I find my help in the mountain. I find a rock with a view and ground myself in the beauty and interconnectedness of nature and gain perspective by looking down at tiny little Tucson, and by realizing that in the larger scope of things, my challenges and issues are also very small. I can get grounded and lighten up at the same time.

More visual UUs enjoy reading, reflecting, journaling, gardening or creating art in any of its various forms as spiritual practice. The more auditory among us may connect through music, or through sharing thoughts and feelings with others in small group ministry circles. Others may have integrated spiritual practices into their other daily routines. There are so many ways to increase our awareness, connect to what is most sacred, and ground ourselves in what sustains us and gives us hope. Even the way you all light the chalice each Sunday is a prayer:

With its beauty and grace and strength,
may this flaming chalice remind us of our highest aspirations,
our deepest commitments, and our most earnest intentions.”

One of the things I learned during Clinical Pastoral Education was to hold the silence so those I was serving could speak. Sometimes it was an opportunity for them to share their feelings; other times an opportunity to reflect or to decide what held value for them. They could listen to their own inner teachers.

I offer you the same opportunity, a moment of silence.