

“Prayer as Primary Speech”  
delivered by Rev. Margie King Saphier on August 28,2005 at  
United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?  
My friends all drive porches, I must make amends.  
I've worked hard all my lifetime, with no help from my friends.  
So, Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a color TV?  
Dialing for dollars is trying to find me  
I wait for delivery each day until 3, so  
Oh Lord, won't you buy me a color TV?

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a night on the town?  
I'm counting on you Lord, so please don't let me down.  
Prove that you love me and buy the next round, so  
Oh Lord, won't you buy me a night on the town?

I have to admit, I love this song that mocks the pervasive and empty materialism of our present capitalistic society in the form of a prayer. Its requests are the idle or not so idle mental fantasies that drift across the landscape of the mind revealing how self-centered and empty one's desires can be. We all have mental formations or fantasies in one form or another. We are usually the super-star of our own fantasy show. At its best, prayer, like meditation, can be a spiritual discipline that enables us to be free from the tyranny of ego-grasping thought. At its worst, prayer is a total reflection of our self-centered desires. Many of us cringe when we hear the plea, “God bless America.” By omitting all other countries, the world, the universe, this three-word prayer infers that America deserves to receive God's blessing above all others. Putting the United States, (or any one country), as well as oneself above all others, is a form of idolatry.

Do you pray? Do you believe in prayer? Do you wish you believed in it?  
Or do the two previous examples confirm why you don't pray?

When I was doing my first chaplain internship at the then Deaconness Hospital in Boston, Joe, one of my fellow intern chaplains, asked us whether we believed in prayer. During one of our daily seminars, Joe explained that he had just returned from being with a patient, who, 2 weeks ago, had received the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer and was told he had no more than a month to live. The patient was told to go home and put his affairs in order. Instead the patient, who I will call Steven, decided to fight the cancer. He came to the Deaconness Hospital where a team of doctors was conducting research using a new combination of chemotherapy. The doctors told Steven that this new drug protocol had a 2% chance of extending his life. Steven accepted the poor odds, because he believed 2% was better than none.

This was the story Joe heard from Steven, when Steven asked Joe to say a prayer. As Joe began his prayer, Steven interrupted Joe and demanded that Joe pray for a miracle. At this point Joe stopped telling us his story and asked, "Do you believe in miracles?" "Better yet, do you believe in prayer?"

To the miracle question, we all agreed we felt uncomfortable with a God who dispensed miracles to some but not all. It reduced the concept of God to being the Big Santa Claus in the sky, like the one in the Janis Joplin' song. On the other hand, we all had heard stories about people who were given a terminal diagnosis and were still alive 25 years later. If they were proof of miracles, it was agreed the Big Santa Claus in the sky also had a sadistic streak by not granting miracles to all. Although we had compassion for Steven's plight, requests for miracles reminded us of the definition of the verb "to pray" by Ambrose Bierce in his Devil's Dictionary: "To ask that laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner who is confessedly unworthy."

Today when I think back to Steven's prayer request, I do not hear him necessarily asking for a "miracle," but rather a crying out that he did not want to die. I believe prayer - at its best - is a speaking from the heart, calling out to the universe to bear witness to our fears, our pain, our suffering, our confusion; as

well as our joy and gratitude. Theologian Ann Ulanov and Professor Barry Ulanov state, "Prayer is primary speech and the most direct line of communication we have to our interior reality. ... Few experiences are so important in the development of the language of primary speech as those of admission. We must own up, stop denying," to what we have done and not done, recognizing that being truthful with ourselves can be messy business." Much of human suffering is a result of mistaken identity. By this I mean our real self is buried underneath illusions we have created because we think the illusion will be more readily received than our true self. I bet most of us, myself included, are not totally honest with ourselves. This state of affairs confirms the observation by the Roman writer Seneca, "We often want one thing and pray for another, not telling the truth even to the gods."

Authentic prayer, meaning we are authentic as we speak our truth, takes courage. When we truly enter into the spirit of prayer, in order to speak the deepest feelings in our heart, we need to let go of our fears. Too often the words and feelings we hold in our hearts, hold a power over us because we feel vulnerable, because we are fearful. The Buddha would say we are clinging to our ego - to our illusions or image of ourselves that is not congruent with who we are. We are afraid if we speak the worst about ourselves, our worst fears about ourselves might be affirmed. In actuality the opposite often occurs. When we name our fears, rage, anger, sorrow, they no longer have power over us. As I look back to the prayer requests of the patients my fellow interns and I visited, I believe they were asking us to bear witness to their pain, fears, confusion, anger. To bear witness is to pay attention, to honor and acknowledge the experience of the other by fully listening with a compassionate heart. In so doing one is no longer separate. The judging mind becomes silent, and we are in prayer with one another. Often when I pray with a patient naming with compassion what I heard the patient saying, tears begin to flow - tears of relief. Then the patient

discusses more deeply his or her concern and the seeds of transformation begin to take root.

Naming or identifying what is feared within us allows the Wisdom Within, or that sense presence to .emerge. R. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series, lets the reader know the power of naming. The dreaded, life-draining villain Lord Valdemort is not called by his name by the characters of the story, who live in fear of his possible existence. They call him “He Who Most Not Be Named.” But Harry Potter and Dumbledore, the very wise and compassionate wizard, call him by his name, Lord Valdemort, and therefore are not paralyzed by the fear of his existence. Likewise, if we name what we believe to be the worst about ourselves, it will no longer control us. Likewise, if we name what we believe to the worst about ourselves, it will no longer control us.

In the Christian tradition Centering Prayer and in the Eastern tradition meditation are spiritual practices that enable us to experience unity by diminishing the sense of separateness. They are practices that serve to center ourselves by disciplining our mind to be attentive, to be mindful. In Tonglen meditation (a form of prayer) the practitioner sends loving kindness to others in full awareness that suffering is shared by all. During Sunday meditation, I sometimes have led the congregation in Tonglen meditation. We sit in silence and bring forward mental images of those who have had our deepest well being at heart. This could be a teacher, a grandparent, a parent, a mentor, Jesus, the Buddha or all of them. Next we imagine their love and compassion being sent to us, filling us with loving-kindness. In the presence of this loving kindness, we remember a sorrow that may still be with us and feel its presence in our body. We then bring the healing power of loving kindness to it. After the sensation of our sorrow is softened, we return to it; feeling it again in our body in the presence of loving- kindness. But this time, we picture the 100’s and 1000’s of people throughout the world, who are also suffering the same sorrow. We are

no longer alone and we send to them the never-ending loving- kindness that has been given so abundantly to us.

Jon and I have an 89- year old friend who lives in Northern Ireland. For the past 30 years she has been a participant of a weekly prayer group who pray for the deepest well-being for those in need. There are Christian churches that have groups of women knitting prayer blankets for patients in the hospital. As the women knit, they, like my Irish friend, also pray for the deepest well-being of the individual who will receive the blanket. Most of the time these women do not know who will receive the blanket. Some of my Hospice patients have received these blankets. Often the recipients of the prayer blankets do not attend church nor are they Christian, but they all say they feel better when the prayer blanket is resting on top of them. Praying for the deepest well-being of some one is not praying for a cure or total recovery. There is much talk and even clinical studies stating that praying for the well-being of others can lead to improved outcomes. In many ways the spiritual practice of praying for the welfare of others, whether it be Tonglen, prayer circles, knitting of prayer blankets or prayer requests during Joys and Concerns enable us to incorporate the commandment that is prevalent in all world religions, but is stated in the New Testament as: "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind; and love your neighbor as your self." As we open our minds to the suffering of others, the boundaries of the ego become less defined and we are able to love them as ourselves, thereby having a glimpse of a larger reality. Praying daily for the deepest well-being of others may or may not transform them, but it will transform you as your heart grows with the compassion you send to another.

In the spirit of communicating from our own interiority, from that place deep within where we know our strengths and our weaknesses - The Living Tradition gives us a prayer by Rabindranath Tagore (#519), that begins

"Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,  
But to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain,  
But for the heart to conquer it."

This prayer recognizes that transformation can happen at the intersection of paradox that where there is weakness or danger, there is also the opportunity for strength.

Sometimes we need to be like Anne Lamott as we sit with our fears and listen to the small still voice inside without forming expectations of how the results of our choices will look. I wished at the end of Sam's birthday that instead smiling at his mother and saying thank you, Sam looked angrily at his mother and said, "I hate you. You didn't let me go hang-gliding" Then Anne would have to sit with sadness, knowing she was not ready to let go of her son that day. The day will come - when he is older - she will let go of Sam - but not that day.

C.S. Lewis, in a book called Letters to Malcom, wrote in "Chiefly on Prayer," "the one prayer which precedes all prayers is this: May it be the real I who speaks; may it be the real You I speak to. Again, may it be the real I who speaks; may it be the real You I speak to." A Buddhist prayer, that I repeat at the end of my daily meditation, makes a similar request but its frame of reference differs from the Christian prayer., "By the power of this practice, may the real enemies, my projections and misdeeds be overcome, so ultimate vision can be attained." When my projection are absent, the real me can show up. When the real me shows us, ultimate vision (or some form of it) can be attained so I can experience a larger reality or God.

Brother David Steindl Rast states, "We must distinguish prayer from prayers. Prayers are the poetry of prayerful living.. Whereas prayer is an attitude of the heart that can transform every activity. The Apostle Paul advised that we "pray without ceasing. Steindl-Rast explains this means we need to keep our heart open for the meaning of life. The attitude of gratefulness enables us to keep our hearts open. So Steindl-Rast concludes that gratefulness is

prayerfulness. He asks, "Unless we wake up to the countless opportunities to enjoy life, how can we expect to be awake when the opportunity comes to serve life?" An attitude of gratefulness enables us to drink deeply from the source of meaning, and enables us to awake when opportunity comes.

Being open to the gift of life, John Lama Deer prays,

"I'm an Indian

I think about common things like this pot.

The bubbling water comes from the rain cloud.

It represents the sky.

The fire comes from the sun, which warms us all, -

men, animals trees.

The meat stands for the four-legged creatures,

our animal brothers and sisters,

who gave of themselves so that we should live.

The stream is living breath.

It was water, now it goes up to the sky, becomes cloud again.

These things are sacred.

Looking at that pot of good soup,

I am thinking how in this simple manner,

The Great Spirit takes care of me."

May it be so.

