

# THEME FOR THE MONTH: PRAYER

A group of Unitarian Universalists were asked the questions "How do you pray?" "Why do you pray?" and "What role does prayer play in your life?" Their responses reflect the variety of approaches to prayer found among Unitarian Universalists. Here are some of their responses:



## FROM ROGER COWEN:

In a desperate moment, I cried out for help, and I was answered. Some years later I am still a humanist—I believe that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now. Yet I am a humanist who prays, who begins each morning with devotional readings and a time of silence and prayer. Why do I do this?

I need a quiet time.

I need to express my gratitude.

I need humility.

I pray because—alone—I am not enough and also I am too much.

I express gratitude for the gift of aliveness.

I assert my oneness with you and all humankind and all creation.

When I pray, I acknowledge that God is not me.

## FROM LYNN UNGAR:

During the moment of silence in our Sunday service I close my eyes and sing, silently, inside my head, "Guide my feet while I run this race for I don't want to run this race in vain." As I sing in silence, I imagine myself and the congregation enfolded in arms of love.

At a hospital bedside I hold the hand of a dying woman. The words form in my mind—or perhaps in my heart—"Goddess, be with her, give her strength and courage and comfort for this journey."

The full autumn moon rises, huge and orange and glowing, and I feel my spirit lifting along with it. "Thank you," I say. "Thank you." In the moment of beauty it doesn't matter whom I am thanking or even whether I am heard. It is enough to be grateful and to be a witness to wonder.

### FROM DANIEL BUDD:

The best advice on prayer I have yet found was given long ago by Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said that prayer was nothing to flaunt about or show off. It is a personal matter, an intimate aspect of our living, and not the public proof of our righteousness. Prayer begins in the heart, that secret place within us all.

Other living traditions have taught me that prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this Mystery to dwell. Prayer is a covenant we make to be of service. Prayer is a way of living with the very questions that perplex us.

Prayer is an opening of the human heart. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said, "Pray like this," simply, from the heart.

### FROM LUCY VIRGINIA HITCHCOCK:

Prayer for me is taking time to be present for that gracious spirit and aware of the gifts that come to and through me simply because I am alive. One word for this time of presence is gratitude. Another word is meditation, in which, by observing my breathing, I become ever more aware of creation in process. In addition, prayer is theological reflection and social strategy, alone and in groups. This leads to a return of gifts bestowed, as in the wonderful Universalist affirmation which I love to recite in our communal worship, "Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament and service is our prayer. . . ."

Service, especially the prophetic, artistic, dogged work of systematic change for economic justice, is my prayerful response to all I have been given. When I act for justice, when I act with compassion, the spirit in me is no longer trapped at my fingertips. It can move and shake and shape and sing.

### FROM NICK PAGE:

I composed a piece of music called "Healing Prayer," to be sung by combined choirs and congregations. I wrote it because a dear friend had been diagnosed with leukemia. He asked that his friends neither visit him nor call him, but rather that we simply pray for him. And people prayed—even many who had never before given prayer a thought. My friend is now well on his way to recovery. I am far too scientific to say that our prayer healed him, but I know that those of us who prayed found a deeper connection to him, to each other, and to the world we live in—and I know that my friend also found that connection between self and all things. I also know that this connection was more than mere thoughts—it was tangible—as tangible as the medical treatment he also received.

Growing up in the Unitarian Universalist faith has been a wonderful evolution for me. The words from Psalm 42 have become very meaningful: "As the deer longs for the stream, so my soul longs for Thee, O God." My longing is for the elation of compassionate connectedness—that incredible feeling of being a part of all actions—God or Creation as a verb—a self-organized interdependent event. I composed the "Healing Prayer," not because I believe in a higher power, but because I believe in a living universe with energies both powerful and subtle—all mysterious. At the end of "Healing Prayer," members of the congregation may offer the names of those in need of healing. It is a powerful moment—an emotional moment—a spiritual moment. We touch that which we long for—the living spirit of Creation.

#### FROM ANITA FARBER-ROBERTSON:

When I was in my thirties, still early in my ministry, I was stricken with a mysterious illness. My world turned upside down. I was hospitalized while the doctors ran tests, and my body did its own thing, separate from what I wanted of it. I was frightened, too frightened to pray. For the first time in my life, I understood intercessory prayer. I needed the connection, and I was not strong enough or grounded enough to establish it for myself. I needed someone to keep the lines open and clear, to maintain them and make sure they were secure in the turbulence that was ahead. I couldn't do that. It was all I could do to get through one day at a time, not knowing what was happening to me, a prisoner of a body that was becoming my enemy, rather than my connection to the sacred.

I asked my friend to pray for me. He did. I was astonished at its power. I felt the tears, the release, the comfort, and the assurance that the world and all that was sacred would wait for me, would hold a place for me, when I could not do the work of holding it for myself.

In that moment I could feel that the spirit of the universe held me, as it held every living creature. My friend's prayer had touched that spirit as surely as it had mine, and it had done so in my behalf.

I pray for people now. Every day. It is one of the most important parts of my prayer life. When all the rest of it falls away out of busyness or distraction, I can still, each morning, lift up those I love and those in pain, through prayer. And fortunately, there are those I know who pray for me.

#### CONCLUSION

May these various testimonials to prayer, in all their diversity, be like seeds planted in each person who reads this, and may it help give expression to that feeling and urge to 'pray' in a manner true to each person's understanding and belief.

May we all allow the flower of spirituality to grow within us, whether by prayer or other means, in accord with the best we know, and in harmony with our highest self.

