

## **“Standing in the need of prayer – Who, us?”**

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On its historic stage, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Stevie Wonder, and James Brown, to name just a few, have found their voice and their audience. The Apollo Theater, that landmark of African American music and entertainment on Manhattan’s 125<sup>th</sup> Street, has earned its marquee claim again and again: “Where Stars are Born and Legends are Made.” One balmy night a few years ago, at a benefit concert for East Harlem’s Booker T. Washington Learning Center, I sat in the audience and heard a star being born. Here was the granddaughter of Rev. Leroy Ricksy, the late founder and director of this East Harlem Learning Center, standing on the stage of the Apollo, all three and a half feet of her six-year-old frame, adorned in a sunbeam-radiant dress with socks to match, belting out, “It’s a me, it’s a me, it’s a me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.” Her name? Charisma!

We rocked and clapped to Charisma’s gospel, and it rings in my ears to this day. Besides, she had some truth to sing, as did our own Jeanne Scammell in her rendition of that song this morning – “Standing in the Need of Prayer.”

Who, us? Sometimes we who are Unitarian Universalists don’t quite see ourselves like that. Sin isn’t a common word among us, so we rarely deem ourselves in need of a prayer for forgiveness for the dumb and foolish and downright harmful things we’ve all done. Petition is an even less common word among us, so we rarely enter into prayer or meditation with the understanding that we’re petitioning the divine Someone for a human something. Humility is definitely not our denominational strong suit. There’s good cause for that quip that Universalists believe God is too good to damn us, and Unitarians believe we’re just too good to be damned. And these apparently well-cushioned footstools that we find in some of our pew spaces are long forgotten as kneeling pads. When was the last time we were driven to our knees? Yet I can’t help but feel, I can’t help but believe that prayer is at least as complex as we think we are, as subtle, as nuanced, and as multi-dimensional.

We would sometimes do well to take our cue from writer Anne Lamott, who prayed that “Help me, help me, help me” prayer in those anxious moments of churning over whether to give the green light to a high-risk birthday present for her beloved seven-year-old son. Her prayer was straightforward, completely unsubtle, and decidedly one-dimensional, more like an “Oh my God, what do I do now?” than a discrete, “Spirit of Life, guide me....” And sure enough, she found her answer, albeit more as a strained echo of intuition than the hoped for clap of thunder with some large-font instructions.

Then there are the prayers that might be called “chutzpah appeals” – like that uttered by the adoring and doting grandmother charged with watching her grandchild play on the beach. An enormous wave comes in and carries him out to sea. Instinctively she cries, “Please God, save my only grandson, I beg of you, bring him back!” Another wave comes in and washes him onto the beach, wide-eyed, gasping for breath, and very much alive. His grandmother has more words with God: “Don’t you remember? He had a hat!”

This is probably not too far-fetched. Desperate, we ask God – believing or unbelieving, we ask God – to do whatever. Our hopes are realized. We ask for more, just one more whatever it is we think we need – another day, another job, another child, another parent, another body, another chance. Satisfaction does not come easily to the bottomless pits of petition that we humans can be.

My guess is – and I’ll play it safe and call it a guess – that most folks here wouldn’t concede that prayer to God or the Spirit of Life or what I sometimes call the Great Whoever is effective as a means of securing a specific. God itself is a word that some here take issue with, especially if the visceral notion of God contains a someone, somewhere, with enough time on her hands to qualify as forever. My guess is that most folks here wouldn’t concede that the Transcendent, however manifest, is a micro-manager with nothing better to do than entertain our endless requests. Nor does the Transcendent probably “feel better” when we say “Thank you,” like a parent training us to be civil and so grateful that we finally said “Thank you” on our own. Yet we each have a need to connect with something deeper than ourselves, something that we can call Holy, something that calls us out of the myopic spheres of ourselves into what Albert Schweitzer called “reverence for life.”

In the spirit of reverence, we lean ever so easily into prayer, but not necessarily “to someone” or “for something.” In his work on reverence, Classics scholar and humanities professor Paul Woodruff posits that the prime purpose of reverence is “something that reminds us of human limitations.” I would stretch his notion to suggest that an expression of reverence – prayer, for example – can be gratitude, desperation, wonder, and the acute realization that one has severely screwed up. A prayer to smite one’s enemies and spare one’s own life, for example, wouldn’t qualify as an expression of reverence. Prayer as reverence acknowledges that “It’s not all about me. It’s not all about us.” Yet I and we are players.

Two stories come to mind. The first came to me through well-timed e-mail.

You never know what will happen in choirs, church choirs and concert choirs. My longtime friend, Ron Sundermann, whom I’ve known since kindergarten, is a devout bass who sings with the Concert Chorale of Cedar Rapids, Iowa – the same Cedar Rapids that Zach Johnson, winner of last week’s Master’s Golf Tournament, calls home. After exhausting this news, Ron went on to recount a recent choral rehearsal. Mid-point in learning a song based on Robert Frost’s poem, “Take Something Like a Star,” the choristers tripped across the phrase, “And steadfast as Keats’ Eremite.” A bewildered alto bothered to ask: “What is an Eremite?”

What might we assume? That Iowans don’t understand New England poets like Robert Frost and their esoteric allusions? Not so. An answer came from a gentleman Ron describes as “a great rump of a man, the guy who does the jazz announcing at the local public radio.”

“Keats wrote a poem about a family who hired some homeless hermit, an Eremite by ethnos, to be their ‘bead man.’ The bead man was hired by wealthy Catholic families to say the Rosary for them, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It relieved them of their spiritual responsibilities. So, while the young lovers in Keats’ poem cavorted and escaped to the woods to enjoy each other’s pleasures, the bead man faithfully kept to his recitations, sitting there in the cold ashes of the fireplace, oblivious to the moral looseness going on about him, yet praying for all in the household to be holy and live in the favor of God. THAT is what this particular Eremite, a steadfast Eremite, was.”

Imagine! A devoted hired hand to say your prayers. Can prayer be delegated? Purchased even? And if one accepts employment as the surrogate prayer giver, one utters prayers for sale! So much for reverence.

Turn a corner with me. Turn a corner into a kitchen on the morning of a visit by a man named Sheldon and his family to his wife's parents. He had just scrambled eggs, a role that had become ritual during such visits. All gathered around the sturdy oak table. As he began to serve everyone, his mother-in-law, Kate, was helping her husband, Jack, into his chair. Jack gazed up at the young son of Sheldon and his wife. "Who's the boy?" he wondered aloud.

His wife, Kate, answered gently, "That's your grandson, dear. His name is Philip." Jack looked confused; he recognized only his wife among those seated at the table – not his daughter or son-in-law or two grandchildren also seated there. He had suffered a series of cerebral incidents that left his motor functions impaired and the mere trace of a memory. Before then, it had been family tradition that Jack said grace. He began haltingly: "God is.....God is...." His grandchildren delicately finished his intended grace.

Conversation resumed and everyone picked up their forks, diving into the scrambled eggs and bacon that filled their table. Sheldon turned his head to notice that his father-in-law's was still bowed. He was mumbling something. His granddaughter, Liz, tenderly leaned into him and rubbed his back, then gave him a kiss on the cheek. Jack raised his head and smiled at her, lifted his fork and began to eat. Sheldon noticed tears trickling down Liz's face. He looked at his daughter with an obvious question mark on his own face.

Liz paused, then explained: "Grandpa was praying the same thing over and over. He just kept saying, 'God, don't forget me. God, don't forget me. God, don't forget me.'"

Uttered in words or in silence, offered in thoughts complete and incomplete, begun with the intention of clarity and offered from spaces all but buried, prayer can connect us with our lost inner self, with others whom we have lost, with others with whom we walk and talk every day but often miss, with what is happening in our inmost hearts and what is happening in our outermost world. Prayer assumes countless demeanors – humility, arrogance, chutzpah, confusion, desperation, serenity; I could go on.

All hundred and fifty psalms contained in the Hebrew Bible are prayers. Some lend comfort, such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd..." Some carry supplication, such as the 121<sup>st</sup>: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? ..." Some ring with praise and sound with joy, such as the 100th: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the lands! Serve the Lord with gladness!..." Some reek with demands for retribution, such as the 94<sup>th</sup>: "O Lord thou God of vengeance, thou God of vengeance, shine forth! ..." Some brim with gratitude, such as the 40<sup>th</sup>: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry." Each is a prayer, an utterly human prayer.

We who are Unitarian Universalists come from many spaces of the heart and mind and faith. For some, "Now I lay me down to sleep ..." will evoke comfort; for others, early terrors. For some, "Our Father who are in Heaven ..." will carry tradition treasured; for others, sexist ritual readily discarded. For some, the prayers and meditations in which I call us to join hearts and minds will ring with your hearts' most immediate truths; for others, wandering minds will find alternatives.

While I often invoke a Spirit of Life, I sometimes invoke a God of many names. Prayer, I believe, is not necessarily “to” a being. Surely with meditation, the process is not “to” a being. There is overlap, and they are also distinct. Both prayer and meditation call us to pay attention, close attention, rapt attention. Both can tap the farthest spaces of our being that protest for want of attention. As far as answers, it’s a matter of interpretation. I haven’t much tolerance for those who would say that God answered their prayer to make it out alive from a disaster natural or otherwise if the counterpart is that God just didn’t choose to comply with the same desperate pleas of those who didn’t survive. Yet I understand and pray that we might all survive one another, given the wiles of our human nature, so rife with brutality, so equally capable of reverence for life, for each other, and for the earth we inhabit together.

So what do you think? Are we in need of prayer, that common ground of heartfelt expression, that soulful grounding for beliefs and non-beliefs endless in form and number? Poet Jeanne Lohmann called it “Nothing So Wise.”

The arc of an egg  
bends hands  
to shape prayer,

the shell  
unbroken,  
the heavy yolk  
floating.

Our fingers  
curving always  
inward, become a cup,  
an open bowl.

Prayer is  
circumference  
we may not  
reach around.

space for all we cannot hold,  
the rim of Love toward which we lean.

We may curve our fingers inward as if holding a cup or upwards as if forming a bowl, a chalice even, but prayer itself we cannot wrap our fingers around. We cannot contain it.

Do we need it? Some of us do. Some of us need it to draw breath, to tend to our spiritual center, to make meaning of what we find, to recall our human limitations. We say it, we dance it, we offer it in silence, and sometimes we belt it out in song, like Charisma up there on the stage of the Apollo: “It’s a me, it’s a me, it’s a me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.”

I am. I am ever in the need of prayer. Amen

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