

**“Prayer without God-talk”**

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I have now been here more than three months. And it has been a pleasure.

Before starting here in September, I had, of course,

envisioned what it would be like to a ministerial intern.

Much of what I pictured that I would be doing has in fact been what I do:

preaching, as I am today;

teaching (as I am greatly enjoying with the

awesome 9<sup>th</sup> grade Coming of Age class);

and getting a chance to talk with more and more of you

one on one or in smaller groups.

Indeed, before starting this internship,

I gave a lot of thought to what kinds of things

I might be called on to do as a minister.

And yet, at my first supervisory meeting with Nathan in September,

I found myself staring at him,

thinking to myself, “You want me to do *what?!?*”

What outrageous, difficult task had Nathan asked me to do you wonder?!?

He had asked me to ... PRAY.

And not just quietly, alone, but publically, in front of all of you!

Why, you might be asking, would someone who has decided to  
become a minister be *surprised* to find herself  
asked to lead prayer in worship?

Isn't that sorta a big part of the job?

What then was the problem? Why didn't I want to pray?

My problem with prayer is that I did not know how to begin.

Literally. I did not know how to start a public prayer

that did not begin with some version of "Dear God."

And, I have enough discomfort with God-talk

that I was not going to be starting a prayer like *that*.

I fear that for some of us certain words are a stumbling block to prayer.

Words like "God" or "Father" or "Lord."

I suspect that I have company in not knowing how to begin a prayer.

"God" is a word with a lot of baggage for some of us.

We learned the word "God" within particular contexts of

church, family, and/or friends.

These contexts taught us that "God" meant certain things:

God is male, God is all-powerful,

God is judging us, God is perfect,

God never changes, God is LORD.

Recently, I found out just how much baggage

I am carrying regarding the word Lord.

For Thanksgiving, I returned to Michigan to be with my family.

I had arrived early in the week and my son,

Alek, was scheduled to fly in on Thanksgiving morning to join us.

Unfortunately, his plane was late.

30 minutes. 60 minutes. 2 hours.

My mom was holding dinner, the turkey was getting dry.

Frustrated, I walked into the Grand Rapids airport to speak with

an airline representative to find out what was going on.

Fog. The agent calmly explained.

The Detroit airport had been fogged in all morning and that

there was a big back-up.

Sensing my continued dissatisfaction,

she smiled sweetly at me and said,

“Well, I guess The Lord just had different plans for the day.”

Stunned by her use of theological statements as customer service,

I stared, then firmly declared to her,

“I don’t believe in The Lord!” and walked away.

Let me be clear, I *do* believe in a sense of the sacred and the holy,

but I do *not* believe in “the Lord” that she was referencing.

This phrase, “The Lord”, used in this way at this place—Grand Rapids, Michigan—is an example of what I mean about learning words in particular contexts.

I had learned about this “Lord” when growing up as an evangelical girl in a Calvinist church tradition.

In this context, The Lord was a name for a  
god who made all the rules and had all the power.

What The Lord expected of us,  
we were to do—no questions.

What The Lord did,  
we were to accept—no questions.

But, I’ve always liked to ask questions.

And, as I asked questions,  
I found that the answers I was given didn’t always satisfy me.  
So I asked more questions. And, then more questions.

I’m still asking questions.

Along the way, my questions have led me to very  
different understandings of the mystery of life that many have called God.

Recall the words of Universalist minister A.J. Mattill in the first reading:

"God' is a name my heart gives to the mystery of the universe."

To Mattill, the word God is not the proper name of a divine person,  
but a word that points to a great mystery.

Richard Trudea responds to this idea by exclaiming:

"*There's* a God that certainly exists.

There *is* a mysteriousness about life, and  
that's what people are grappling with when they use the word *God*."

What does the word "God" mean to you?

What name or names do you give to that mysteriousness of life?

That sense of beauty or something 'more' to life?

There are many names aren't there?

Spirit of Life. The Holy. The Sacred. Yahweh. Allah. Jehovah.  
Mother of Creation. Emmanuel.

When Nathan asked me to pray and I struggled with knowing how to begin,

it forced me to ask anew what *do* I believe about "God"?

What names or words can I use to refer to this understanding?

And, if I did not want to pray to "God", then

how do I pray *without* God-talk?

Doesn't prayer, by definition, mean talking to God?

How do you pray if you don't believe in "God"—

or if you're not certain that "God" is a person who's listening?

How do you pray without God-talk?

One strategy, of course, is to follow Mattill and Trudeau and

re-imagine what that name "God" means.

Does God have to mean a male, personal deity?

Does God have to mean an all-powerful Lord?

What does "God" mean to you?

What names do you give to the mystery of the universe?

I am certain that we do not all have the same names or understandings of God.

In our last staff meeting, I told my airport story

about "the Lord" being in control of my son's flight.

Robin, our director of religious education, smiled and said, that

"Lord" was one of her favorite names for God.

This was not the first time that Robin and I had discovered that

we have different understandings of the Holy.

Since September, Robin and I have had an ongoing theological discussion.

I have learned much from her and our differences.

Both this church and our larger Unitarian Universalist tradition is about  
being in community with people who are different from us.

We do not have a creed—a shared statement of faith—  
telling us all what we have to believe about God or  
how to speak about God.

As a consequence, we are here together,  
but we do *not* all think alike, speak alike, or pray alike.

For some, the language of God or Lord or Father or Jehovah  
or other such personal language *is* a living, meaningful way of  
connecting to the mysteriousness of life.

But, for others, God-talk can be an obstacle to expressing spiritual connection.  
So, while the strategy of reimagining what “God” means may be enormously  
meaningful for some people’s spiritual journeys,  
others seek to find a way to be religious and spiritual  
without God-talk.

The second reading comes from a book entitled,  
*The End of God-talk: an African American Humanist Theology.*

The author, Anthony Pinn, is an atheist and humanist  
who does not use language of God or transcendence.

Rather, [Pinn](#) “affirms the idea of community” in place of the symbol of God.

Yet, how does one *pray* without God-talk?

Pinn suggests that for some religious humanists

“prayer may provide a centering moment—

an opportunity for focused attention on pressing issues in

ways that isolate their importance and their mutability.”

In other words, prayer can be a chance to sift through all of the

competing demands for our attention and

to focus on pressing issues.

Prayer can be a means of centering oneself to focus on particular concerns.

In this moment of prayer, a person can consider the

importance of an issue . . .

and to consider what can be done about it.

In this way, prayer becomes an activity of

training one’s thoughts to attend to what’s important and

how to live in a way that reflects our values and commitments.

Prayer does not have to have to be understood as a conversation

between you and a Divine person.

Prayer can be also be a kind of conversation

that you have with yourself or that we have as a community.

Prayer can be a way to attend to what's going on,  
to weigh what is important, and  
to ask how we might live in light of this awareness.

Last week, Nathan quoted Reinhold Niebuhr who said,

“Prayer does not change things. Prayer changes people,  
and people change things.”

I hear Pinn saying something similar when he suggests,

“prayer becomes the activity of humans  
bringing about the twists and turns of encounter and life commitment.”

Prayer without God-talk can be understood as a

human activity that seeks to consciously connect our  
awareness, our commitments, and our actions.

Too often life comes so quickly at us with so many demands that  
it is easy to lose one's center.

It is easy to forget what is important.

It can become harder to make choices based upon our  
values and commitments.

Or, pressures may make it seem as if nothing *can* change.

Even without God-talk, prayer can be a way of re-connecting  
to deeper values that reillumine what is important.

Even without God-talk, prayer can be a way of re-imagining

what is possible and what changes we might be able to make.

So, how many of you have asked yourself in the last 10 minutes,

how *has* Stephanie been starting her prayers?

I have been beginning with the phrase, “Spirit of Life.”

For some of you, hearing or singing this phrase, might connect with a

sense of Spirit with a capital “S” as a way to

express a sense of God and divinity.

With a capital “S”, Spirit of Life can be a way of re-imagining the word

God and wrestling with the mysteriousness of life.

But, spirit of life can also be heard and spoken through a

humanist lens without God-talk.

There is also a lower-case “s” sense of spirit in the

sense of “the freshmen have great school spirit.”

Spirit with a lower-case “s” can simply refer to a particular feeling or sensibility,

a kind of enthusiasm or sense of connection.

For example, you can refer to a “spirited horse.”

For a religious humanist, praying can be a means of centering oneself to

connect to the “spirit of life” with a lower-case “s”.

Within this understanding, prayer can be a moment of breathing deeply . . .

of being grateful for the life-spirit that courses through one's veins  
and sustains us.

Prayer can also be a way of meditating upon the ways in which  
the spirit of life is harmed by violence, illness, and even death.

As human creatures we have limited abilities and capacities  
to respond to *all* such challenges to the spirit of life in our world.

And yet, religious humanism holds to view that

it *is* up to us humans to build communities of love and justice.

By working to change us, prayer helps to change the world.

Whether you embrace the language of God,

wrestle with re-imagining what "God" means to you,

*or* actively seek to avoid God-talk,

my prayer for each of you is that you find your way to remain

connected to a sustaining sense of life and light, love and justice.

May it be so. Amen.

**First Reading**

*Selected from Richard Trudeau, Universalism 101*

A.J. Mattill, Jr., onetime minister of Liberty Universalist Church near Louisville, Mississippi, once said: "'God' is a name my heart gives to the mystery of the universe." That struck a chord with me. I thought, "*There's* a God that certainly exists. There *is* a mysteriousness about life, and that's what people are grappling with when they use the word *God*." *God* is the X of life's equation, the meaning we seek, the answer we long for. The all-too-human mistake that humanism saves us from thinking is that we *know* the answer that the name *God* represents.

**Second Reading** *Selected from Anthony B. Pinn, The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*

[As] some religious humanists might argue, prayer may provide a centering moment—an opportunity for focused attention on pressing issues in ways that isolate their importance and their mutability. So conceptualized and arranged, prayer becomes the activity of humans bringing about the twists and turns of encounter and life commitment. That is to say, Tubman prayed and worked, thereby training her thoughts through the embodied context of lived experience. As Frederick Douglas was wont to remark, [he] “prayed for emancipation for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.”