

Life as a Prayer

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 20, 2024

I offer you two seemingly contrasting vignettes this morning – one of death, and one of natural beauty and awe. I do this to highlight the blessings of the divine in each. For the mystery is both hidden and present all around us.

I stood at his death bed, my beloved stepfather who was imminently transitioning from this realm to the next. His eyes closed, his breathing shallow, his face at peace. We knew he was passing while I was at a wedding in California, and so I traveled by plane and train to be by his side, praying he would wait for me, and he did. I remained by his side offering words of love and farewell, holding his hand, and embracing him. I stepped away, and heard my mom tell him it was now ok to pass, and he did. There is so much mystery and sacredness when a being slips away from this impermanent life. The veil between the mortal and the divinely transcendent is permeable and thin.

My husband and I lay on our backs alongside the crashing, ocean waves in the cool, evening sand of mid-July in New Jersey. The sky was velvety black, sprinkled with massive stars so distant they reached us as but a speck. On this night, gazing into the unknowable distance, we observed an occasional shooting star, a short arch of light dancing in the moonlight. The sand, the stars, the comets, and the echoes of the rolling sea – sacred, and divine, just one peace – one expression – of all that is holy.

Today we listen. Today we listen to the sacred, we listen to the holy, we listen to unconditional love, to a great, unknowable essence, to a transcendent beauty and wonder and awe, and as such we engage in an act of prayer to all that is blessed and holy and divine. Prayers are the words of the sacred spoken to us in love. What prayers emerged through the sorrow of death and the awe of nature? At the death of Al, I heard blessed whisperings of my sacred affirming unconditional, eternal, unceasing love. Nature as seen through stars as plentiful as fireflies

offers my open ears to the divine prayer “may you embrace this, beloved, for this is the beauty of life.”

There is mystery all around us, if we pause, listen, invite, and welcome it into our lives. Great, divine, sacred, holy, immortal mystery disguised as common human experience. Nature and death, yes. So, too, in moments of love, of childbirth, of forgiveness, of hope, of art, of illness, of loss. Great questions emerge which drape these events in mystery. What inspires beauty and awe? Why is pain inherent in life? How are we held in the midst of that wonder which pervades our beings? To perhaps the greatest mystery of all, not a question, but an experience— when we encounter the presence of the divine, whispering to each of us, I love you, and all shall be well. Within each of these and so many more mysteries is held the divine. Positive moments of wonder and awe, negative experiences of dejection and loss – present in each beautiful and aching human life. To engage and find meaning in these moments of mystery is to invite and to listen to the sacred murmurings. How can we listen to a sunset? It whispers, embrace my beauty, wonder, and awe. How can we listen to mystery? We hear, dear one, embrace that which cannot be known. How can we listen to dejection? We receive the words, find strength, beloved, for you have it within you to thrive. This is what the divine offers.

Listening, sacred, divine, intentional, beautiful, committed listening to the great mystery, to the spirit of love, to God or Goddess or mountain or transcendence, this is prayer. Prayer is to open our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls to the whispers of all that it is we hold sacred and holy. To pray is to listen to that voice that calls us beloved – beloved children of all that is sacred and holy. To pray is to let the great mystery converse with that still, small voice within. To let that voice of love reverberate throughout our entire being. It is something we feel. When we gaze at a sunset, when we pause amidst a field filled with a beautiful array of wildflowers – when we feel this nature echoing within us, that feeling is a prayer. Prayer is not the spoken words of the lips nor silent words of the mind, but an orientation of the entire body, offering the sacred silence and adoration; it is an intuited conversation with that which is so much greater. Our lives are created to listen to the sacred speak. I think of my own deepest moments of prayer. It

is not simply a petition. It is not simply a request. It is also asking, “How can I be a conduit between you and the world? How can I be a channel between you and those I serve?” It is asking, “How can I respond to divine persuasion, and do the next best thing in life?” Then I pause and I listen.

And yet we may note a wariness to prayer, a hesitation, feelings of skepticism or indifference. We do not listen because we are anxious about what we may hear in return. Will we hear whispers of judgement? Of condemnation? Of indifference? Of damnation? Do we not listen because we fear we might not hear anything at all? That we will be met with an alienating silence? Do we not consider listening because we believe there is nothing even speaking? Even the trees murmur words of compassion and love. In my role as minister and chaplain, I sometimes meet with those who fear the sacred due to a horror and a dread of divine punishment. No, I offer, the sacred forgives each of us. The holy is an essence of unconditional love. So how can we alter our expectations of sacred abandonment or judgement, and instead embrace divine affection? “Prayer”, writes author and priest Henri Nouwen, “is the presentation of our thoughts—reflective, as well as daydreams, and night dreams—to the One who receives them, sees them in the light of unconditional love, and responds to them with divine compassion.”¹ God, nature – whatever it is we hold sacred and holy – receives each of us with unconditional love and divine compassion. Can we hold this truth within us, no matter how much we expect or fear dejection or nothingness? We are called to embrace this love and compassion, for this is the sacred truth of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

How can we listen to the great, mysterious, spirit of love and life through the most challenging times of our lives? How can we listen to compassion when our bodies feel broken? How can we listen to love when love seems so distant? How can we connect to the divine when we feel we have done the unforgivable? How can our days be a prayer when we feel lost and dejected? I remember my disconnection with the divine when I felt so very angry at someone who had deeply wronged me, a person present in my life for a handful of difficult years. I was angry. I

¹ “Fearless Conversation with God: Henri Nouwen on Prayer and Introspection” by James Wilhoit

was bitter. Yet we can create a space for that divine essence which will never leave us. To me, this space is my heart space, my synonym for soul. To me, it is to listen both to that still, small voice within, and an invitation to that which is so much greater. I place my hand on my heart and converse with the sacred both within and beyond. The challenges we face can, unexpectedly, present an openness to receive an unconditional presence of divine love, an openness towards faith and spirituality and, perhaps most importantly, mystery, for hardship is mystery. We wall ourselves off from the sacred in an act of defiance, only to let it in and let love and forgiveness and compassion overwhelm us – breaking through our defenses. To me, this anger that had begun to isolate me in pain and regret. Yet I met with a sacred, an essence that called me towards forgiveness, and I slowly healed. What suffering could we have avoided if we held this divine openness in our hearts from the start? Anger becomes forgiveness. Death becomes a celebration of life. Aggression becomes peace. Lies become reconciliation. Greed becomes gratitude. Hate becomes love.

Spiritual Director Ruth Haley Barton offers this, may we live life as a prayer.² I beg the question: How might we create a way of living that does not only include sporadic prayer, but is instead itself a prayer? With our contemplation on deep listening, I offer that the first thing we must do is open ourselves to a perpetual invitation to the voice of the divine. At each moment, prepared to receive into our beings all the sacred murmurings whispered to us by all that is blessed and holy. Life is a prayer. I furthermore think of those wishes bestowed upon the small child in our Story for All Ages – wishes that, for me, seem synonymous with continuous prayer. May you delight in things big and small, may you live in awe, may you hear the stories of the stars, may you love, and be loved in return, may every moment be a gift, may you know generosity, gratitude, faith, and hope.³ And so, the reflections of Barton. She encourages us to rearrange our lives in response to the calls of the heart. To say yes to the divine calls for spiritual transformation. She offers us two questions for reflection: Who do I want to be? How do I want to live?⁴

² "A Centered Life" by Ruth Haley Barton

³ *May You Love and Be Loved: Wishes for Your Life* by Cleo Wade

⁴ "A Centered Life" by Ruth Haley Barton

And so let us take a moment to interpret these musings. What is a life of prayer? I wonder, first, what is a life of sporadic prayer? This is the life known to many people of faith, not inherently bad or empty but not as fulfilled or meaningful as the potential that is held within. On the far end of the spectrum, I hold those to whom prayer is obligatory and scripted, not opening a space to listen to the divine but a chore or an empty and meaningless expectation bestowed upon them. This, I offer, is an empty way to engage with the divine. And yet there are others who do pour their hearts into these moments of divine petition or request or gratitude or conversation. There are those who do not even realize they are praying but feel the reverberation of love or awe or wonder within them when observing a velvety night sky or gazing into the eyes of a beloved, who orient their lives towards goodness and compassion that expresses itself in moments of gratitude or beauty.

So, how do we live life as a prayer? It is how we react to the world, guided by genuine questions. How can I respond, in each of my actions, through unconditional love? How can I live with daily grace and wonder and mystery and awe? With gratitude and generosity? Listen – listen to the whispers reaching your receptive ear guiding you towards love. Feel this love reverberate within your very body as you are guided by all that is sacred. We can highlight the forgiveness espoused by Universalism. Likewise, we can live, observing the inherent goodness of all people offered by Unitarianism as we react to each blessed and broken being with faith in this goodness. We meet aggravation with patience, we meet indifference with love, we meet the mundane with wonder and awe. And it is how we center within ourselves. We become oriented with a love for humanity just as we foster an appreciation for sunsets and relationships of deep love. We become immersed in a gratitude for the gift of life, in an abundant awe that we even exist. We gaze at the expansive universe and settle into a state of wonder. There is, too, a deep compassion for the least of these and as such a call to service and justice. All of this culminates in a constant connection to something far greater than our individual selves, be that God or a sunset or the spirit of love. Who do I want to be? How do I

want to live? I want to listen to divine whispers of love and compassion and act upon these holy offerings in each moment of each day.

May we live life as a prayer; may we – beyond all else – listen to every divine and sacred whisper. When staring into the sunken face of a beloved about to leave this realm, may I hear soft words of love permeating that thin veil between the mortal and the immortal. When gazing at distant, ancient stars may I hear quiet blessings offering beauty and awe so that that very moment I feel the wonder of prayer reverberating in my very being. May we welcome mystery disguised as the ordinary for to do so is to invite wonder and awe and the divine into our lives. May we listen and receive, may we open our very beings into all that is sacred and holy and be attentive to whispers of love and divine guidance for to do so is to pray, and to pray, until our very lives become a prayer. Until even the challenges are full of mystery and awe and an invitation to the sacred. May we work to act, always, in love, and may we orient ourselves, in each day, towards receiving all that is divine, sacred, holy, and blessed.

May it be so, and Amen