

# IN THE NEED OF PRAYER

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Thank you for welcoming me back to this pulpit.

“Come down, O Love divine, seek thou this soul of mine ... till we become the place wherein the holy Spirit makes its dwelling.

“Dear God...”

Those words speak to me today, but in my youth and right through middle age, I would have choked on them.

By age 14 I had concluded that organized religion was not for me. I was certain not only that God did not exist. I was certain that I had no need for God. I was certain about so many things. It seems that I’ve gotten more and more uncertain as I’ve aged.

I proclaimed a “stand-up” atheism and, truth be told, took some considerable pleasure in the consternation this caused among the adults with whom I shared my adolescent point of view. I was 14 and I was so arrogant.

Worse yet, though I hope I never said this out loud, I was certain that those who needed God were merely displaying their weakness. They were somehow a little less evolved than was I. Prayer? I had no need of it.

Dear God, I am almost embarrassed to look back on that person who was Bill Sinkford then. The title of this sermon is “In the Need of Prayer.” But “Confessions of a Recovering Atheist” would be just as apt. Or simply, “A UU Journey.”

Today, our faith pitches a big theological tent. The diversity of theological belief and practice we welcome is stunning. Liberal

Christians, humanists, Buddhist, theists, pagans and those who resist any label for their religious beliefs sit side by side in our sanctuaries every Sunday morning. In this sanctuary. This Sunday.

At our best, we not only believe but live the belief that our theological differences need not divide us, that they can be blessings and not curses. This was one of the core messages I delivered over and over again as UUA President. From this pulpit, Forrest Church proclaimed that God is not God's name. His image of the Cathedral with many windows, but one light, made spiritual space for the diversity of belief in this sanctuary.

The atheism of my adolescence and early adulthood was fairly common in Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism of that era. Though not universally affirmed, what is commonly called "humanism" was clearly the dominant belief system.

What a spiritual journey this religious community has taken, is taking. We seem to be able to take that easy to say motto "revelation is not sealed" quite seriously.

It has certainly been a journey for me. Most of you have heard the story that led to what is called the Language of Reverence, how, sitting at what could have been my son's death bed from a drug overdose, I found the language of prayer. First the selfish prayers for forgiveness...for the too frequent absences, for too many things left unsaid and for a few things said that should never have passed my lips. And then the pure prayer that Billy might live.

I felt myself being held and knew, somehow, that Billy was being held as well regardless of what the morning would bring.

My sharing of the experience of that night elicited a storm of reaction from our folks. In much of that reaction, I saw fear. Fear, among those who consider themselves "humanist", that they would lose their church. I did my best to reassure them that there would always be a place for them in this faith, not a place of dominance or control, but a place they could count on.

But deep thanks were also called up, especially from those for whom the limits of the language of humanism had long chafed. Too many words were off limits to hold their evolving sense of the holy. Too many felt they had to be in the spiritual closet.

There are many names for the holy: God, Spirit of Life, Power of Human Possibility, Spirit of Love. Many names. They all point to that which transcends us. They all point to an embracing presence out of which and into which we are born, a presence which is experienced with a sense of reverence, of awe, of gratitude.

Just as there are many names for the holy, so too there are many practices used to be in communion with the holy. The many forms of meditation, the physical and spiritual disciplines of Tai Chi and Yoga, spending time in the natural world and many others are all practices through which we can connect to that which transcends us. So too is the practice of prayer.

I've been asked many times what the next step in the language of reverence conversation should be. Should we form a national task force to develop some language? Should we move to a vote? For me, the next step is to move into the practice of reverence, using whatever discipline of the spirit works for you. Our relationship with the holy, with God, needs to be celebrated and deepened by making space for it, by intentionally seeking out the holy and making ourselves available for that presence in our lives.

My own journey, what I now call my prayer life, began evolving when I entered Starr King School for the Ministry. I was 46 and knew I had a lot of work to do. I'd just been through a personal bankruptcy. Though my inherent worth and dignity may have seemed intact viewed from the outside, it was suffering inside. I knew I had to wrap my head around religion. And I knew I needed to be in relationship with colleagues of color... or go mad. I was the only full time student of color at the school. My solution was to "hang out" at the nearby Baptist seminary.

A black clergy group met there, led by J. Alfred Smith, the pastor of Allen Temple Baptist on 14<sup>th</sup> St. in Oakland. He had built that congregation from a few hundred to three thousand members that

ministered not only to the spirit of his flock, but to their needs for affordable housing, addiction services and violence prevention. J. Alfred was the dean of the black clergy in the Bay Area.

In the spring of that first year, at one of the black clergy meetings, J. Alfred turned to me and said, “Brother Sinkford will offer the prayer at our next meeting.”

I was terrified. I had never offered a prayer in public, did not pray in private. My credibility was at stake. The black clergy had a hard enough time accepting a non-Christian Unitarian Universalist. What if I could not even pray? I obsessed about that prayer for a month.

But when the day for the meeting finally came and I stood to pray, their habit of prayer saved me. I offered the words I had struggled so long over: “Enter with me now the place of silence and honesty, known by many names. Let us pray.” They knew what to do. And we prayed.

I pray every day now and have often been asked what I mean by prayer. Who do you pray to? Who is on the other end?

For me, prayer is not about talking with a bearded old white man who resides somewhere above, not about communing with the divine feminine or even the God of nature. Prayer is about asking the very best questions I can, the questions that matter, and waiting for answers. I don't invest time or energy in trying to name where the answers come from. Its enough that they come.

Most 12-Step programs take the same approach. “You take care of your side of the street,” they tell their members, “Don't worry about who is on the other side.”

A good friend describes me as a “fuzzy theist”, and that is probably as good a label as I'm likely to find.

That feeling of being held happens rarely for me. But I do remember it and give thanks for it in my prayers. I am told that communion of that intensity is infrequent. Mother Teresa has written that she has known the intense presence of God only once.

Nor is prayer always warm and fuzzy. Sometimes I enter the space of prayer angry and rail at God. “How could you let that tragedy happen?” And I have to work through the anger or the frustration to a place of peace. The anger can still fuel my actions, but, somehow, usually, I can put aside the arrogance of believing that I hold all truth.

Most often I have focused, in prayer, on some particular problem, some specific piece of anxiety, some important decision I have had to make. Prayer, for me, is not about asking for anything.

Howard Thurman was a preacher, a poet, **a mystic** and one of the founders of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, the first truly interracial church in the US. I particularly love this story he tells about prayer:

“(A very old lady told me how) ...In her little Congregational church in a small New England community there was an extended crisis over the minister. The congregation felt he should leave because his usefulness was over. He prayed about the matter and as a result was convinced that, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, he should remain at his post. My friend said that she decided to take the matter directly to God in her prayer time. I quote her:

*I gave myself plenty of time. I went into a thorough review of the highlights of the sixty years I have been a member of the church right up to the present situation. I talked it through very carefully. It was so good to talk freely and to know that the feelings and the thoughts behind the words were being understood. When I finished I said, “Now Father, these are the facts as best I can state them. Take them and do the best you can. I have no suggestions to make.”*

When I first encountered Thurman, in seminary, he was a real test for me. I could relate to his writing on race and oppression (Jesus and the Disinherited is the most famous of these). But his more theological, more mystical words found no place to anchor in my spirit. I literally could not bring myself to read his words about prayer. This made the course that I was taking on his work quite problematic and my relationship with the professor rocky to say the

least. I finally made peace with the professor and we became friends, but I never found meaning in Thurman in those days.

The process of asking my questions has been the heart of my prayer life for many years. It kept me centered throughout my time as UUA President and does to this day. But it seems that my journey of prayer is not over.

Have any of you had the experience of reading something and discounting it completely, dismissing it out of hand, only to return to it later, even years later, and find it has great wisdom. The words haven't changed, but you have. In my case, Howard Thurman has become my guide.

Thurman talks about the focus on problems in prayer as a blockage. They can be useful blockages, because they tend to clear everything else away. But blockages nonetheless. Because for Thurman, and increasingly for me, prayer is not about solving problems, it is about satisfying a hunger for communion with the Holy, for connection, for the lived relationship with the Spirit of Life.

From Thurman, "The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us. Prayer is the experience of the individual...(seeking)to make the hunger (for God) dominant and controlling in... life."

"When the hunger in...(the) heart merges with what seems to be the fundamental intent of life, communion with God the Creator of Life is not only possible but urgent. The hunger of the heart, which is a part of the givenness of God, becomes one with the givenness of God as expressed in the world of nature and in human history."

"The hunger cannot be separated from God. For many this is what makes communication...(with) God... possible. This is the swinging door that no person can shut."

There is a place beyond the problems, beyond decisions needing to be made, a place where the voice of God in me and the voice of God beyond me sing, in harmony, a song of praise and thanks. I am hearing fragments of it in prayer these days.

Again from Thurman, “This is not to say that the Great God of Life is reduced to or squeezed into the hunger of the (human) heart..., but that the hunger is an expression of the givenness of God. (The hunger) is the trysting place where the God and the (human) soul... meet, where they stand on common ground and the wall of partition between them has no status.

Well, I told you Thurman was a mystic. Perhaps I am becoming one as well. Perhaps I’ll have to change my self description, from “fuzzy theist” to “fuzzy theistic mystic.” Doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue with ease.

But there is a place beyond the problems of the day where I am beginning to visit in my prayers. It is the next stop on my own journey. Your journey will not doubt be different. Travel well and as you go, sing songs of praise and thanks.

Amen.