

## *Prayer among the Heathens*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org  
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*Prayers are not recipes or  
formulae, they are love  
poems. They need not be  
factual, but they must be true.*

*May love and strength be in  
my hands  
May love and courage be in  
my heart  
May love and wisdom be in  
my mind  
May love go with me, and  
work through me  
today and in all my days.*

*May those who suffer find  
courage*

*May those who help find  
strength*

each of the above  
from Kate Braestrup  
in *Beginner's Grace*

### **WELCOME**

When someone says, “please join me in prayer,” people typically bow their heads and get all somber and silent. There are circumstances, of course, in which it is useful to look down or to close our eyes. It can help us to focus. And there are circumstances that call for privacy and seriousness. But I think it’s unfortunate that the word prayer so often assumes these things, and that the default posture of prayer, even for those who unaccustomed to prayer (maybe especially for those who are unaccustomed to prayer) is the posture of cowering before a judgmental God.

So, join me now in prayer. Feel free to beam your brightest smile. And if this is one you know well put down the cheat sheet and make eye contact with people you love. *Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

And let’s pray together *in song* now: #23 *Bring Many Names*

### **CHILDRENS FOCUS**

This is a Rosary. In some Christian churches people find it helpful to hold beads while they pray (which means talking to God or maybe just thinking out loud about what is most important to you). By using prayer beads some people find that they can kind of lose themselves for a while, kind of step outside of their worries, but their fingers help them to keep track of where they are.

This is a rug. An important part of the Muslim tradition is to participate with other Muslims all over the world, 5 times a day, when everybody turns toward Mecca (their holy city) lays down their prayer mat (if they have one) and bow down to submit themselves to the will of God. Would you like to try that? (you don’t have to) Face East/kneel/hands down/forehead down.

These are singing bowls. Some Buddhists use the bowl or a gong to begin and end a long period of quiet meditation. They may be alone or in groups, sit in silence for long periods of time. You want to try that? Be careful though. Once the bowl is struck everyone has to be silent.

This is my voice box. Of course you have one too. Some Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs and Jains too (these are all big religious traditions in India) ...use their voice to connect themselves with the whole universe. They chant a mantra, which can be one word or a phrase, over and over. Like the sound "OM." Let's do that for a minute.

Chanting goes well with the singing bowl too. Or with the rosary, or with the prayer mat. Because actually in all of these traditions there are people who do all of these things in different ways.

And speaking of doing, everything we DO can be prayerful. I should explain: in each of these things I've called "prayer" I've been talking about holding ourselves in a state of attention and thankfulness. We can do this when we're feeling happy or feeling sad, no matter what is going on in the world around us we can be attentive and grateful. Since that's not always easy to do, it can be helpful to have a rosary or a rug or a song or a habit or a group of friends to remind us to do this.

Unitarian Universalists often light a flaming chalice to remind ourselves to take on that attitude of attention and gratefulness. That's why each time you go off to your classrooms, someone takes a bit of the light from the chalice in order to light another one that you carry with you upstairs.

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS and GREETINGS**

### **MILESTONES**

#### **CHAMBER CHOIR**

*Ubi Caritas*

#### **DREW BETZ**

On prayers of gratitude / A prayer of gratitude

### **SERMON**

My wife Jane was raised as a Unitarian. When she was six years old, her parents adopted a child through the Lutheran Social Services agency. Janie was so excited. They went to the office and did a bunch of paperwork and then they finally got to see and hold her new little baby brother. But then, just before they were going to take him home, the social worker stopped and said, before we go, why don't we say a prayer? And little, eager to get going Janie pipes up with exasperation: "Prayer? What's a prayer?"

Prayer is not all that familiar among Unitarians, or it may be rejected entirely along with its associations with begging, supernatural hocus pocus, or feeling bad about ourselves. But if those are the only things that come to mind when you hear the word prayer, then I urge you to translate. Come up with another word if you need to. Then (acknowledging that you can't get everyone else in the world to use your preferred word) consider some of the many ways that honorable people throughout the ages have found to be attentive and grateful.

After the service today the worship arts team invites you to a workshop on public prayer. I imagine this as “prayer among the heathens,” to acknowledge that public prayer is kind of an edgy experience. The word, heathen, of course, is generally used today as a pejorative for an outsider or someone with the wrong point of view, but since I’ve probably been thought of as a heathen—for not being theologically correct—I tend to translate the word to “primitive”—which I think is how we *all* are in this world together, still early in our learning.

So why would we pray in public, among the heathens? As you may remember, Rabbi Jesus advised his followers to pray alone, in private. In one of his parables he mocked the hypocritical man who went out of his way to ostentatiously pray out loud and show off his holiness in following all of the religious customs of that era.

I don’t think he meant, though, that one should *never* pray in public, or with others. If that was what Jesus meant, then clearly he was a hypocrite himself, since he initiated a lot of public prayer. Some of the most prominent images we have of Jesus are within crowds of people, not asking for anything but simply reminding himself: “Blessed are the poor...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

And in sharing “The Lord’s Prayer” was he not praying in front of an audience—even as he taught others to pray?

Speaking of translation, there are some wonderful riffs on “The Lord’s Prayer.” So if “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” doesn’t spring from your soul, consider:

*...Untie the knots of failure binding us,  
as we release the strands we hold of others' faults....*

Or, here are excerpts from “A Blogger’s Prayer:”

*...Give us this day a life worth blogging,  
...words and images that express our journey with passion and integrity,  
...Give this day, The same ability to those less privileged,  
Whose lives speak louder than ours,  
Whose sacrifice is greater,  
Whose stories will last longer.  
Forgive us...For counting unique visitors but not noticing unique people,  
...As we forgive those who trespass on our sites to appropriate our thoughts without  
reference, and ...Let us not be tempted...to make our blogs look better than our actual  
story....*

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When we bare our souls on Facebook, I wonder: is this more like praying alone, or in a crowd?

Of course it has always been possible to be in a crowd and to still feel alone. I’ve been in interfaith settings, for example, when someone leads the group in prayer using language that

clearly does not represent everyone in the room: “We pray in the name of Jesus, for in him alone we find salvation.”

I imagine you’ve been in similar situations at a family holiday meal. At weddings and memorial services too, siblings and cousins and grandparents often have dramatically different expectations about what words, symbols, or rituals will best invoke the richness of the moment. So, ironically, instead of powerful, these experiences can be awkward or even isolating.

Our call as Unitarian Universalists, I think, is to help ourselves, and those around us, to overcome that kind of unnecessary isolation.

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My colleague Rev. Kate Braestrup is chaplain to game wardens and safety officers in the State of Maine. She’s there for the families and the rescuers when someone is lost, hurt, or killed out in the heath. Three of her wonderful books about these experiences are here in our public library. In her most recent, called *Beginner’s Grace*, she utilizes her experience praying in interfaith settings to help even those of us who are wary of any kind of prayer to consider the possibilities with new eyes, and ears, and heart.

In contrast to situations like the one I mentioned earlier where someone aggressively prays in a form which is not inclusive, Kate shares a story about a public event in which the prayer began this way:

*“Before I offer a prayer for the rescuers, I would like to extend my gratitude for the tolerance and patience of those of you whose religious tradition may not be adequately represented by the clergy assembled here, or who may not be religious at all.*

*I am convinced that you have all already offered the finest prayer there could be: you are here. We are together. [Our presence says with more eloquence than any words can say: thank you]”*

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I wish I were more comfortable with prayer. It would come in handy as a minister. This Tuesday I’ve been asked to offer an opening prayer for a memorial service for workers killed on the job. This interfaith service will honor dozens who have been killed this past year on the job in Washington, along with several soldiers from Washington who have been killed overseas. The ceremony will also mark the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. And a speaker from *Familias Unidas* will say a few words about this year’s focus: farmworkers. Bellingham honors those who have been killed on the job with this annual memorial service, and a monument down by the library...and another monument to fishers down in Zuanich Park. Since these lives and these deaths are part of our shared experience as a community, it is appropriate to honor them publicly. Again you don’t have to call it “prayer,” but don’t let that word get in your way or keep you from what these monuments and public rituals call from us: attention and gratitude.

Last week here in this space we held an interfaith gathering of prayers for Peace in the Middle East. This is something that has been going on once a month for 15 years, roving all over the county. BUF has been host a few times now. What struck me about the small group who gathered was that they had no illusion that their discipline would resolve a crisis that has been playing out for centuries. But they also had no expectation that there was a right way for us to pray. They simply encourage each host congregation to do whatever seems best.

So we began by singing a centuries-old tune, which I noted had been translated into BUF's language of reverence (in our hymnal 378, 380, 382, let's sing these now...)

*Let those who live in every land  
Declare that fear and war are done—  
Joined by the labor of their hands,  
In love and understanding one.*

*Rejoice in love we know and share,  
In love and beauty everywhere,  
Rejoice in truth that makes us free,  
And in the good that yet shall be.*

*De todo bajo el gan sol  
Surja esperanza, fe, amor  
Verdad, y belleza cantando,  
De cada tierra, cada voz*

After this I noted who we were, and what we were there for. That's the main thing in both private and public prayer: not to do it right so we get what we want, but to acknowledge our context: what we face and need to change...or what we need to accept as outside of our control.

Acknowledging who we are, the blessings we have, and the limits of our reality can help us to fully realize and appreciate the moment in which we dwell.

And one reality that I will always bring out, as a Unitarian Universalist, is that we are together, and that in the very act of including one another in our reality, we find holiness.

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Prayer simply to acknowledge reality can be powerful. Sometimes if we can just say what is true, the reality that has been pressing down on us, demanding that we notice it...then it kind of backs off. It becomes less scary.

Someone said to me once in just a few words what I think a lot of people have been trying to articulate lately: "I'm angry. And I don't want to be angry. How can we channel compassion in the face of circumstances that we find infuriating?" I'm paraphrasing dozens of comments and conversations here: "How can we channel compassion in the face of circumstances we find infuriating?"

That question itself is a prayer. The Psalms are filled with lines like that. Statements of conundrums, realities that make no sense, absurdities. How can we find divine purpose—or if not that at least a glimmer of a reason to hope—when we find that even our highest ideals seem unable to resist the onslaught of what feels like ignorance and malice?

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If *you* were going to stop once a day, what would it be for? Gratitude?

To Reaffirm your determination to go on?

To Reaffirm a particular goal?

To be a good parent?

To be a truth teller?

To refrain from an addictive behavior?

To express loving kindness toward someone toward whom it is difficult to feel loving kindness?

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I like what Kate Braestrup writes about prayer being like poetry. That makes prayer easier for me to relate to. It suggests that *figurative* language is appropriate, and individual interpretations are inevitable. This makes numinous/mystical/intangible concepts like “God” easier to move within and around.

For example in this Iroquois prayer:

*May all I say*

*And all I do*

*Be in harmony with thee*

*God within me*

*God beyond me*

*Maker of the trees*

I don't use a lot of God language, but this resonates with me. This “maker of the trees” that is within me, and beyond me...yes... I DO want to be in harmony with this maker of the trees within and beyond me.

For those who are ambivalent about religious language that comes with a lot of baggage, thinking of prayer as poetry can provides a new opportunity to investigate and try things out.

The prayer of St. Francis spoke to me when I was little.

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love.*

*Where there is injury, pardon.*

*Where there is despair, hope.*

*Where there is sadness, joy.*

*may I seek not so much to be consoled, as to console;*

*not so much to be understood, as to understand;*

*no so much to be loved, as to love.*

Of course the phrasing I just shared I've translated through my humanist lens. It's easy to do this with the Serenity Prayer too, without reference to God:

*May I have courage to change the things I can, serenity to accept things I cannot change, and wisdom to know the difference.*

To me that's powerful. But I understand that to others, by removing the phrase "God grant me" this will seem like the Cliff's Notes or Reader's Digest abridgement of the real thing.

Still, a beautiful thing about the "May I" wording is that it acts as an expression of aspiration, acknowledging that I have room to grow. And we can say it together—Each of us saying "I" statements. So there's simultaneously this feeling of "we" even as we tell the truth that only "I" can carry through with these good intentions.

And at the same time, "May I?" (as in May I have the courage to change...?) is a good joke. I mean really: "May I?" as if I'm not sure if I'm allowed! As if I'm not sure I have permission to have courage, serenity, or wisdom. Do I really have to ask?

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The loving kindness meditation is another beautiful way to give a blessing for those who would like to do so without the baggage of god language. May [I] be filled with loving kindness. May [I] be at peace and at ease. May [I] be well. May [I] be happy.

We can go on from there, then, to speak of this blessing toward someone we care about. And then continue with someone toward whom it's harder to express our goodwill. So this is not some cheap unicorns and rainbows kind of blessing, but something difficult and powerful when delivered toward someone toward whom we're feeling distrust or anger. Expressing goodwill even toward someone you're tempted to hate.

*[Is there anyone for whom you might pray this blessing right now? Let's stop for a moment and each do so silently.]*

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Silence is another very effective way to express ourselves—both in private and in public prayer. Without the risk of your rational mind getting in the way and perpetually wordsmithing.

And ritual is another way to pray without words. Now doing this in public may not be easy. If you suggest a ritual that's been done before, it's going to have negative baggage for somebody. If you make up something new it won't have the depth that enters even the simplest of rituals when they are repeated thousands of time and become integral to your very identity.

So music can bridge a lot of our differences. Especially when it doesn't have words. But even when there are words that I don't wholeheartedly endorse, I can sing with fleeting voice things that I might not sign in blood.

Songs of blessing, like *Go now in peace*

Songs of yearning, like *Winds be still/Abide with me/I Wish I knew How*  
Songs of simple acknowledgement, like *Spirit of life /Bring many names*

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I'll conclude today with an image mentioned by Kate Braestrup. As I mentioned she often works with families who are told out of the blue that their loved one is gone. We can imagine a lot of that happening this morning in Tibet where an earthquake yesterday killed thousands of local people along with mountain climbers from around the world.

Kate Braestrup notes that, in cultures around the world, people fall to their knees. Not because they have learned or are expected to do this, but because grief simply makes us collapse. Willing submission or unwilling submission, our strength fails and our body buckles. When our hearts stop we put our head down so gravity can ensure that the blood keeps flowing to our brain.

But we fall so that we might rise again. In order to notice, and connect, and assist, and appreciate.

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

**SENDING SONG**                      *Now Let Us Sing*                      #368

**CLOSING CIRCLE**