

For Praying Out Loud
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There is a wonderful line in the introduction of Mary Livermore's autobiography. She wrote, "What can I tell you today that will be useful to you? It has been suggested that I speak of my own life. I hesitated only enough to satisfy modesty."

When the Worship Committee asked me to talk about my book, *For Praying Out Loud*, I, too, hesitated – only enough to satisfy modesty. I trust that what I tell you will be useful. I will be sharing with you some of the prayers that I wrote and collected for the book. I realize this may create a dilemma for you. I will be sharing them in an expository way – as an example of creating inclusive prayers – but, they are prayers, after all. I invite you to hear them in the way that makes you most comfortable: – either attentively as literature or in a prayerful manner.

How does a Unitarian Universalist minister come to write a book about prayer? At one time, I, too, might have asked that question. We have gotten the reputation of being a stiff-necked people; people who are not always comfortable bowing our heads, speaking to the unseen about the unknown. But after working with inter-faith groups for a number of years, I came to realize how important prayer is to many people – especially in a public setting – and how difficult it is for some people to step outside their own traditions. This is often what we must do in public settings: step outside our own traditions to hear prayers in the way others hear them, and to understand the affect our words and theirs have on other people.

This was the arena of my work.

Praying within a faith community provides familiarity and comfort to those inside the community, as well as connection to others of the same faith. Faith-specific prayers gather worship participants into a common mental and spiritual space. They uphold the tenets of the faith and offer support and inspiration to the faithful. Public prayers, by contrast, are often shared among participants of diverse beliefs. They require a different kind of spiritual language, one that will invoke a sense of the holy, as well as offer a common sense of belonging to everyone present, no matter what their beliefs.

I came to the conclusion that we need a new literature for praying out loud; for public prayer. This was my inspiration and my goal for writing the book *For Praying Out Loud*. I hope my effort is just a beginning.

I'd like to share some of my experiences along the way.

I often participate in the Martin Luther King Day event here in Cincinnati. One particular service stands out in my mind as a horrible example of what can happen with public prayer. There had been a wonderful guest speaker giving the sermon, and a local celebrity to emcee the liturgy. There were readings from young people who had won the essay contest on the importance of inter-racial harmony. And this year there were a number of speakers bringing greetings from various community churches and temples. There was an eloquent woman from the Jewish community who spoke of King's universal inspiration.

There was an impressive man who spoke for the Hindu community, an enthusiastic teenager from the local Islamic temple and a soothing Buddhist priest from a nearby town. Each of them praised the work of Dr. King and of the many faith communities that keep his work alive.

As the long celebration came to an close, I watched the four participants from non-Christian faiths squirm in discomfort and, quite likely, in anger, as the Christian minister who gave the closing prayer intoned over and over again, "We all know that the *only* way to God is through Jesus Christ."

A real opportunity for public healing and interfaith dialog was lost that day, because this minister fell back on the comforting words of his own faith and failed to give thought to how they might be received by others.

The problem with tradition, as I wrote in the book—especially religious tradition—is that it gets to be a habit. This might be good in our own homes and houses of worship, where ritual is comforting, but it certainly can dull participatory creativity. If we are to be inclusive, and thoughtful, when we pray out loud, we need to create *new* traditions. We need to remember that our traditional prayers were once new. The decalogue was once heard for the first time, leaving listeners in awe and filled with inspiration. Now, known as *The Ten Commandments* it is a subject for court cases. The Psalms were once new, written by poets and lovers. We need to learn to think like poets and lovers about the things for which we pray in public.

This is a prayer that I wrote for my graduation from seminary. I didn't yet have a sense that a new body of literature was needed, but I had an intuitive sense of the possibilities in public prayer. I called it *A Prayer of Petition, When You Don't Know What You Want Or Need*. Let us pray:

Spirit of Ages, Light of Life,

What can we tell that is not already known?

What can we ask for that will not come without the asking?

And, still we speak—to tell, to ask, to pray.

We would tell of our triumphs, in order to drown out the shout of our defeats;

we would tell of our love, in order to still the fear that we are unloved;

and we would tell of our lives, as if to live forever.

We would ask for wisdom, and will settle for the courage to do what we must;

we would ask for joy, and will be grateful for the ability to cry;

and we would ask for one another's continued presence, and will be content with memories and dreams.

Thus we tell; and thus we ask; and thus we pray,

giving thanks for what has been, accepting what is, and yearning with hope and determination for what will be. Amen

When we pray in public, we need to ask ourselves a number of questions: How do we address the Holy; by what names? How do we gather disparate people together? How

do we invite them, inspire them, to act in community, in spite of their personal faiths, as well as because of them. These are questions I addressed in *For Praying Out Loud*.

I am very impressed with my colleague, the Rev. Marge Keip, now an Accredited Interim Minister. She has a knack for this gathering of faiths. At a peace rally, some years ago, this is how she prayed.

*There are one hundred and fifty of us here today.
One hundred and fifty uniquely personal faiths.
One hundred and fifty different understandings of God.
In this way we are not unlike the world—
 a world in which we invest our love and hope.
So let us invoke love and hope—attributes of God—
 and of ourselves, in reverence to that which is worthy.
Let us spend one whole and holy minute together in silent prayer,
 in which we each, true to our own faith,
 call forth within ourselves our hope and love.
[There was this sixty second pause, and then she continued.]
Holding this reality close, may we become verbs.
 May we hope.
 May we love.
 May we do peace, and make it real—
 make it our destiny and make it now. Amen*

Marge accomplished a lot in that prayer. She acknowledges there are differences. She gives each person space for a personal prayer, but she holds them in this community of one hundred fifty people—holds them and challenges them in the name of their own experience of the Holy. Can you begin to see the possibilities? Can you see any pitfalls? They are there as well.

Among Unitarian Universalists there has been a resurgence in the past fifteen or so years of goddess religions and earth-centered religions. One of my favorite stories is of a pagan family that prayed together at home as well as offered prayers at church. I talked to the eight-year-old daughter one day about her favorite part of this family faith tradition. She said, "It's the end of the prayers, when we say 'Blessed be!' I imagine this bee buzzing up to the Goddess to deliver our prayer, and it makes me feel good."

Blessed be was used for a while in some UU churches as a way of avoiding *Amen*. There is a great deal of spiritual baggage retained from that cryptic word, *amen*, by those who have been raised in a church they have subsequently abandoned. *Blessed be* seemed innocently benign. But it isn't. It makes people who eschew the Goddess tradition as agitated as *in Jesus' name we pray* makes non-Christians. We need to ask ourselves not only how we address the Holy, but how we say good-bye when we pray.

How do we go about creating careful prayers? In a unique service to honor their common goals, the Muslim and Unitarian Universalist communities of Greater Dayton, Ohio, created, together, this Litany of Faith and Hope. It was hammered out by representatives of both faith traditions before it was presented to the larger community to speak. This is an example of the essence of interfaith thoughtfulness. This is an inclusive use of prayer language.

We are a garden:

A community of many different varieties growing together.

We need water, sun and soil.

We have one source.

We live alongside one another, respecting one another, maintaining our identities, like an iris and a carnation.

We come together to discover we have a common language—our children, our families.

We seek to know one another.

We need to build on these experiences of community; to be full of care for people of all faiths.

We believe in our children being friend with other children who may not look like them, who may hold different beliefs, who have different backgrounds.

We believe we share a common origin as human being; we are children of the same creator.

We believe in the dignity and worth of all human being.

We know the world is big enough for all of us.

It is so exciting to be involved in interfaith worship when it is truly that. Four or five years ago, the Jewish Community contributed a garden to Cincinnati, a garden dedicated to peace and located in the zoo. I was asked by Rabbi Gary Zola, who was in charge of the celebration, to participate in the dedication of this garden, along with a black Baptist Minister. Rabbi Zola thinks very inclusively. He wanted the garden blessed by the whole community, and the three of us, in his thinking, would represent that community. He asked that we not give a traditional prayer out of our own faith, but to choose a reading or a poem, that expressed our faith's thoughts on peace and harmony.

None of us found a reading that satisfied us. We brought books of poetry and inspirational writing, but none of said what we wanted to say. I offered to try to write a poem that included all our intentions – a poem we could read responsively. It turned out to be a prayer. It was received most warmly at the celebration. I have asked two people to read it with me so that you can hear the careful blending of voices and faiths. This is what we shared:

Peace is more than the absence of worry.

It is the creation of safe havens for all;

It is the building of security for everyone;

It is the forgiveness of self, as well as one who would harm you.

Let us seek contentment; let us learn peace.

Peace is more than the absence of discordance.

It is the intent listening to diverse points of view;

It is the intentional speaking of all voices, one at a time;

It is the tension within silence that welcomes all thoughts.

Let us seek harmony; let us learn peace.

Peace is more than the absence of tension.

It is studying the hard lesson of letting go;

It is breathing through pain into tranquility;

It is forming friendship out of enmity.

Let us seek serenity; let us learn peace.

Peace is much more than the absence of war.

It is observing the promised truce when anger would say no;

It is finding the just compromise when the ego would say my way;

It is striving for reconciliation when the heart would say revenge.

Let us seek amity for all the earth; let us learn peace.

My sister Karen married a Seventh Day Adventist. Her husband, Frank, was very dedicated to his faith. When we were both younger, Frank and I used to argue religion. We were each pretty intolerant of the other in matters of religion. We participated in verbal body slams and counted up the inconsistencies we heard in the other's arguments.

Fortunately, we have mellowed over the years. When I went to seminary, I began to understand the importance of meeting one another, of building bridges over the chasms of our faith stances, rather than knocking them down. I asked Frank if I could attend church with him one weekend when I was visiting.

Frank was pleased. He thought if I could see the light, hear the truth, I would be converted. Don't we all have that feeling somehow? I did, I must admit, attend that service with an attitude that my way was superior; that I would be viewing this worship as an anthropologist from a more civilized culture.

What happened was quite different from what I expected. I was struck, not by how differently they prayed—although they did—but by how comforting the words they used in their prayers were to them; and how sustaining. I lost interest in arguing with Frank—or with anyone outside my own faith. I wanted, instead, to find a common language that would comfort and sustain us all. I have wanted, since that chance epiphany more than twenty years ago, to help create a new language of prayer that would be inspirational to us all. I have made with this book a small and tentative beginning on a path to inclusive prayer. I can only hope that others will join me; will reach out to friends and strangers when they come to pray in public; will listen and really hear. I hope that Unitarian Universalists can get over their own religious stumbling blocks to help smooth the way to better religious tolerance and understanding. Let us pray.

The ringing of a bell calls us to worship.

The pounding of a drum calls us to war.

The popping of a cork calls us to celebration.

What is sounding that calls us to hear one another?

Listen . . . Listen carefully . . .

It is here, in the silence . . . Listen deeply . . .

The beating of our own hearts calls us to ourselves;

calls us to be our true selves;

calls us to be our best selves;

calls us to be what we might become.

Listen . . . There is another sound . . .

The breath of our neighbor calls us outside ourselves;

calls us to be companions;

calls us to be allies;

calls us to be partners.

Listen . . . we must heed the call of our own hearts

where love and truth, caring and justice, are born.

Listen . . . we must heed the call of others,

to gather together for some great purpose,

where passion and fidelity, compassion and equity, are nourished.

The hammering silence calls us together;

that we may do the work we cannot do alone.

Let us heed the calls that come in the silence,

that we may be well,

and do good,

in this world together.

Amen