

March 8, 2020

## **The Power of Prayer**

*"I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs."*

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

### **Welcome**

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard. This morning we have come together for a family service on prayer. Today's service was inspired by a request from a member of our congregation. As I was gathering ideas for the service, some common threads emerged.

Prayer is often a private practice and many of us UU's have more questions than answers when we consider the topic and practice of prayer—due to our own previous religious experiences of prayer and praying and our evolving beliefs. Some of the questions that emerged were can I pray if I don't believe in God? How is prayer different than meditation? Is it?

In today's service, as we explore our questions about prayer, we will also practice praying together in a myriad of ways.

### **Community Connection**

As is becoming our practice at family services, we are going to mix things up a bit today, beginning right here with the opening of our service. So, instead of reading our traditional welcome and announcements, I invite you to take part in an ancient Hawaiian forgiveness and reconciliation practice: Ho'oponopono.

At its most basic level, a simple forgiveness prayer is repeated: I am sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you.

This prayer can be repeated for oneself or with someone else in mind, as part of a conscious healing exchange with someone else, or as a mantra practice throughout one's day. The power of this prayer practice comes from the belief that we are all connected and that in forgiving ourselves and/or each other, we are healing our world.

Haleaka Hew Len PhD, a Hawaiian psychologist, and Shamanic Wisdomkeeper used this practice during his work in the mid-late 1980s with the criminally insane. He practiced ho'oponopono as he read over the inmates files and was present with their histories. As he said: "No one wanted the job I did with the criminally insane. They were averaging about one psychologist a month. But I got asked. We had about 25-30 people. Half of them would be in shackles at the ankles or the wrists because they were dangerous. They could either kick you or slam you. Everyone would walk with their back toward the wall so that they wouldn't get struck. They had no family visits. No one could leave the building. A year and a half later there was none of that. There were people going out on bus rides. Nobody in shackles. The level of medication dropped. What did I do? I worked on myself. I took 100% responsibility."

Let's try Ho'oponopono together right now. First, we'll repeat the phrases together to get them in our minds.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.  
I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.  
I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.

Now, I invite you to bring into your mind something that you are sorry for. Harm that you have done to yourself or to another. It could be resentful feelings that you have been experiencing, anger or hurt that you are feeling. With that in mind, now let us repeat the ho'oponopono prayer together again.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.  
I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.  
I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.

Now, if you are comfortable, I invite you to share this prayer with someone else in the congregation, looking into each other's eyes as we repeat the prayer one more time.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.

I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.

Thank you all. I love you.

Is anyone a new or returning visitor? If you would like to introduce yourself to us all, I will come along with a cordless microphone.

A warm welcome to all of you. Thank you for being here today. The help of many goes into the preparation and creation of our services each week. I would like to give special thanks to Arlene Conroy for inspiring this service, to Peter Palches for his probing questions, to Rita Brown for sharing with me and you what inspires her and to Esther Hopkins who will be reading this morning. Thank you. I love you.

**In this spirit of forgiveness, love and gratitude, let us now enter the spirit of worship.**

## **Prelude**

### **Call to Worship : *Praying* by Mary Oliver**

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch  
a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't

a contest but the doorway  
into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

### Opening Hymn: "Down in the River to Pray"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ltxpHDAX8>

### Chalice Lighting: (courtesy of Arlene Conroy)–**READ TOGETHER**

"May I be calm and loving in heart and mind,  
May I be strong and healthy in body and spirit  
May I may be safe and protected from outer and inner harm  
May I accept myself as I am, connect with others, and be content."

### Candles of Joy and Concern

### Moment of Silence

### First Reading: *Do You Pray?* read by Jan Casey.

Jan is a recovered Catholic, hospice nurse, the donut lady,  
bookkeeper, political junkie, and still enjoying the trip.

Do you Pray? I love this interpretation of prayer. What is prayer? Prayer doesn't just happen when we kneel or put our hands together and focus and expect things from God. Thinking positive and wishing good for others is a prayer. When you hug a friend. That's a prayer. When you cook something to nourish family and friends. That's a prayer. When we send off our near and dear ones and say, 'drive safely' or 'be safe'. That's a prayer. When you are helping someone in need by giving your time and energy. You are praying. When you forgive someone by your heart. \*That is prayer. Prayer is a vibration. A feeling. A thought. Prayer is the voice of love, friendship, genuine relationships. Prayer is an expression of your silent being.

## Food Offertory

Today we are trying on a new practice that my family experienced when we were in Florida last year on vacation. Once a month, the congregation in St. Augustine has a food offertory. Members bring non-perishable foods to church and the children collect them during the service. I now invite our youth to collect the food and bring it to the front of the chapel. While the food is being collected, I'd like to share a prayer that our family learned when our boys attended Plum Hill Preschool. It was a prayer sung at snack and mealtimes. I'll sing it once through (if you are familiar with it, please join right in. If not, please join us as we sing it the 2nd time through.

### Food Offertory Prayer

(courtesy of Plum Hill Preschool)

The silver rain, the golden sun  
In fields of scarlet poppies run  
And all the ripples of the wheat  
Are in the bread that we do eat  
So when we sit at every meal  
We sing this grace and always feel  
That we are eating rain and sun  
In fields of scarlet poppies run.  
Blessings on our offertory.

### Second Reading: *I Happened to Be Standing* by Mary Oliver

Will be read by Esther A. H. Hopkins. Esther, a woman of amazing accomplishment, embraced by love and dedicated to the advancement of all of humanity is a historical source of knowledge in our midst.

I don't know where prayers go,

or what they do.  
Do cats pray, while they sleep  
half-asleep in the sun?  
Does the opossum pray as it  
crosses the street?  
The sunflowers? The old black oak  
growing older every year?  
I know I can walk through the world,  
along the shore or under the trees,  
with my mind filled with things  
of little importance, in full  
self-attendance. A condition I can't really  
call being alive.  
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,  
or does it matter?  
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their way.  
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe not.  
While I was thinking this I happened to be standing  
just outside my door, with my notebook open,  
which is the way I begin every morning.  
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.  
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,  
I don't know why. And yet, why not.  
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever you believe  
or whatever you don't. That's your business.  
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be  
if it isn't a prayer?  
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

**Hymn #401: Kum ba Ya**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYJMtn6IJeE>

**Third Reading: Jan Casey**

Excerpts from Tosha Silver's book "Outrageous Openness"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv03TwMLvwk>

## Offertory

We Give

By [Kristin Collins](#)

We give to remind ourselves how many gifts we have to offer.

We give to remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

We give because we believe in music and sacred space.

We give with the faith that, together, we have enough.

## Morning Message: "A Prayer Journey" Jennifer Knight

What does prayer mean to you? Do you pray? How do you pray? What does prayer look like? Sound like? Feel like to you? Is there a prayer that you pray regularly? Or one that you remember from your childhood?

My first memories of prayer are the ones that my family said at mealtimes, hands clasped around the table: "Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from the bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen."

Then there were other mealtime graces that I learned in my Brownie Troop –like the Johnny Appleseed song: "The Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need the sun and the rain and the apple seed. The Lord is good to me."

I remember watching Little House on the Prairie and observing how Mary and Laura and Carrie said prayers every evening before bedtime, but although my family faithfully went to mass every Sunday, we weren't a get down on our knees and pray sort of people. I remember trying it out a few times on my own, specifically praying a Christmas Eve prayer one year for world peace—but it felt awkward—as if I were playing some sort of a role.

I learned prayers in Sunday school: the Our Father and the Hail Mary and there were prayers that I recited from memory with the priest every Sunday (unbeknownst to him). With the advent of my First Confession and First Communion, I learned to say the rosary. So, while I knew the prayers and said them, I wouldn't say that the practice of prayer held any power for me, personally. My praying was disingenuous—something that I did when I was supposed to, but without any sort of higher intention or inner connection. It was during high school, that my consciousness grew. My emerging awareness didn't enhance my prayer life; however, it did just the opposite. I began to question the validity of prayer, itself. During the congregational prayer of the Nicene Creed, I began to wonder if anyone was actually aware of what they were claiming to believe. Did they know what they were saying? I knew that I didn't actually believe half of what we were praying together. As a senior in high school, one of my assignments for English class was to learn the Our Father in Old English. I began to recite it during mass that way under my breath—making use of communal prayer time to practice for an upcoming quiz rather than taking part unconsciously in some prayer that I didn't believe in. "Father Ure Thu The Arte en Heufonum. . . .

As a freshman in college I dated a Jewish man and began to learn and embrace the prayers and rituals of Shabbat. Intimate blessings of family and food sung over candlelight captured more of my heart. As the relationship ended, however, so did my shabbat prayers.

As a young adult, I shied away from the idea of God. I couldn't even say the word god without feeling uncomfortable. Then, I found fellowship in the rooms of Al-Anon along with the understanding that I didn't have to embrace the God of my childhood, but could find a higher power within the wisdom of the group or nature or the universe. In fact, if the word God made me feel uncomfortable, I could always simply substitute the word Love in its place. A new prayer entered my life. The Serenity Prayer saved me on more than one occasion. As my mind and a situation with my alcoholic loved one spiraled out of control, I began to pray: "God 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.” I would pray these lines over and over and without fail, the clouds would part, a calm would come over me and what was moments before a crisis was now, somehow manageable.

As I continued along my spiritual path, I discovered meditation and then singing mantra meditation. For a while, I used a mala—prayer beads—to enhance my practice. These prayers changed my life. One that I use consistently to this day is Aad Guray Nameh a very powerful mantra in Gurmukhi used for protection, to gain clarity, and to receive guidance from one’s highest Self. I first learned it during a 21 day meditation challenge with Deva Primal and Miten. They mentioned that it was great to use in traffic. Since then, I have used it before embarking on any travel. Chanting it eases any anxiety I feel and does, indeed pave the way for a smooth trip.

*Aad Guray Nameh  
Jugaad Guray Nameh  
Sat Guray Nameh  
Siri Guru Dayvay Nameh*

While I have learned the English translation of the Gurmukhi, the prayer itself is powerful even when I don’t hold its meaning in my consciousness.

The similarities between praying the rosary and using mala beads are not lost on me. While I could not connect with the familiar prayers of my Catholic upbringing, somehow, I found a more genuine place within me as the shapes and sounds of unfamiliar Hindi and Gurmukhi words became personal touchstones. I don’t know exactly when it happened, and if you had asked me about my prayer life up until recently, I might have answered you from an uncertain, slightly uncomfortable place. But somehow in the process of preparing for this service, I have come to realize, that I have a prayer life. I have become a person who prays—not because I

am supposed to, and not every day at a certain hour—although more and more I am realizing that a dedicated practice such as this would enhance my life greatly. I pray not because I am supposed to, but because I find solace, strength and hope in prayer.

Now that I am more open to prayer, I find it everywhere.

In the autumn, lying beneath the trees. Feeling their roots embrace me as I look upward and consider the surrounding beauty of the dying leaves.

Each time I pick up my pencil and paintbrush and paint possibility, I am praying.

And parenting is a prayer form. As Alex learned to brave the ocean waves, I maintained both a focused intent to keep him safe and an open release, letting him experience increased freedom and confidence. We met each wave with a prayer that calmed our hearts and helped him to stay afloat: *Gentle Giant. Buoy. Gentle Giant. Buoy. Gentle Giant. Buoy.*

On my way home from vacation yesterday, I watched “Won’t You Be My Neighbor”. In one scene, Fred Rogers matter of factly acknowledges death as the elephant in the room. Then he said something that really caught my attention: “If something is mentionable, it is manageable.”

What if we thought about prayer from this perspective? For those of us who don’t believe in God as an entity and who have prayer baggage from our religious upbringings, Mr. Roger’s words can be used to frame prayer in a way that feels less charged. If something is mentionable, it is manageable. What if we viewed prayer as the practice of mentioning something? And if the simple act of mentioning it—alone or aloud—made it manageable. Once something feels manageable, my outlook on life changes. I feel inspired, hopeful. I experience forgiveness, gratitude, and love. This is the potential that prayer offers me, when I choose to practice praying. What does prayer mean to you?

## **Congregational Share: Reflections on Prayer**

While you are taking a moment to consider your own relationship with prayer, I will be coming around with a basket of quotes and conversations starters about prayer.

- Raise your hand if you would like to share your quote with the congregation.
- Please take a moment to share your thoughts with a person(s) near you.
- Would anyone like to share their ideas/thoughts with the larger congregation?

I encourage you to continue these conversations after the service has finished. There will be a space set up in the library area of the chancel for those who would like a more quiet spot.

## **Closing Hymn: #1009 "Meditation on Breathing"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z51yWRKIGnO>

## **Extinguishing the Chalice**

Carry the Flame

By [Brian Kiely](#)

The Chalice is now extinguished,  
but its light lives on in the minds and hearts and souls of each one  
of you.

Carry that flame with you as you leave this place and share it

With those you know

With those you love

and most especially, with those you have yet to meet.

## **Benediction**

All before me peaceful

All behind me peaceful

Up above me peaceful  
Underneath me peaceful  
All around me peaceful  
All around me peaceful

**Postlude: "Pray" by MC Hammer**

**[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJT5\\_Y\\_H4\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJT5_Y_H4_E)**

If you would like to continue your discussion of prayer after the service, we will have a quiet space set up in the library area until 1:00 pm.