

“Pronouncing Blessings, Even When the Words Don’t Come”

Christian minister and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,
Who both President Obama AND Sen. McCain site as their favorite
philosopher (!)
wrote perhaps one of most recognizable prayers ever.

It begins:

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to the know the
difference...”*

Reinhold once said this about prayer

(And if you hear nothing else from this sermon hear this,
And notice if it challenges what you think or feel when you hear this word
“prayer”):

“Prayer does not change things said Reinhold.

Prayer changes people,

And people change things.

Prayer is not hearing voices! Said Reinhold.

Prayer is about acquiring a voice.

Would we like to hear that again?

*Prayer does change things; prayer changes people, and people change
things.*

Prayer is not hearing voices; prayer is about acquiring a voice.

And with that definition in mind go with me, as you so you often do on these Sundays, into the past. *Where are we going this time?* You're asking. Well, this time we're going together into the basement of Boston University's School of Theology.

The year is 1998, the month is early September, and you are with me During the opening week of orientations to the 3 year Master of Divinity degree Program.

On the slate for that first semester is Hebrew Bible (including weekly surprise quizzes), Western Philosophy in Theological Perspective taught by The brilliant Aussie Prof. Wesley Wildman who held degrees in both theology and mathematics and could recite the works of Immanuel Kant by memory, but who on first day of class told us:

*"The question, friends, isn't much you know;
It is how much you love."*

And then there was a class on UU Religious Education, Where I learned about the namesake of our big room in the new wing, Sophia Lyon Fahs,

And finally an introductory course on worship and liturgy taught by Joe Bassett,

A wild-haired, wild-eyed Unitarian Universalist minister who supplemented his parish ministry in Chestnut Hill with weekly Wednesday visits to Children's Hospital Where he would walk the halls and write the first names of the young patients down on little post-it notes,

which he would then carry into the chapel and recite out-loud,
over and over (*Amy, Gregory, Dillon, Rebecca, Harrison, Becky, Julia...*)
as part of his prayer practice.

Every Wednesday for 30 years Joe did this.

Are we as humbled as I am?

Now, I was a pretty good student back in the day,
Which is to say, back in 1998 when I walked through those doors
On Commonwealth Avenue I felt, it's fair to say,
Some intellectual 'swagger' about what I thought was ahead of me.
You want me to study the hermeneutic of the Psalms? *No problem.*
You want me to describe in 200 words or less my understanding of
theodicy? *Bring it.*

You want me to write a 5-page paper analyzing the historical, cultural
context of the Gospel of John? *Make it 10 pages!*

(I was pretty insufferable, actually).

But what I wasn't prepared for was the moment during that last day of
Orientation, when all the incoming students and professors gathered
In the basement cafeteria for communion that was pizza lunch.
Arriving a little late, I walked through the doors with my seminary swagger
And got in the back of the line to pick up my two slices
of T-Anthony's Pizza,
And with pizza and paper plate in hand began scanning for a seat –
Remember those moments from our youth,
looking in the cafeteria for a friendly face, those lonely moments of standing
with food in hand and nowhere to go?

I'll bet a few of us said our prayers then, didn't we?

But then off in the corner I see an open chair at a table of three,
and so there I go.

On my left is Joel, the Methodist from Iowa who left a lucrative tech career
in Des Moines to pursue his call to ministry,

and Suzanne, a 6'1" 40-something lesbian woman who played division 1
basketball

at Old Dominion in college and was a corporate executive
before leaving it all to pursue her call,

And Claire, who came from upper state NY right out of college,
and me.

And like you do, you introduce yourself:

*"Hey, hi, I'm Nathan, I'm Joel, I'm Suzanne, I'm Claire...nice to meet
you!"*

And then there is a lull, a pulse of silence, and so what comes next?

In that brief moment it seems like a good time to take a bite of my now
Cold-ish pizza, to give my mouth something to do.

But just as I do,

Just as I sink my teeth into the cheese, and look up at my table-mates,

What do I see?

I see Joel and Claire and Suzanne with their uneaten pizza on their plates in
front of them, and each of them has their eyes closed and their hands folded

in front of themselves and Joel's lips are moving,

and from his lips to my ears I hear:

'Heavenly Father, we thank you....'

And though I have stopped chewing now,
 and though I have put the slice quietly back into the plate,
 I can't hear anything else he is saying because
 there is a cold chill climbing up my spine and working its way into my ears,
 shutting out everything,
 Shutting out everything except for how suddenly uncomfortable I am,
 Because I haven't prayed like this since I graduated
 From Catholic prep school in 1990,
 and if this is what ministers do, if this what ministers say,
 Then I'm wondering, I'm freaking out, I'm asking - *can I do this?*
Because even though I'm here at seminary
I'm not even sure what God is, and I'm not sure what prayer does,
and if this is how people of faith are supposed to pray....
Am I in the right place, I am supposed to be here, am I a fake, am I fraud?

Joel finishes, they all say 'Amen' and smile affirming-ly
 and go on to eat. Except me.
 Because instead of chewing I am taking deep breaths, deep breaths.
 Would you believe that I left that afternoon shaken in my call?
 Shaken enough to consider for a week switching seminaries until I realized
 how much money I would lose?
 Agonizing with Karen, who suffered me nightly,
 Walking with me up and down Comm. Ave wondering
 if I could ever get ordained
 and pronounce blessings and say prayers and preach sermons...
 if the words don't come?

So let's just name the elephant-size question in the sanctuary.

Why pray? Why bother with the word?

Why even open our mouths when you and I get so tied up in intellectual knots that we don't even know where to start?

Prayer – ready for the etymology? -

Comes from the Latin *preier* meaning to ask, to entreat, even to plead,

And so the next question on our lips is to plead to what, to ask whom,

And does it make any difference?

Sound familiar? Of course it does.

Because we all have our doubts, and we all have our questions,

And I'll bet one of the reasons nearly every one of you have

found yourselves in a church like this is because you heard from somewhere

or someone that: *shhh, but did you know that in 'so-called church'*

up on the hill where they practice UU-ism

doubts and questions aren't even sins, but maybe something close to

sacraments (!),

because they help us figure out the difference between fact and fiction,

and truth and untruth?

The sermon isn't over yet,

but can someone please give me an *Amen!*

Fast forward two years, the summer of 2000,

And I have just finished two years of divinity school.

And can I be honest – I am really no further along in my prayer progression.

Joel and Suzanne and Claire still close their eyes in what appears

To be something close to pious certainty,

And I, thanks to Prof. Wildman and his lectures on Kant and Hegel
And other German theologians I cannot even pronounce,
Am even more tied up in my knots that before,
The swagger all but gone.

And now it is time for hospital chaplaincy, this time I have told us of before,
Where it is my primary job to walk the walls and enter rooms
And greet perfect strangers to ask them if they would like...
can you guess it...

That's right...if they would like to pray!

It would be funny if it hadn't been so deeply, deeply difficult.

During the third week Father Gerry, one of the staff chaplains,
Poked his head into the student chaplain's room and asked for help.
Friends, hold onto your pews, lean into them, because this next
Thing I need to tell you will not be easy to say or to hear,
But I tell you because I think it teaches us all an important lesson.
Father Gerry pulls me out into the hall and tells us we are needed
In the emergency room.

Why? Because a pregnant woman, a young mother, has miscarried,
And she and her boyfriend would like us to bless her baby.

There is the cold tingling again going up the spine,
But this time I cannot stay silent, this time I cannot flee.
I know this is hard, but are you still with me?
And here's the strange thing. We never actually meet the parents.
They are somewhere else now, in some other room.

Instead the nurse ushers into a small room, curtains around us,
we are all alone,
and I realize that no one will hear what we say except us
and maybe God,
And this humbles me, startles me,
because I realize that even if my words aren't perfect
I will pronounce this blessing. I must. There is just no other choice.
Remember Niebuhr from earlier in the sermon?
Remember how he said that prayer isn't about hearing voices;
it's about finding a voice?

And so that's what I did. I dug deep and listened for mine.
Father Gerry and I spread out hands out over the blanket
Where the baby lay, and from my lips to our ears
I began to hear myself pray. Did I say God?
Did I grow suddenly certain that this young life was bound for heaven?
Did I ask for some kind of intervention?
Were my intellectual knots untied?

Hardly, *and here's the really important thing: it didn't matter.*
All I remember doing was saying the child's name,
Pronouncing out loud this name and this life that was holy
Even though she never got her chance,
Blessing her parents, that they will receive comfort during their pain,
Blessing this room, that despite appearances it was now sacred space,
Bless this mystery of life, that it would find a way to bless these parents
Again in its own way,

Bless the nurses, for having courage enough to do this hard, tender work,
Bless Father Gerry, for having enough faith to do this hard, tender work,
And bless me, for pronouncing blessings and finding something that
sounded for the first time like my voice.

And here's the lesson: I am no different from you.
And being no different from you I sometimes worry that
we intellectually knotted people are so knotted
That we never feel like we can find our voice,
And because we cannot find our voice we hold off
we stay silent, we stay mute
from blessing the world that is in need of such blessing
Because we think we won't have the right words or the right theology
Or the right religious beliefs or the right body posture or
The right kind of church or the right religion.

And it is such a loss, my friends, such a loss,
Because when you walk the malls this season
and turn on the TV
And you see the ice caps melting up there and down there
And you walk to the edge of fiscal cliffs,
And maybe emotional cliffs and professional cliffs and health cliffs,
Then you know, each of you know in your bones
That what we need are people who see each other and the earth
As deserving something akin to blessing,
As people and creation who deserve to be treated with love and care
And concern and respect and dignity.

And so I have a request here at the end,
and here imagine me down on both knees,

An apt posture:

Can we reclaim this word 'pray' from those who would have us believe
In can only mean one kind of thing to one kind of god in order to
Achieve one kind of change?

And can we redeem this word to mean not just believing and wishing,
But also seeing and speaking and dancing and maybe more dancing
And listening and silence and meditating and singing and visiting and
Holding hands out over the blanket and struggling to find our own voice?

Because if we don't pronounce these blessings
and inform these old words with new meaning then who will?
And if we don't challenge those who tell us prayer and blessing is only for
them and them, but not those others over there and there,
Then who will?

I pray that we will be this people.

Because I believe we are a religion for our time.

I believe we have good news to share.

I believe we have blessings and prayers to pronounce.

I believe we have a voice all our own, if only we

Could find it more, redeem it more, reclaim it more, share it more.

And friends, I believe it starts here, with how we

Pronouncing blessings on each other.

And so all I have left to ask is this:

an someone please give me an *Amen!*

First Reading

Our first reading is from a book called *“It Takes a Worried Man”* by Brendan Halpin, who at the time he wrote the book was a high school teacher in Boston and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Jamaica Plain.

Brendan wrote this book out of journals he kept as his wife fought cancer, and it is a warm, funny, honest, expletive-filled account of their lives during this time.

In this section of the book that Rita Ghilani will read, he talks about a prayer group he attended at the Jamaica Plain church:

“While I like to pray, I need to go to this group because I am too lazy to pray by myself. I started to have doubts, though.

I know prayer makes me feel good, and I believe it’s effective, but if God can intervene in the world, I guess I wonder why God doesn’t do it more often.

If God intervenes, where was she in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Rwanda...? Therefore, God doesn’t intervene.

So why then am I asking her to look out for people, or grant healing to people,

Or to bring somebody home safely?

What am I doing?

Does it matter?

I have now officially become a Unitarian...

Because I am too tied in knots intellectually to pray.

My crisis of faith comes before – BEFORE, mind you – the Diagnosis.

Small wonder. After the diagnosis of cancer...

Why not pray?

Second Reading:

The author of our second reading needs no introduction to many of us – Mary Oliver – who says the most religious thing she does is walk through the woods and along the beaches of her native Provincetown, Massachusetts. Alan Cantor and Rita Ghilani will read for us...

Alan:*Praying...*

*It doesn't have to be about the blue iris,
It could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
Small stones; just pay attention,*

Rita:

*Then patch a few words together
And don't try to make them elaborate, this
Isn't a contest but a doorway into thanks,
And a silence into which another voice may speak.*

Rita:*Praying...*

*It doesn't have to be about the blue iris,
It could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
Small stones; just pay attention,*

Alan:

*Then patch a few words together
And don't try to make them elaborate, this
Isn't a contest but a doorway into thanks,
And a silence into which another voice may speak.*

