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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes  
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*Blurred Boundaries*

READING: From a Facebook page called “Empaths, Old Souls & Introverts”:

What is a prayer? Prayer doesn’t just happen when we kneel or put our hands together and focus and expect things from God.

Thinking positive and wishing good for others is a prayer. When you hug a friend – that’s a prayer. When you cook something to nourish family and friends – that’s a prayer. When we send off our near and dear ones and say, “Drive safely” or “Be safe,” that’s a prayer. When you are helping someone in need by giving your time and energy, you are praying. When you forgive someone by your heart, that is a prayer.

Prayer is a vibration. A feeling. A thought. Prayer is the voice of love, friendship, genuine relationship. Prayer is an expression of your silent being.

Keep praying always.

SERMON:

You never know when life will make you take a good look at yourself. It happened to me ten days ago at an auto mechanics’ shop in Albuquerque. Our daughter, an avid athlete, needed help getting around after surgery for a hip tear – she just started walking and driving this week, a good thing!

The week before, when mounting her snow tires, a tire center had no choice but to cut bolts which had frozen up. They needed to be replaced. So we showed up for an appointment at Christian Brothers Automotive.

While she talked with the man at the counter, I noticed how well-appointed this waiting room was – leather couches, handsome lamps, artwork on the walls – like a quality hotel. And here and there were prominent framed signs that read in all caps FREE WIFI AND BIBLES. Password: “nicedifference.”

That got my attention, and an old attitude within me sprang into action, on high alert for proselytizing. Already I could feel myself harden to the pitch, the religious language that would surely follow and annoy, exclude or otherwise trigger me. But you know? That never happened.

In fact, it took more time than I like to admit to become hugely impressed with this operation. Our shuttle driver explained (only when asked) that the company was founded on Christian *values*. His bumper sticker read “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

It was that simple. By the end of the day, we had learned that the Christian Brothers franchise has some 200 garages across the southern and central states. “Is your job a ministry?” I asked. “Is this business a ministry?”

No, he said. Not everyone working there is Christian, probably the upper management was, but, “We just try to live by these values” – by treating people well, “our customers, as well as each other....It’s good for business,” he added. I had, come to think of it, picked up on how pleasantly the people there spoke with each other. The icing on the cake was that, because the tire center had broken the bolts, Christian Brothers didn’t charge Laura for the \$175 repair! Of course she will return.

Now once upon a time, I was a card-carrying non-church person. Not one who prayed, though my father always said grace before dinner and I grew up saying prayers before bed every night – in order of age, from my grandparents down to my three younger siblings, and always the dog. But over the years, my parents became disaffected with the local Episcopal church, and by the time I was in junior high, we all slipped away to the ski slopes on Sundays. After college, out in the world and free to find my own way in these matters, I went through a phase of rejecting religion. A black-and-white attitude crept into my understandings: if you’d asked me about prayer in my 20s, I might have professed no need for that, thank you. Wasn’t religion, after all, a crutch?

That was then, and this is now. Forty years later, I like to think that, though a holier-than-thou streak can creep in now and then, that youthful, judging prickliness has mellowed. Everything feels like a prayer today. Giving voice to our awe and longings was one of the many gifts of coming upon the beauty of this doctrine-free faith tradition, this “free” tradition that calls on each one of us to search for meaning.

Our society has an abundance of rigidly religious people who are intolerant or zealots or whose politics are inextricably entwined with their churches. Thank goodness for religious heroes. I’m thinking of the late Cokie Roberts, a lifelong devoted Catholic, raised by the nuns with whom she remained in close contact all her days, “really doing the work of Jesus,” as she said. Likewise, I found the recent funeral of African American Congressman Elijah Cummings deeply inspiring, infused throughout with his whole-hearted commitment to Christianity.

These past few weeks have brought my way a confluence of insights about prayer. Who has seen the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* with Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers? By halfway through, you know some of the people in his life. The scene where he kneels at his bed at the end of the day and gently names them, one by one, brought me to tears. No religious language, no petitioning, no rote words, just a quiet naming of everyone in his heart...and their parents...and their kids – a long, long list.

This reminded me of a conversation long ago with someone who was feeling alone in the moment, not sure, in her aloneness, that she could manage all her responsibilities. “Who *is* there for you?” I asked. She thought hard and was able to name someone. Then she remembered someone else. And someone else. She gained speed – and we laughed in delight – as more and more people came to mind. That was prayer!

And what a beautiful Mister Rogers scene in the coffee shop. In the gentlest way, he invites his journalist friend to join him for one minute. “For just one minute,” he says, “bring into your mind all the people who have loved you into being.” The journalist, going through an angry, hurting, rough patch in his life, looks heart-struck, as if to say, “You’re not asking me *that!*” Meanwhile, the whole coffee shop goes dreamy. Everyone has closed their eyes and tilted their heads back. They smile, recalling all the dear people in their lives who have “loved them into being.” Toward the end of a long minute, the camera swings around to you, the viewer. Mister Rogers looks into your eyes. “Who has loved *you* into being?” By then everyone in the theatre is tearing up and smiling. Prayer!

Where are you with prayer? Many Unitarian Universalists do not pray. Prayerful language can feel triggering if you have left all that or perhaps resist it as a humanist or an atheist. Not all UU services include prayer. We often tiptoe around the word, instead saying “reflection” or “contemplation” or “meditation.”

We are praying, though, every time we put energy into our gratitude, sorrow, awe, despair, or hope. When we remember a friend, when we pause to wonder how someone’s doing? That’s prayer. When our heart hurts and we need solace? That’s prayer. When we feel filled up with loving life...on the trail, with friends, even when grieving? That’s prayer, too.

Let’s go there for a moment. Many of us remember two UUFES women, now in their 90s – Willie Mork and Phyllis Shepard. They can’t get to Sunday services anymore, but oh, what memories we have. How good it feels to visit them.

Help me describe Willie for those who’ve not had the pleasure of knowing her [*her smile, her stance, a dancer and singer, her style....*] Willie lives in assisted living at Sugar Hill. She spends a lot of time alone, preferring that to the noisy dining room where dinner goes on and on and on. Let us continue to hold Willie and let our thoughts turn to what we wish for her today [*peace and quiet, friends to visit, serenity, a pink feather boa....*].

And now let’s tell new friends and members about Phyllis [*a force, eccentric, purple/blue/pink hair, her recorder, out on the porch, loon whisperer, her sense of fun*]. Phyllis lived on the lake for years in a cottage stacked high with music and instruments, an LLBean canoe hanging from the ceiling, soft pine needles all around. She now lives in a nursing home in Meredith. Her daughter works nearby and has lunch with her everyday. What do you wish for Phyllis these winter days? [*Music, song, fresh air, visits, a long canoe ride at the end....*]

This is praying.

Just now, something happened in our brains. Focusing on Willie and Phyllis – holding them and loving them and wishing for them – activated the frontal cortex of our brains, the center of focusing and figuring and language. Research indicates that this lighting up of the frontal cortex is especially pronounced when people pray.<sup>1</sup> As a muscle strengthens with use, the more a person focuses in prayer, the stronger their wiring for doing so becomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Sandoiu, “What religion does to your brain,” *Medical News Today*, 20 July 2018, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322539.php#1>

The other thing that happens during prayer and meditation is that the right parietal lobe of the brain quiets. This is the part of the brain associated with our sense of self. Researcher Brick Johnstone of Missouri University calls it the “Me Definer.” It locates us in space, and it also “generates self-criticism [he says], constantly updating our self-knowledge: my hand, my cocktail, my witty conversation skills, my new love interest...”<sup>2</sup> We know this part of ourselves, compelling and distinct from everyone else, right? It comes as no surprise that studies show that people who pray or meditate regularly have a less active right parietal lobe. We might imagine that, while as for anyone the sharp edges of *self* exist, these meditating, praying people also know well the less self-focused, peaceful, blurred boundaries of oneness.

I see inviting prayerfulness into our lives less as a religious act and more as a form of self-care. What are we missing out on without it? When we hurt, we long for comfort and relief. When life thrills us, our cups runneth over with gratitude. When it awes us, reverence fills our being. When moments of peace grace us, we rest in a oneness like no other, our boundaries soft and porous.

No matter our stance or our wonderings about the existence of a supernatural being, the aliveness that quickens within is prayer – “an expression of your silent being,” as we heard in today’s reading. Being moved, looking up into a canopy of trees or a sky full of stars on a cold winter’s night, is prayer. Becoming lost in gazing at a painting or an ancient bowl or listening to music is prayer. When we sit hand-stitching a project or sanding and smoothing a beautiful piece of wood, our breathing evens out, the mind clears. We come away less concerned with the details of our own story and more in tune with the whole of it.

Joys and Sorrows is prayer – can you feel that edge of self that separates us *blur* as we feel each other’s pain? as we love this world together? as we delight in each other’s good news?

Let’s remember that we can get hung up on certain words. “Prayer” is one. Shakespeare’s Juliet compares her lover’s forbidden, hated name to a rose: “That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.” His name, that forbidden word in her family, has nothing to do with the sweetness of their love. And that which I’m calling prayer here, by any other name would touch hearts as deeply, no matter our theology. The more we open to the practice of seeing and feeling what matters, the more full and meaningful our journey.

Whom do you wish well? Whose suffering is in your heart? And our home: how is it with our planet earth, glaciers crashing into the ocean and the birds – where are the birds? The litany of what we care about, what matters, flows like a river.

A few years ago, members of UUFES kindly participated in my ordination at the Portsmouth UU church. You may remember long retired UU Rev. Brad Greeley with his shock of white hair and sparkling blue eyes. Delivering the Charge to the Minister, he spoke of how he used to flip through the pages of the church directory many a morning and think about the people in it.

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Nixon, “Spirituality Spot Found in Brain,” LiveScience, 24 December 2008, <https://www.livescience.com/5237-spirituality-spot-brain.html>

I do this, too. Page by page, I look at your faces. Your stories and faces become part of my day. This is prayer.

The heart aches with what we feel. We tend to one another, and the heart stretches, perhaps tears a bit as it lets in more – more empathy, more hope, more love. That which many call prayer, by any other name, would be as sweet.

In the name of all that is good and true and holy, Amen.