

“Prayer and Poetry”  
Homily by Sharon Wylie  
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA  
August 7, 2011

If you regularly attend Sunday services here, then you may recognize that our order of service is different this morning. You may particularly be aware of this if you came prepared to share a joy or a sorrow; we normally share joys and sorrows with each other right after the chalice lighting. So I want to assure you that there WILL be time to share our joys and sorrows with each other in this service. Don't worry.

But before that, I want us to talk about prayer this morning. I want us to think about what it might mean to us to pray. And I want to invite us to pray together.

Now, because the joys and sorrows are coming later, I know it might be hard to give your full attention to what I'm saying for the next few minutes. If you're like me, like many of us, it's hard to listen when you're waiting for your turn to talk. That's why we do joys and sorrows early in the service, so you can release what's on your mind, so you can then listen. That's also why we begin many of our committee meetings with a time to check-in with one another.

In conversation, what many of us do is, when other people are talking, we are thinking about what WE'RE going to say when it's our turn to talk. So we're only half listening at most. That may be painful to acknowledge, but it's incredibly common. We all do it. A significant portion of the training to be a minister is training to develop listening skills. If you've ever been in any kind of therapy or

counseling with a relationship partner or with other family members, then you know that communication skills are usually one of the first things that get addressed. Some of us need help learning to express ourselves, but ALL of us need help learning to listen.

I say all of this to suggest that prayer is a way for us to release what is on our minds so that we can then open ourselves to better listening, to hearing in a new way, to receiving what may be offered to us.

Prayer, of course, is an ancient practice. And I think in its most rudimentary form, it's a PRIMAL practice. The simplest prayer, after all, is the words "help me." In our times of deepest despair, how many of us have cried from the depths of our grief, cried out to we know not what, pleading "help me. Help me get through this." What our rational minds might reject in the clear light of day, our aching and secret souls yearn for.

We tend to think of prayer as talking to God, ASKING God for gifts or intervention, like throwing pennies into a fountain, wishing on a shooting star. God as Santa Claus, ready to reward us if we have been good. And those of us who have rejected that idea of God as Santa Claus may have rejected the idea of prayer as well. We are responsible for our own selves, our own actions; we don't need to beg for assistance from a supernatural being.

But there is so much more to prayer than this one notion of it. Yes, we can pray in petition, asking for what we need. "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to

know the difference.”

But we can also pray in adoration, an expression of our joy at the beauty in the world around us. “Breath of all life, hear my song of praise for the beloved earth beneath our feet, the precious air that fills our lungs, the shining sun against our skin, and the morning dew that nourishes the flowers and trees.”

We can pray our contrition, our regret, our sorrow that our actions have perhaps fallen short of our ideals. “Spirit of life, I’m sorry my greed has blinded me to the needs of others.”

And we can pray our gratitude for life’s myriad gifts and blessings. “Mother of all, father of all, thank you for this gift of community, this nourishment of spirit.”

To whom do we pray? Does it matter? Perhaps we are simply speaking to ourselves, naming our own hopes and fears, calling forth our own inner strength to act in response. Perhaps we are acknowledging our interdependence, calling out to the interconnected web to hold us closer or more gently. Perhaps we are harnessing forces of co-creation that swirl around us, providing direction to what had previously been chaos.

Whatever our individual theology, prayer is the act of communication between us and whatever it is that we hold sacred. Our prayers may be spoken, sung, chanted, danced, painted, drawn, collaged, drummed, rung, screamed. Our prayers may be offered in silence or aloud, in community or in isolation, in prepared form or in spontaneous declaration. There are as many ways to pray as there are prayers to be offered.

Poet Joy Harjo writes, “To pray you open your whole self / To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon / To one whole voice that is you.” I believe our whole selves CRY to be opened. Our own voices clamor to be heard, our whole selves yearn for expression. So much more than what we allow day in and day out, our little conversations about where to eat and did the laundry get done and who’s going to gas the car. “To pray you open your whole self.”

It’s terrifying. It takes courage to pray. It takes courage to open our whole selves to our one whole voice. What might we say?

We have such a hard time listening. We have such a hard time listening to others. I wonder if we don’t have a hard time listening to ourselves too. I wonder if we aren’t afraid of what our whole selves may demand of us, if given a voice.

Prayer is the act of communication between us and whatever it is that we hold sacred. As an act of communication, it runs both ways. Once we’ve released what’s on our minds, given expression to our one whole voice, THEN we can listen. THEN we can hear. THEN we can receive. With our whole selves opened, what might we hear?

POEMS READ IN THIS SERVICE

“On Prayer” by Czeslaw Milosz

“Nothing So Wise” by Jeanne Lohmann

“Answered Prayers” by Kathleen Norris

“Prayer” by Lisa Colt

“Eagle Poem” by Joy Harjo

BENEDICTION

The poet wrote,

“To pray you open your whole self

To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon

To one whole voice that is you.”

May each of us here have the courage to open our whole selves

To be inspired by the sky,

Cradled by the earth,

And kissed in the tenderest way by the moon.

My the one whole voice that is you find expression and love.

May it be so. Blessed be.