

Sermon of the Rev. Bill Phillips  
Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia

**“What We Talk About When We Talk About Prayer?”**

Sunday, Nov. 2, 2008

**Introduction:**

My first memory of praying was as a child. I bet that some of you were taught the same bedtime prayer that I was, “Now I lay me down to sleep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.” What a frightening bedtime thought!

My second memory of prayer was at the dinner table, almost always the eldest male said the blessing out loud and usually very fast, “We thank you for this food may it go to the nourishment of our bodies, and strengthen us to do thy service, in the name Jesus thy Son, Amen”

The third prayer was said every morning to start class in our public school and also was memorized for confirmation class in the Methodist Church, The Lord’s Prayer. *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, for thine is the kingdom the power and the glory, forever and every, Amen.”*

As a teen I memorized the MYF Benediction (taken from an ancient Hebrew poet, “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you, the Lord lift up the countenance of his grace unto you and give you peace Amen” During my Methodist Youth days I also attended several “Watch Night Prayer Vigils.” These all night prayer services involved many young people signing up to be at the church to spend an hour or two at the church altar in prayer for some particular person or project. I remember well spending hours in a church sanctuary kneeling at the altar trying to concentrate and trying to hear the voice of God in response to a petition or request that the deity of the universe would make some friend well or some Christian project successful. The experience was quite moving, frustrating, kind of scary, and very unsuccessful. I slowly began to give up on speaking with God directly or trying to hear a voice from heaven.

During my clinical training as an adult I learned another significant

prayer, the AA Serenity Prayer—“ God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This simple prayer is offered at

every AA meeting and is the essence of a person’s desire to take responsibility for their actions and to accept their own human frailty. This concluded my history of regular prayer life as my orthodox Christian friends would define it.

## **I. Types of Prayer:**

Out of my experience and theological studies I did learn some things about the different types of prayer.

**Prayers of Petition**---When we are attempting to ask the divine creator of the universe to grant us some particular favor, like “good health, freedom from prison, or fear, or to avoid a death. A prayer of petition is a request of the deity to intervene on our behalf and bring us a gift.

**Prayers of Thankfulness**---A prayer telling the divine creator how much we appreciate the fact that we have food, shelter, friends, and family and are not in a land of famine, lacking water, have not been blown-up by bombs and our children are safe and not dead. We are thanking God for our good fortune or maybe for our salvation from damnation.

**Prayers of Confession**---This is a prayer for when we are feeling guilty or have been guilty of mean, dishonest or deceitful thoughts or acts. We hope that the creator of the universe will forgive us, not hold us responsible for eternity and let us move on. Teenagers having sexual fantasies or practices and criminals awaiting trial or wanting out of prison often offer these prayers.

**Prayers for Guidance**—When we are confused we ask for help in figuring things out and for guidance to do the right thing. This can become a short cut for studying, working, or thinking through the problem with wise friends or teachers. An old Negro spiritual calls for us to “pray with our feet” i.e. to get off our knees and get to work to solve problems. I like that idea of “praying with my feet.”

**Public Prayers**--- these are offered by the clergy at banquets, official gatherings, football games, political rallies, the opening of buildings, the opening of congress or senate. The participants usually then begin to attack, maul, and humiliate themselves and their opponents. Jesus said, “And when you pray, go

into your closet (a private place) and do not pray in order to be seen or heard by others.”

## **II. Definitions of Prayer, Meditation, Reflection, and Contemplation**

**Prayer**---a seeking to communicate with someone or some force outside of myself and outside of nature, communication with God or the supernatural.

**Reflection**---To reflect is to re-think my actions, thoughts or experiences. When we reflect we re-examine our experiences and relationships.

**Contemplation**-- is thinking about the future, what do I think are new possibilities for tomorrow? I contemplate how I would like to change my thinking, my behavior, or my life. Thinking about the future and planning my days is a contemplative exercise that can help provide focus to my life.

**Meditation**---is seeking to communicate with my inner-self or realize my connectedness with the natural world. Meditation may best occur beside a still calm lake, walking along a mountain path, down a dirt road, on along the beach. Meditation can also occur in you own room, office, any quiet, and peaceful environment.

To differentiate--- prayer is an attempt to receive forgiveness, receive guidance, receive gifts, or receive help. Prayer is an attempt to contact a power outside yourself and outside nature.

Meditation focuses on listening and being: being thankful, being peaceful, being loving, being forgiving, being helpful, feeling calm, still, and gentle, being helpful, being kind. Meditation is an attempt to experience your inner power, health, and talents and your connectedness to the natural world.

### **Tibetan Monks @ MIT.**

In September of 2003 at the McGovern Institute at MIT the Dalai Lama and a group of Buddhist Monks participated in the first international conference to study and discuss the biological basis of human brain functioning. The monks were invited due to their ability to concentrate for hours on a single object or thought. Tibetan Monks were seen as the superior athletes of the mind. Through observation of brain functioning with the MRI “Magnetic Resonance Imaging” basic observations were made.

First, moods and dispositions are rooted in specific regions of the brain. Positive states of mind, like joy, happiness, humor, and passion are located in the high left frontal lobe and Negative states of mind like anger, resentment, frustration are reflected in the right frontal lobe of the brain. Scientists were able to see this activity with MRI as the Monks meditated and began to study “the mechanics of human perception.” Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard wrote that

“meditation produced sustained psychological benefits by reducing heart rates, lowering blood pressure and regulating breathing rates.” He began to validate scientifically that meditation can be taught and can reduce stress. These beginning studies tend to prove that temperament is a skill that can be developed and learned not a fixed, hard-wired genetic fact of life that cannot be changed. New imaging technologies and studies offer hope for teaching and learning stress reduction, peaceful resolution of conflict and reduction of aggression.

This is the kind of stuff UUs talk about when we talk about prayer, a mindful discussion of our history, a look at current scientific studies, and an open expression of questions & beliefs.