

Quest

To Whom it May Concern: A Sermon on Prayer



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The very first prayer I ever learned as a child was a bedtime prayer, taught to me by my grandmother. It went like this: *"God bless me and keep me a good boy, and spare me for a good end. Amen."*

Granny, an old-country Irish widow who lived with us when I was growing up, was a very devout Catholic woman, and although she was never showy about it, she was a world-class champion prayer. Prayer was my grandmother's instinctive response to all of life's primary situations. She prayed when she was happy, she prayed when she was sad, she prayed when she was frightened or worried or puzzled or grateful or hopeful. She would utter a quick grace before every meal. And she had a habit of whispering a silent prayer whenever she heard a siren go by. When I asked why she did that, thinking it must just be some little superstition of hers, she said, "No, not at all. A siren always means that some poor soul is in some kind of crisis; a little prayer for them can't hurt." Indeed, I am sure that a prayer from my grandmother, for any poor soul, carried a lot of weight.

My grandmother's understanding of prayer was very clear and traditionally Catholic and Christian in concept. To her, prayer was a spoken or silent reverent communication from a person to a personal God. According to my grandmother's faith, the relationship of God to human was a parental relationship of Father to child, and one spoke to God as to a father, literally.

One communicated one's fears, concerns, gratitudes, and hopes. And God, in return, like a wise and loving father, would listen to our prayers, and provide for us as only He in His Divine wisdom knew best. Sometimes prayers would seem to be answered—the wishes expressed in the prayers would seem to be granted. Sometimes, however, our wishes were not to be granted. This, we were to assume, was because God had, well, other plans for us.

My colleague Thomas Schade at our church in Worcester, MA, wrote:

Our faith advances not by paying attention to all that we doubt, but by paying attention to what makes us sigh, what makes us groan, what makes us tear up, what makes us shudder, what makes us gasp, what startles us and surprises us. What makes us ache. Where once we cherished our doubts, now we need to name our longings.

To name our longings. Prayer is *naming* our loves, *healing* our hurts, *confiding* our fears. My late colleague Rudy Nemser once wrote that all prayer can be summarized in four simple words: *Thanks! Oops! Gimme! and Wow!*

Church is where we bring the sometimes inarticulate prayers and the sometimes silent alleluias of our lives. It is where we bring the imperfect, unfinished stuff of our lives to be blessed, strengthened, fortified, and transformed. *Thanks! Oops! Gimme! and Wow!*

I am absolutely certain that my grandmother's rockbound faith never wavered one iota on the outcome of any prayer she ever offered. She had a difficult life, with

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“Prayer is not asking.
It is a longing of the
soul.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT PRAYER

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many setbacks, many hardships, many sorrows and disappointments. But she always prayed her next prayer with the same sincerity, and the same complete confidence that she had God's personal ear.

Having grown up with my grandmother's example and in my grandmother's church, I never questioned much her teaching about prayer until the time came when I first doubted the existence of a personal God, Father or Mother. If one's definition of prayer is limited to the concept of a personal conversation, however reverent and sincere, between two distinct beings, then prayer made little sense once God was de-personalized. Or so I reasoned at the time.

The problem with such an analysis is that it concentrates on criticizing the form of prayer over the substance. What I should have heard, in my grandmother's myriad prayers, was her exquisite ability to articulate through prayer her feelings of joy, gratitude, hope, love, regret, fear, and praise that sprang forth from her poetic soul.

But because the form of her expressions usually began with words like, "Our Father" or "Dear Lord" or "Dear God," as a young man I arrogantly disregarded the deep and moving content of those prayers as meaningless or misdirected or purposeless. Of course, that kind of critique is the classic case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. It is the most shallow and simplistic of theological analyses. It hears the *words* of prayer, but it fails utterly to hear the *music* of prayer. It condemns the *form* of faith without honoring the *witness* of faith.

What my grandmother really understood, and what she was never afraid to demonstrate to us, was that there are times when a human soul cries out in mourning, and there are times when a human soul sings forth in gratitude for the sheer joy of life. (*i thank You God for most this amazing/ day, for: the leaping greenly spirits of trees/ and a*

blue true dream of sky; and for everything/ which is natural which is infinite which is yes)

There are moments in every life of sheer terror, and there are confessional moments, too, of regret and inadequacy and alienation and loneliness, and the awareness that we have hurt others or "made choices of lesser goods," in Von Ogden Vogt's memorable phrase.

There are moments when the beauty of the earth is almost overwhelming to us. Recall Edna St. Vincent Millay's great

**That, properly understood,
is what prayer is about:
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human predicament."**

line, "Lord, I fear Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year...prithce, let not one leaf fall." And there are also moments when we know the frustration and the desperation of tragedy, when we would invoke every power in the universe to change the course of some disastrous event. (*Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*)

Whether those elemental human feelings and expressions are sent forth in the form of personal address to a godly being, or whether they are held in a more inward acknowledgement, as in meditation, the substance and the necessity of prayer in the religious life remain the same. A religious life that deals with the fullness of existence, from joy through bitterness, from celebration through grief, must give voice to these varied scenes of the human journey.

That, properly understood, is what prayer is about: "giving voice to the human predicament." Reinhold Niebuhr's original line about prayer has been reworked any number of times by different theologians, but it bears repeating here:

Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people, and people

change things...Prayer is not hearing voices, prayer is acquiring a voice.

One of the most powerful experiences I ever had with prayer as "an acquired voice" happened when I was still a student minister working as a chaplain in a hospital in Chicago. Late one night I was called to the bedside of an elderly patient, a Black Baptist woman, who had asked to see the chaplain on the evening prior to her surgery. I was still very much a wet-behind-the-ears minister-in-formation at the time, not at all sure of my calling, and not at all sure what my own personal theology was.

I introduced myself as the chaplain, and in my best Rogerian listening style, tried to get the woman to talk to me about what was on her mind. Nothing worked. I could see she was nervous and upset, but I couldn't seem to get her talking. Finally, I asked her if there was anything at all I could do for her. She looked at me straight on and said, "Would you say a prayer for me right now?"

And I was stuck. I knew, of course, that theologically the woman and I were light years apart, and that any prayer I might be able to stutter forth from my young agnostic Unitarian heart of that moment was not likely to offer much comfort to her old Baptist soul. You see, it had been a long time since I had talked to her God. I did not wish to be disrespectful to her need at that moment, but neither did I want to be inauthentic with my own beliefs.

In a moment of—what? inspiration? desperation?—I said, "Tell you what, let's you and me hold hands, and you say the words of the prayer." So we did. And talk about an "acquired voice"! Off she went.

Lord, I know you hear my prayer now, because I have your man the Reverend here with me, and I know you won't ever ignore his prayer! Here's all I'm asking of you, God: I'm frightened, Lord. I'm really scared of this surgery tomorrow. I'm only asking you for courage,

God. I can take whatever your will is for me, God. I'm just asking you to make me unafraid, so I can do this with dignity. I'm asking you in Jesus' name. Thank you. Amen.

And I tell you true, I have never said Amen myself with more sincerity than I did at the end of that woman's prayer. "Thank you, Reverend," she said with tears coming down her cheeks. "I needed that prayer," she said. So did I, I told her. So did I.

She has been with me through a lot of years of ministry, that old woman of faith. She felt unable to tell any other human being about the deepest fear in her heart, but prayer gave her an acquired voice, a self-permission, to articulate her greatest need on that frightening night. And just incidentally, in the process she taught a very unsure ministry student a profoundly humbling lesson, not only about the power of prayer, but also about the trust that his office carries for many people.

In any Unitarian Universalist congregation, with our diverse theological understandings and approaches, prayer can be a somewhat tricky business. Most of the Unitarian Universalist ministers I know spend more time than you might ever assume composing good inclusive-type prayers for hyper-fussy congregations. It isn't easy. Of course, the Atheists and capital "H" Humanists in the crowd are always sorely challenged to tolerate even the notion of prayer, let alone the word itself. The word "meditation" is a much more comfortable notion for many UUs to digest than the word "prayer."

Meanwhile, capital "T" Theists in a UU congregation squirm just as much at the various contortions of the language employed in an effort to avoid mention of the word "God" in many UU prayers. For example, I confess I get pretty fidgety with prayers that begin with "*Oh, Great Essence of Life.*" To me that sounds like a perfume ad. And in honesty, I must tell you I am no more comfortable address-

ing deity as "Mother" or "Goddess" than I am with "Father" or "Lord." But still, I would rather look for the intention beneath the words than feel there is only one "right way" to pray.

After many years of wrestling with the notion of prayer, I find myself at this point in my life more appreciative of its value and potential power, respectful of the faith which calls it forth, increasingly tolerant of the limits of language which make almost any prayer seem awkward or inadequate.

I like the fact that our UU diversity of beliefs makes us choose our words of prayer carefully. In the Jewish tradition, the name of Yahweh is not spoken aloud, even in prayer. I think there's a certain religious wisdom in that. Even in an acquired voice there is sometimes that which cannot be given a name.

Cultural differences are often profoundly obvious in prayer forms, of course. I had a friend from the Isle of Man whose family owned the same farmland for 800 years. He remembers his father teaching him as a boy that before the ground is to be plowed, a prayer is always offered to the earth, asking forgiveness for the intrusion of the plow and for a warm reception of the seed. Native American religions typically have similar reverence for (and comparable dialogue with) the natural world.

Some prayers address a god, some speak to the earth or the universe, some invoke a simple blessing, some are phrased in masculine imagery and some in feminine, and some in impersonal images. Some prayers come from a Western religious understanding, some come from other cultures.

Some prayers, of course, are not even meant to be spoken aloud. In Japan, in Shinto tradition, prayers and blessings are sometimes calligraphed on paper streamers, which are tied to branches and bushes. As the streamers wave in the wind, the blessing is said then to fly out over the world.

In Tibetan custom, prayers are carved into wooden wheels which are spun like a top, sending the prayers up to the sky. The wheels are sometimes positioned in a stream so that the water current spins the prayers even without human assistance.

One of the Five Pillars of Islamic practice is the requirement of prayer five times every day, facing Mecca. In medieval Catholicism, monastic orders who took vows of total silence endowed the simplest work of their hands with the status of prayer. The motto of the Cistercian monks was, *Laborare Est Orare—to work is to pray*. Their entire lives were offered as a single unending prayer to their God.

And in the Hebrew Scriptures, as in the story of Cain and Abel, reference is made to the smoke of sacrificial fires rising up to God as a prayer. The idea continues in the imagery of incense used in some church rituals to this day.

But whether we see ourselves in relationship with a personal god, or whether prayer for us is the pouring out of an acquired voice, I would suggest to you that prayer has a powerful and potentially significant place in the life of religious liberals. It may indeed be something quite different for us than what we learned from our parents or grandparents. Or it may be exactly what we learned from them in essence, only given our own form, and our own voice. Human experience hasn't changed so very greatly, not on the deepest levels—and neither has our human need to give voice to our living.

There's an old joke that we Unitarian Universalists begin all our prayers with the phrase, "*To Whom It May Concern.*" I realize that is meant to be a slap at our open theology, but, in truth, that feels to me like a very honest salutation for a prayer. I respectfully suggest that "*Whomever It Does Concern*" will appreciate our hesitation, and She might even appreciate our humility!

Somebody say *Amen!* ■

God or the Horse?

BY CHRISTINE ROBINSON, SENIOR MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO



An immigrant from Russia was explaining to his children and grandchildren about life in the Old Country, and told a story about his father. One

winter's day, his father was away from home with his horse and sleigh, and a terrible blizzard began. Soon, the man could no longer see through the storm. He was lost and afraid and cold.

The wolves howled. It looked like he might not make it back to his family. He thought he might die.

The man slackened his hold on the reins, letting the horse find the way while he prayed. The horse took off. The wolves seemed very close. On went the horse. Eventually, the man

realized that the looming shapes ahead were his house and barn. He leaped out of the sleigh, led the horse into the barn, ran into his own house and fell to his knees in thanksgiving to God for his deliverance.

As his descendants breathed a sigh of relief at the story's happy ending from the warmth and comfort of their New World home, the youngest child whispered to her cousin: "He should have thanked the horse."

Here's what I have come to believe about prayer. In the end, there is only a shade of difference between thanking God and thanking the horse. Both are good, both are prayer. You could say that one acknowledges a mystery and another does not, but what greater mystery is there, after all, than the mystery of horsey knowledge of the invisible world, which brings a man safely home to his family?

And if it was the peasant's ability to pray which allowed him to drop the reins and trust that mystery, who is to

say whether the effect of prayer came before the storm (allowing him to trust his horse) or during it (guiding the horse or affecting the storm, or even spurring the horse on with the voices of wolves)? For it is surely likely that if the man had tried to blunder through the storm, tight-reined, on his own wits, he would have confused his horse and perhaps, in his anxiety, missed the shadow that was his home and his barn. He would thereby have frozen in the pastures beyond.

I see prayer as a slackening of the reins when all else is bound to fail—the willingness to give ourselves up to the healing powers and creative possibilities of a porous universe in which horses and still small voices can speak to us, soothe us, lead us, teach us, sometimes even save us. It's not an obvious truth; it's quite counterintuitive, after all. And so we must pay attention and remember and be thankful, and tell the stories. All of that, be it by word or song or a sigh too deep for words, is prayer. ■

The Versatility and Power of Prayer (Excerpt)

BY MARISOL CABALLERO, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTERIAL CANDIDATE

I am still asking myself the question: Do I pray? I believe that the answer is, "I am learning how."

I laughed when a talk show host recently asked a little girl performing back flips on her show, "How did you ever learn to do all of that?!" and the girl responded, out of breath, "Practice." The same goes for prayer. You may have heard prayer referred to as a "spiritual discipline" or a "spiritual practice." I am learning that this is exactly what it is. Prayer takes both regular practice and discipline. Prayer is *intentional* spiritual reflection.

Whether planned or spontaneous, communal or solitary, prayer always has a beginning and an end and a purpose. To many of us, it does not come naturally. I used to not pray because I became hung up on whether or not someone or something was receiving my prayer and would respond. Then, I came to understand that this concern is unnecessary, that the prayer *itself* was the response. Each form of prayer is reciprocal. Each is about giving and about receiving.

In prayers of petition, we offer our hopes and receive hope in return. In prayers of contemplation, we give away our haughtiness and receive love and connection. In prayers of wonder and awe, we give our praise and receive beauty. In prayers of prophetic witness, we give our hearts and receive justice and solidarity. And, in prayers of thanksgiving, we give our gratitude and receive blessings.

And so, my prayer today is simply that we continue to find ourselves engaged in prayer and that, in prayer, we continue to find ourselves, each other, our world, and our Sacred Truth. ■



Prayer

BY RANDY MILLER, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN INDIANA

Prayer is a truly powerful thing, and represents our spiritual connection with the Creator. Prayer is our time to give thanks for the blessings we have been given and to ask for help for those in need. Prayer is one of the most important aspects of our lives, and, unfortunately, it is one aspect we often neglect.

I am *Tsalagi*, or, as our European brothers named us, "Cherokee." When we pray, we stand looking to the East, the place where all life begins. We do not bow our heads, but look up to *Galan lati*, the Sky World, and send our prayers to *Wankan Tanka*, the Great Mystery. With our arms outstretched, reaching for the Creator, we ask for good health and good help for *Ahwensa Uhili*, All Our Relations. When finished, we bend and touch our Mother Earth and give thanks to her for all she has provided.

When *Tsalagi* come together in prayer, it is a powerful thing. When we pray together we form the Sacred Circle or



Hoop. We enter the Circle in a sunwise direction to the beat of the Sacred Drum, which represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth and our people. The Bundle Keeper burns tobacco, sweetgrass and sage as an offering to the Creator, and sends prayers inviting good spirits to come into our Circle.

Next, we smudge. The Bundle Keeper, in a sunwise direction, goes to each person with the burning herbs. We offer prayers and pull the smoke to us: over our heads, to our chest/heart and down to our feet. As we do this, the smoke purifies our bodies and we offer our prayers to *Wankan Tanka*. Once everyone in the Circle has smudged, prayer is again offered to the Creator. Once this Sacred Circle/Hoop is formed, it cannot be broken by anyone until the conclusion of the prayers and the closing of the Circle.

When the Circle is closed, we offer a thank you song to the Creator, our Grandfather. The first to have entered the Circle then leaves the Circle—again, in a sunwise direction, stopping to greet and embrace every person in the Circle. Each member follows the first person's lead, thus making sure we have all greeted and embraced everybody, strengthening our bond and our Circle.

This is a very brief description of how the *Tsalagi* pray, both alone and in groups. To go into the full meaning behind all that is done would take many, many pages. The important thing is that we come together as a people and support each other in prayer. Just as the Bible says, "When two or three come together in my name, I am there," *Tsalagi* also believe there is greater power in prayer when we are together in the presence of the Creator.

Whether you are alone, with a few friends or in a large congregation, prayer should always be offered before you start any activity. In doing this, you ensure everything you do is with the Creator in mind and that you are walking in a sacred manner. ■

CLF Nominating Committee Seeks Leaders

FROM THE CLF NOMINATING COMMITTEE: LAUREL AMABILE, CHAIR;
WENDY WOODEN; A.W. "BRAD" BRADBURD

The Church of the Larger Fellowship Nominating Committee seeks CLF members to run for positions on the Board of Directors beginning June 2013:

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Board members set CLF policy and approve the budget. The Board meets in Boston twice annually and periodically by conference calls.

For more information, including Frequently Asked Questions, visit www.clfuu.org/boardofdirectors/nominating. You may nominate yourself or another CLF member for any of these positions.

Please contact the CLF office at nominating@clfuu.org or 617-948-6166 by **January 15, 2013**, with your nominations. ■



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The CLF is looking for UUs who enjoy writing and receiving snail-mail letters to become penpals with CLF's prisoner-members. Many of them are the only UU at their prison, and regular letters from a non-incarcerated UU help them feel more connected to our UU faith community. Prisoners are told only their penpal's first name and mail their penpal letters to/through the CLF. For more info, go to clfuu.org/prisonministry or write to the CLF Prison Ministry at 25 Beacon St, Boston, MA 02108

■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

In my Unitarian household as I was growing up in West Virginia, the word “prayer” was not uttered, and certainly no one ever suggested, much less demanded, that I pray.

I spent every moment possible in the woods, playing with sticks and rocks, arranging them while lying full bodied in the sun, talking to myself and making things just right. No one suggested that I was creating altars, that I was experiencing Holy Communion with the earth, that I was opening my heart and summoning deep wisdom, that this was sacred time.

What was actually *called* prayer entered my young life in a way that was both frightening and negative. In the woods where all the neighborhood kids played day in and day out, the favorite game for girls was “House.” We made walls out of leaves and sticks, and claimed the space under our favorite trees as our own rooms. It was during the games of House that this prayer thing got intense. Frequently the “goodnight prayers” in our games of

House morphed into pretty serious descriptions of the hell that would befall any kid who didn’t accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

I always thought these prayers were aimed at me when I was a kid, but as an adult I’ve wondered if it wasn’t also that my pals needed to figure out a way to sort through their own fear and guilt and shame about being worthy of Jesus Christ as *their* savior. As kids, we did all that sorting in play.

I was bewildered by the whole thing. And yet, I was also intrigued. The intimacy and love with which the praying girls spoke about Jesus was nothing I had experienced. This personal savior, who listened to and cared about every problem they had, seemed like a friend anyone would want! But that never made sense with the detailed descriptions of hell. Why would such a good friend make anyone *go there*?

I am grateful that I could go home and talk with my mom about this. She would console me, albeit in a hyper-rational way, by explaining that this religious belief was just plain wrong. She shared with me the basic Universalist wisdom, that no loving God would create people and then create Hell just to torture them.

Later, when I came out as a lesbian and was damned to hell by *many* people who had learned (as the kids in my neighborhood did) just *exactly* what hell looked like, my childhood experience stood me in good stead. How I wish every gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender child had the experience of a loving parent telling them that nothing is wrong with them, that something is wrong with any religion that would condemn them for being who they are!

Well, actually, I wish every single one of us knew that we were precious, *no matter what*. But the truth is, I don’t think hyper-rationality will help us to know that any more than religious fundamentalism will. So how do we find our way? How do I pray?

I’ll give you a few ideas that have worked for me, and perhaps even in disagreeing with them, you’ll find what’s right for you. There truly are no formulas here!

First, reflect on what resonates with you. Is there a particular mythology, metaphorical system, culture, language, music, visual art, or spiritual practice that makes you feel connected and larger? Follow that impulse! Set time aside and promise yourself to savor this connection. Listen, look, smell, eat, learn a language, read stories, touch—let your connection bring you more life.

Second, notice when you are at peace with yourself. What are you doing? Are you cleaning house? Gardening? Eating? Reading to your small child at night? Reflecting on the psalms? Running? Sitting on a zafu cushion? Let yourself bask in this practice—look forward to it, savor it, imagine shaping your whole day around it. Claim it as part of your prayer life.

Third, create a list of practices to bring you back when you are lost. We all get lost, all the time. So have some ideas in mind in advance about what you’ll do next time. Will you breathe? Say a mantra? Call a friend? Smell peppermint? Look at a screensaver of your favorite place in New Mexico? One of my favorite practices is to just get up and go to the bathroom, whether I need to or not. It never hurts.

These practices are not formulas that will necessarily work for you. I offer them because they have helped me. Think of them as dance steps. We can memorize steps, but how we actually dance them depends on thousands of variables in any moment. In the words of the poet Rumi,

*Dance, when you’re broken open.
Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you’re perfectly free. ■*



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November 2012

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



When my wife and I adopted our daughter Mattéa as an infant, we knew that we wanted to build something into our lives together in the way of prayer or ritual. Nothing too formal or fancy, but something that regularly reminded us that we belonged to something larger than our own little selves. We settled on singing a table grace at dinner:

*Thank you for this food, this food,
This glorious, glorious food
And the animals, and the vegetables,
And the minerals that made it possible.*

This works for us. It covers the basics. We need to say thank you for what we are given—the animals, the vegetables and the minerals which are constantly in interaction with us, and on which our lives depend. Just who or what we are giving thanks to doesn't matter so much. That bit can remain open. Perhaps it's the Source of Life, or the Evolutionary Process, or the Interdependent Web. Maybe how each of us pictures it, or doesn't picture it, changes over time. Frankly, we don't talk about it much—we just sing, and then eat. Sometimes we toss in a thank you for the cooks, although technically the cook is covered under the "animals" clause.

One day, when she was perhaps seven or eight, we got to the end of the song and Mattéa threw her hands up in the air and hollered "Boom!" Kelsey and I were, needless to say, perplexed. "Boom?" we asked, "Why boom?" "It's the fireworks," declared Mattéa, in a matter-of-fact tone.

It's the fireworks. That's what was missing from our brief moment of family prayer. The fireworks. The wonder and excitement and glory. Of course the marvelous fact of animals and vegetables and minerals, of life in general, deserves a nightly fireworks display—a grand celebration of the

utter fabulousness of it all.

Prayer can be giving thanks in moments of quiet contemplation. But

prayer can also be ecstatic, energetic, exuberant. Some of our human family's most ancient forms of prayer involve drumming and dancing, bodies moving together, voices chanting, feet pounding or hips shaking in a glory of sound and movement. That "fireworks" version of prayer is every bit as real and valid as a monk praying silently in his solitary cell.

What does prayer look like for you? Do you have a way of addressing something that is larger than yourself, tuning into whatever is biggest and most holy? Some people pray as introverts: writing in a journal, sitting in meditation, reading poetry, walking in nature, finding God in the silence, or listening for the "still, small voice." Some people pray as extraverts: singing, chanting, dancing, drumming, sharing joys and sorrows and lifting up the community in prayer. Some people pray to find their center, to listen for the voice inside. Some people pray to be in communion with God, or Jesus, or the goddess, to be in the beloved presence of the Divine.

And, of course, lots of people don't pray at all. Nor do they have to. But what if you wanted to pray, but didn't know how to go about it? With all these ways of praying—quiet and loud, introvert and extravert, table grace and fireworks—how might a person get started?

Here's what I think. Start with what you love. Maybe it's gazing at stars or snuggling your cat or running for miles. Begin with a thing you love, and then add to it the intention to open your heart. So as you lie there with your cat on your chest or the stars shining down from the unimaginable distances, just focus on opening your heart to where you are and what you are doing.

And maybe once you are there, doing what you love with an open heart, you will want to invite someone else in—not literally, although that would be

fine, too. But while you're there, open heart and all, you could imagine the presence of those you love, or those you know who could use some extra support and compassion, and you could imagine them wrapped in that open-hearted beauty of the stars or the purring.

Maybe in that open-hearted space you'd like to reflect on a few things that you're grateful for. Maybe you could hold yourself in that open-hearted space while you thought about things you were sorry for, and want to mend or do better next time. Maybe, while there in that soft heart-space you would want to ask for help, or forgiveness, or courage.

Begin with a thing you love, and then add to it the intention to open your heart.

Don't worry about who or what you might be asking to help or forgive you. Really, I don't think that's the part that matters. But if you want an image rooted more in science than religious tradition, think of this. Scientists recently proved the existence of the Higgs boson, what some people call "the God particle." I'm not sure why exactly they call it the God particle, but my understanding is like this. Space isn't empty. Even what looks like a complete vacuum is full of the Higgs field, which is only in evidence because things, well, *are*. Scientists know it's there because without it, nothing would have mass, and there would be no atoms, let alone all the animals, vegetables and minerals of our world. Emptiness isn't empty. There is always something which holds and catches the tiniest bits of the universe, allowing things to bind together, to connect.

Pray, if you will, to the Higgs field that holds all of everything, in which we are all linked. Surely it deserves to set off a small "Boom!" of fireworks in your heart every now and then. ■



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“Help” is a prayer that is always answered. It doesn’t matter how you pray—with your head bowed in silence, or crying out in grief, or dancing. Churches are good for prayer, but so are garages and cars and mountains and showers and dance floors. Years ago I wrote an essay that began, “Some people think that God is in the details, but I have come to believe that God is in the bathroom.” Prayer usually means praise, or surrender, acknowledging that you have run out of bullets. But there are no firm rules. As Rumi wrote, “There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” I just talk to God. I pray when people I love are sick, and I prayed when I didn’t know whether I should have a baby. I pray when my work is horrible, or suddenly, miraculously, better. I cried out silently every few hours during the last two years of my mother’s life. I even asked for help in coping with George W. Bush.... When I am in my right mind, which is about twice a month, I pray kindly. ■

by **Anne Lamott**, from *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, published in 2005 by Riverhead Books/Penguin Group

