

Can a Nonbeliever Pray
A sermon delivered by Rev. Kate Rohde

About a month ago, in response to all the anti-Muslim feeling, the local Islamic Society invited Omahans to a program about Islam. It was a modest audience with an ample representation of UU's and other religious liberals in town. Ironically, perhaps, the presenters did little that would have calmed the sensibilities of those inclined to dislike them and they were conservative enough to be somewhat annoying to at least this religious liberal even though they were personally very sweet and welcoming. I tend to have a sympathetic ear for most liberal, tolerant, flexible versions of whatever religion: Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism, Christianity, or Islam, but the more doctrinaire a religion is, the more they seem to claim they have the way, the less interested and more annoyed I feel. The program was long. The main speaker somewhat annoying, except there was one thing that was worth the whole afternoon. It was at the very beginning. A man stood up and gave the singing call to prayer that you hear in Islamic countries, the five times a day haunting, wailing, chanting song. That Arabic song/prayer floated through the auditorium, penetrating everything.

And, beyond reason, I found tears coming to my eyes as if I were about to weep. I was deeply moved. All the words that came later pushed me away, but the prayer, the chant, the song, had drawn me in. I confess that like many a UU, I don't have a clear, concise, explanation of prayer and what it is about. We UU's are not as different as we may think, though. People in any faith tradition who try to go deeply into things will have a similar struggle. I remember visiting a liberal Christian Church in my Chicago neighborhood on a Sunday. They had a section in the service in which individuals could get up and offer a

prayer. One of the prayers offered was for something like good weather for the church picnic. Almost immediately, another member of the church got up, an elderly lady with a feisty demeanor. “That’s absolutely ridiculous!” She exclaimed, “My father was a minister, and that is no prayer! You don’t pray for the laws of science to stop working. I wouldn’t hold up this hymnal and then pray to keep it from dropping to the ground! The law of gravity will not be suspended and only a fool would think that it is a true prayer to ask for it to be otherwise!”

Now whatever we might think of the appropriateness of the lady scolding the minister and congregation during the worship service, most UU’s would emphatically agree with her assessment. The idea that a prayer is sort of a Harry Potter-like magic spell to make impossible things happen, or even to change the physical world, is a pre-modern, pre-scientific, view of the world—a kind of peasant view. So that is not what liberal or even sophisticated orthodox religions refer to when they pray. Although, I imagine a lot of you, like me, utter some petition like “please, please, please!” when some kind of train is coming towards you and about to crash into you, but I think that is a prayer giving voice to emotion, not a belief in magic. As one person puts it, sometimes prayer is emotion trying to make peace with reality.

Now I confess that despite my profession, I am still exploring what I mean by prayer and what kind of prayer has meaning for me. My view is very UU, in fact. I think that there are many different ways of prayer and to find what might work for us is not an intellectual exercise but an experiential one.

I have been surprised over the years to find how many UU's who identify as Humanist and/or agnostic, nonetheless pray.

Many years ago, my mother was suddenly taken ill, rushed into intensive care, and given slim to no chance to live. When I flew out to Oregon, I packed a black dress. Once I was there, my family and I were given wonderful support from local UU's and I received calls and notes from members of my congregation and from other UU friends and colleagues. What struck me at the time was how many of them told me they were praying for us. It particularly struck me back then, because many of the people who claimed to be praying were rather adamantly agnostic. I thought then and I think now that these prayers were not begging a God that most of these people were unsure existed or if they did believe probably didn't believe that praying for my mother would bring her back to health. I think that their prayers were a way of being with us and for us and expressing concern for us. People who could help in concrete ways with notes, presence, food, transportation did so. Some of them were too far away to do anything much and none of us could do much to heal my mother, except to be there with her when she needed us. So, praying was a way to do something when nothing could be done.

There was a man in a Unitarian church in Washington D.C. who never spoke of God, nor probably even thought about God. If asked, he certainly would have said he was an atheist and came to church for intellectual stimulation, but when his daughter died, he prayed aloud at her memorial service. Quite possibly it was the first time he had prayed

in thirty years. Quite likely, he never prayed again, but in that moment his prayer expressed something that he could not express any other way: the sorrow of forever, the depth of loss, the love that transcends death. Even though death separated them, it was in praying that he could express the imperishable beauty of his daughter that had perished, that in some way she was gone forever and yet never gone. In that prayer his love was present with her. Prayers are sometimes the way to be in relationship when because of death or distance there is no other way to be with someone, to express your love and concern.

It may not be crisis or loss that moves us to prayer. Sometimes it is quite the opposite. Maybe the most basic prayer is one of gratitude: it happens on a beautiful autumn day walking amidst large trees shining with bright golds and reds and yellows or on a cool day, walking alone on an ocean beach and being at one with the vast ebb and flow as the waves crash nearby or on an ordinary day, when our child is being her best and sweetest self and runs up to us with a hug and an expression of love. At any of these moments of beauty, even the agnostic can be moved to a silent prayer of gratitude for life and for beauty. Indeed most of us, if we were to make it a habit, could spend some time each day in reciting all the gifts in our lives. The evidence is, that people who spend time in that gratitude each day, face life with a heart that is lifted.

Our busy, stressful, lives can create sense of turmoil and anxiety within us. Many use prayer as a way of centering ourselves. For some it is centering on the holy or on god, but for others it may be a way of finding inner balance. Fears, worries, anxieties, beset us all

from time to time. Those of us who engage in regular disciplines: prayer, yoga, meditation, contemplation, singing, chanting even such things as gardening or running or walking or swimming can be centering. For some the best way of centering prayer is a receptive, listening, emptying process often associated with Eastern religions style of meditation, although common also in Western contemplative traditions. For others it may be repetition of a chant, a poem, a psalm or other prayer one knows by heart, or it may be paying attention to something in an intense, contemplative way such as one's breathing, a flower, a tree. Myself, I am not good at the emptying kind of meditation and I can quiet my monkey mind and go deep much better by reciting a poem or psalm, or concentrating on something beautiful.

Oftentimes prayer is used for self-knowledge or discernment. My first real experience of that was in my twenties. I was going through difficult times created by the dissolution of my first marriage and I started going to Quaker Meetings for a while. In the Quaker tradition there is the idea that sitting in silence so that one's inner voice, the spirit of God within, speaks to them in silence. I found that during that period of my life sitting in silence for an hour every week, helped me work through the grieving and moving forward that was important to my life at that time. My sister, who has been an active Quaker for a long time, tells me of a practice for making big life decisions in which a she will ask others to sit with her in silent worship and as she contemplates what she is working on and perhaps speaks from her spirit and perhaps others respond from theirs to what she has said to help her become clearer. That attitude of going deep into oneself and examining who we are as we try to discern the way ahead is part of what people mean

when they talk about “praying about a decision.” The process is not entirely different whether you think the clarity comes from someplace beyond yourself or deep within.

Prayer, as something we choose to do on a regular basis, is relational. Traditionally, it is a way to be in relationship with the holy or God. This is related to centering, but it goes deeper. It is not merely calming and throwing off noise and stress of life. It is re-establishing a relationship with what is of highest importance. One of the reasons we admire men like MLK and Gandhi, is not only for their accomplishments, but also for their ability to maintain their spiritual equilibrium in the midst of intense pressures and opposition and even hatreds directed at them. My mother told me she was struck by the fact that for both of them the active life and the contemplative life were inseparable. Before taking any action, they prayed. They prayed not for success but for guidance, for the strength to love in the face of violence, for the clarity that comes when attention is focused beyond our own little egos.

Sometimes the relational aspect of prayer is more concrete. UU minister, Harry Scholfield, used a photo of his loved ones in his daily practice, bringing each person he loved to his mind. A recent study showed that couples who spent time every day praying for their partner, had a better relationship than a control group who did not. It has been my experience that this can be a meaningful thing to do even for a loved one who is no longer living. It can keep an aspect of that relationship present—the love, or the wisdom, or something special they brought to my life.

But getting in touch with the holy for some is a journey within and for others a journey beyond. A view I resonate with is that each of us has within us, deep within us in a way we may not be aware of a kind of template of our best and highest way of being in the world. At moments in life we experience a sense of harmony, rightness, a sense that we are doing what we are called out to do, but life and the world drags us away. Prayer is a way to try to re-establish a relationship with that truest being. In traditional religions they call this discerning God's will. The Quakers would call it listening to the holy spirit within.

What often keeps us away from prayer is that we over think it. My mother, like many UU's kept away from it for a long time because she could not articulate what she was doing. Then she read Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, and the title itself spoke to her. He encouraged people to try it. Experiment with it. She did, developing a regular early morning practice of contemplation, reading, and journaling, which nourished her life. She decided that just as she didn't need to understand everything about electricity to use it to turn on the lights, she didn't need to have a detailed theology of prayer in order to have a practice that would give her a better life. I had a member of a church that I was very fond of who had a drinking problem, but when she decided to go to AA found it theologically difficult. I encouraged her not to over think it, and just to try the practices they were teaching. That worked for her and she was thankful for it as her life and her marriage improved.

So prayer can do different things in people's lives. It can help deal with emotion, it can lift up our gratitude, it can center us, it can help us go deeper, it can help us in discernment, it can help us stay in relationship with others, with God or with whatever we call that which is at our center. The great Jewish leader Abraham Heschel said of prayer: *Prayer cannot bring water to a parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.*

As UU's we actually have a long tradition of prayer. Each year we publish several meditation manuals. Many of the ministers, who have written the most inspiring prayers to God, are agnostics. Many theists use unconventional ways of prayer. There are many paths, and there may be a path may be one that would add to your life. So, if you haven't found one, take Gandhi's advice. Experiment and see if there is some kind of use of prayer that would make a difference in your life.