

A Prayer for Non-believers
Rev. Andrea Greenwood, Guest Minister
Sunday, January 25, 2009
Wakefield Unitarian Universalist Church

OPENING WORDS from the Tao teh Ching, Lao Tse

The Tao is an empty vessel; it is used, but never filled.
Oh, unfathomable source of ten thousand things!

The highest good is like water.
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.
It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore benefit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.

PRAYER AND/OR MEDITATION: **"What I Know for Sure," by Bob Hicok**

Some people, told of witness trees,
pause in chopping a carrot
or loosening a lug nut and ask,
witness to what?
So while salad is made, or getting from A to B is repaired, these people
listen to the story of the Burnside Bridge sycamore,
alive at Antietam, bloodiest day of the war,
or the Appomattox Court House honey locust, just coming to leaf as Lee surrendered, and say, at
the end, *Cool*.
Then the chopping continues with its two sounds,
the slight snap to the separation
of carrot from carrot,
the harder crack of knife against cutting board,
or the sigh, also slight, of a lug nut
as it's tightened against a wheel.
In time,
these people put their hands
under water and say, not so much to you
but to the window in front of the sink,
Think of all the things trees have seen.
Then it's time for dinner, or to leave, and a month passes, or a year,

before two fawns cross in front of the car,
or the man you've just given a dollar to lifts his shirt to the start
of the 23rd psalm tattooed to his chest, "The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want,"
when some people say, *I feel like one of those trees,*
you know? And you do know.
You make a good salad, change a wicked tire, you're one of those people,
watching, listening, a witness
to whatever this is,
for as long as it is
amazing, isn't it, that I could call you right now and say,
They still can't talk to dolphins but are closer,
as I still can't say everything I want to but am closer, for trying,
to God, if you must, to spirit, if you will,
to what's never easy for people like us: life, breath, the sheer volume
of wonder.

Amen--

Reading *from Listening is an act of Love*

This is an excerpt from the Storycorps project, in which sound booths come to town and you schedule an appointment and folks are interviewed -- by a friend or a family member, or by staff from Storycorps. In this section, Janet Lutz, a 62 year old hospital chaplain in Atlanta is interviewed by her friend Lori. She starts off by talking about her work twenty years earlier, saying:

... I was on call, and there had been a fire, and two little kids were killed from smoke inhalation. The grandmother had tried to rescue them, and her hands had been burned, and they asked me to go see her. It was such a crowded, busy night that they put her in a storeroom with two other women who were also patients, and they were separated by moveable partitions so they couldn't see each other. And I went in to see this woman whose hands had been burned. She was African American, and her two grandchildren had died. She asked me to pray with her, and I started to pray. I would say a sentence, and she would repeat it back to me. And pretty soon the other women we couldn't see but knew were in this room started to repeat this prayer back also. You know, there's a place in the Bible where Moses is looking at the burning bush, and he takes off his shoes, because it's holy ground. And I really felt in that moment that we ought to take off our shoes; that we were all standing on holy ground, that these three women patients who didn't know each other and couldn't see each other could pray together in this room....

Then Rev. Lutz changes the topic, and starts talking about how department directors in the hospital call on her when they are having staff conflicts. She goes and interviews all the staff individually, to see if she can figure out the difficulty and get them through it. She talks about an area of the hospital where they pack instruments for surgery. Each surgery has a list of all the instruments they need, and at the top of the list is the patient's name and then this whole list of what's needed. "And these technicians work in the basement of the hospital in a huge,

cavernous, windowless room with lots of instruments. They're given this list, and it's up to her or to him to pack these instruments" and seal them with tape and take them up to the O.R.

"And they were telling me their stories and the more I listened to them, the more touched I was by who these people were -- people who to most of the hospital were basically anonymous. One of the women told me that as she packed the instruments and she knew the patient's name, she would pray for that patient. And she had been doing that for 40 years. I thought, Nobody knows she's doing this. Nobody knows. Here she is, a person who has been working at that hospital for longer than most of us, who is doing this incredibly important job that has to be done precisely and carefully, and is fairly complicated. And as she's doing this, she's praying for the patients she will never meet and the patients she will never see. She'll never know the outcome. She only knows she is helping to make the surgery possible.

Then I found out that most of them did it. I interviewed a whole lot of them and we worked out the issues that they needed to work out in that particular instant, but I think partly what they liked so much was that someone was listening to them, somebody was hearing their story. That's the key, I think -- listening to the stories of the people who are so essential but often not seen by patients and families....

One of the things we do each spring that I instituted at the hospital was we go around and bless the hands of all the people who work in the hospital. For me its a very powerful experience, to touch the hands of all these people. I go around and find the people in the basement, the people who are cleaning the toilets, and the people who are serving the food, and I look for those people and make sure their hands get blessed. And last year one of them said to me, *This is the most meaningful thing that has ever happened to me, that somebody blessed my hands.* That's not something I invented -- it's done in a number of hospitals around the country -- but it is a very special experience to be able to bless the hands that work, because people work really hard in the hospital. I'm sure they do in other jobs, too, but it's very difficult work, much of what they do. And their hands get dirty. And they're not always as valued as they should be. And so when I go around finding people, wherever they are, to bless their hands, they're often startled, and then really touched by it, as am I.

SERMON: Prayer for Non-believers Andrea Greenwood

My last year of seminary, my friend and I escaped from University Housing. We got the janitor's apartment in a luxury condo building. It was in the basement, next to the furnace. What this meant was that we had free heat, which was incredible in Chicago. We were warm for the first time ever. It also meant that there were no windows, and so it was easy to forget what it was like outside. I was almost always the one to get the paper, which involved going upstairs into the lobby and sticking my hand out the front door. One January day the paper was too far down the walk, and although I held the door with my foot, the wind blew hard and soon I was stuck outside in nothing but my bathrobe. At first I was more worried the embarrassment. Then I grew more worried about dying of exposure. I rang our bell relentlessly for an hour. I knew that

my house mate was up. But he never answered. Eventually someone suited up for work left the building, and conceded to let me in though I could tell he was wondering if I really belonged at this building. My housemate's explanation later was that he was meditating, a discipline he took very seriously and would not interrupt for anything. He was proud of himself for concentrating right through that incessant bell ringing, and thought that his success in blocking it out and only being mildly annoyed at me were a sign of progress in his prayer life. He told me this as he read the Tribune while I had my hands defrosting in a sinkful of warm water.

My conclusion was that there was a correlation between deep devotion to meditation and the most seriously messed up students. I also thought that the whole meditation thing did not work, but it occurs to me now that it did -- he felt centered and focussed, which is what he wanted. It just isn't what I thought meditation and prayer were for. My expectation was that such an activity was to make us be of service -- say, by letting the frozen person inside. He did not care about that. He wanted to be able to remain unruffled, able to face everything and not panic; not try to fix the world. Calm soul of all things.

Perhaps I was primed to believe that it was the messed up students who were into prayer because of Franny Glass. Some of you may remember Franny. She was a creation of J.D. Salinger, and could have been the model for the old ad campaign that asked "Are you a Unitarian without knowing it?" She was the original postmodern girl: half-Irish Catholic and half-Jewish, and seriously tutored in the ways of Buddhism by her revered older brother, Seymour, who happened to be a psychiatrist. She was everything, and nothing; a fact made abundantly clear when Seymour went off on a holiday with his wife and killed himself. Franny starts looking for wholeness, for something to rest in, and she reads an old work called *The Way of a Pilgrim*. The book is mentioned by one of her professors, but it is on the desk of her deceased brother that Franny finds the volume. It's by an anonymous Russian Orthodox peasant who took the apostle Paul at face value, and decided that he must pray without ceasing. Franny takes up the task and recites the Jesus prayer endlessly, but grows increasingly depressed instead of enlightened or relieved. The prayer, whose words are "Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner," gives her no respite. A lifetime of being schooled in Buddhist meditation does not do it for her either. Being all things worked when life was good, but under stress, it was the nothing that surfaced.

So I have been thinking about all of this -- about prayer and meditation, and whether the words are interchangeable; about the belief systems implied in each; or the discipline required; but also about the purpose. What do we pray for? I have never liked the part of a church service for prayer, because I don't know who or what I would pray to. Yet I like the word prayer a lot, especially in poems. There is a Tagore piece that has always spoken to me: we pray not to avoid problems, but to have the strength to face them. In church, it is usually the music that is a prayer for me, but sometimes it is just the way the light moves in the room. Meditation sounds more in line with my belief systems, but I don't like discipline very much, unless it is self-imposed, and basically rebel against anything that proscribes behavior. I am sure that the sample I have is skewed by the fact that I went to seminary, but the people I have known who were really into meditation seemed like they were holding an awful lot of demons at bay. But the story of Franny Glass could also be a warning to Unitarian Universalists: trying to include everything can leave us lonely. Consolation becomes intellectual, about what we believe rather than how we feel. We

don't really change; but instead think of wholeness as being restored to the way we were. While that may be what we long for, it isn't going to happen. That fact is why we pray.

Prayer is supposed to be the central piece of religion, but in our tradition we tend to be purposefully vague about its role. I am definitely guilty of this. But I also resent it, and feel like we have something to teach those who are too literal in the practice; who insist that prayer is about communication with a God who can be addressed; a God with some kind of permanent substance. When we let that definition rule, it excludes many of us who do embrace the spirit of prayer; who believe that prayer is an attitude that relates us to our bodies, our actions, our communities, and our world. It isn't a separate practice, walled off and done ritually. It is your whole life; where everything that lets us grow is born. It is the way we habitually live. Your whole life a prayer is what it means to pray without ceasing. When something becomes a habit, it means we do it automatically -- but because we once chose to. It is not the same thing as just doing what we feel like, and it is not mindless. This is why we have to develop good habits -- they really do become our lives, even if we were not planning for that to happen. Endlessly calling yourself a sinner and hoping for mercy from outside yourself is not a good habit.

Habits can be our consolation, our comfort, our strength. My own form of meditation began as a habit long, long ago in the dentist's chair. As a child, we had a dentist whose hands were so big we all wondered why he had chosen this work. Pediatric dentistry is not the right field for a guy who looked like a line backer and had fists the size of hams. I have never known if that line from Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, where the elves ridicule poor Herbie for wanting to be a dentist, was intrinsically funny, or if it just struck a deep chord within me: why couldn't I have a cute elf for a dentist instead of this giant of a man? This was in the pre-rubber gloves day, so we made jokes about how we didn't need to brush because the wiry hairs on his fingers did the job for us. As a child, I was allergic to Novocain, and if you stop and picture for a moment the process by which one might discover such an allergy, you might get an idea of how the posture for prayer developed.

What kind of prayer? Deliver me from this? Strike the doctor dead? No, it was a mind over matter thing. I chose to go without anesthesia and have a short time of pain rather than be sick for two days. So I would watch my hands on the arm rests, and will them to not clench; convince myself to be relaxed in my body. Then I would drift back into the moment, but when I saw my hands I would realize how tense I was, and start over again. It was a game and a distraction, but in my 20s I began taking it very seriously. Quarterly dentist visits seemed like about the right amount of time for a serious meditation practice to me. But as I grow older, I have had more and more time in the dentist's chair -- partially because our instincts about that childhood dentist were right. He was simply living on too large a scale, and all of us who went to him now have the same problem: he drilled away so much tooth that as fillings age and need to be replaced, there is no tooth left. We all have mouthfuls of crowns. My meditation appointments have become much more frequent. And I have to say, I have not grown any better at it. Practice does not make perfect, even though the habit has spread and I now use my hands as a relaxation reminder in many stressful situations. But the dentist's office is the real deal: It is new and the same every time. I approach the windowless room, climb into the chair, almost always noting how NICE dentist chairs are, and think I am fine; then I watch my hands and realize I am not open or relaxed. I begin again, and always feel a sense of triumph if I can

control the muscles in my hands, which then control my brain. I think it's odd how I tuning out what is happening on one level is what lets it in on another. Emptiness brings fullness. It is that storage closet where the chaplain in our reading goes, to help the grandmother who burned her hands in an unsuccessful attempt to save the children from the fire. The closet full of loss is where holy ground springs up; where unseen voices meet up and prayer is shared.

Perhaps more than formula for praying or meditating, what we need to understand most is the paradox of any activity that is so inward, so intimate -- and yet is something we would not and could not do if we were not set down in a very real and concrete world full of drills and dentists, of fires and unspeakable loss. Prayer really has two directions; there is our own yearning for connection, and our understanding that others, too, seek that connection. We both work at reaching out or up or in; and we rest, ready to see; open. But it is an active kind of rest; full of awareness and attention. It is not sleep. What we do with our lives; the work of our hands -- these are our offerings, poured out for the world, which is in our care. As the instruments are packed for surgery, someone in a windowless room is sterilizing needles, and praying that as they pierce the body of a stranger, there will be healing. It does not always go well, but the intent is there. And miracles, too, are there. As Barack Obama became our president, a honey locust tree that witnessed Abraham Lincoln's inauguration was dying -- substantially destroyed by a storm that swept through the National Park on August 7, the tree has been hanging on. It had already lived more than 30 years longer than anyone could have expected, and very soon it will rest. The cold weather this weekend will probably be its end. Ashes to ashes. "I feel like one of those trees, you know -- and we do know." as the poem said.

Think of all the things we witness; all the things we grow through. This is what prayer is really for; to know we are flawed and limited and have troubles and need help; while also knowing that anything is possible; that things change; and that we will, too. Prayer -- the habits we form and practice -- brings us closer to the people we want to be by making us aware of how we are not yet there. I loved the sentences from the Tao-Ching about the usefulness of emptiness at the center of things -- the middle of the wheel; the space inside a clay jug; even a room, Lao-Tse, says only becomes useful if you cut holes into it. Clinical health becomes human healing when we cut holes into those closed spaces; when the prayers that are locked in can be shared.

This year my schedule has allowed me to return to my other form of prayer, which is swimming. Again, this is something that I began as a child, but it has changed as I age. What was fun became a great way to earn money in school. What was a job became exercise. What was exercise became a break from too much mental work. As I moved around the country, pools were often the only place where I could meet people without being in a role; but I always used the pool as a measuring stick with which I could note the balance of my life. This fall, I was struck by the balance of my two disciplines: mind over matter in the dentist's chair; matter over mind in the water. Although I had never entirely stopped swimming, the form had changed as my family grew. Now, back to counting strokes and timing laps, it becomes a sensory experience. It is mindlessness that somehow lets me work through what is on my mind, as I pay no attention to anything but moving through the water. It is profoundly restful. I remember years ago, there was a time when all three of my boys were in programs for 2 and a half hours at a time. A group of mothers were all going to Starbucks and invited me, and it was so tempting. I went a couple of times, but it became clear to me that a habit was going to develop, and I could

pick one in which I would sit around and eat muffins and spend money, or I could go swim. It felt a lot more permanent than it turned out to be, but the choice mattered. Now, it is a relief, not an effort, to swim. It is a return.

When I was ordained, the cover of the order of service had a quote from Simone Weil: Attentiveness without an aim is the supreme form of prayer. That is, we don't pray for things; we don't pray at all. We pay attention -- to our bodies, our breath, to the lives around us. There is no other goal; the attention is all there is. This sounds a lot easier than it is, especially with the lives that we sometimes want a break from -- in my case, my children. My youngest child really wanted to study karate. I was really not into it. I am not big on fighting; I am not big on the topdown leadership; and it basically is the opposite of everything I was taught as a child -- I grew up with the "strangers are only friends you haven't met yet" philosophy; the consensus building; all that. Also, the program required a year long commitment and we had never managed to stick with anything a whole year, not even school. But Asher really wanted to do this, and things had been so bad for him for so long that I was afraid not to listen to him. I brought him to the studio where we knew a friend went, and I was very unsure. I did not want to disappoint Asher, or have him mad at me; but I also did not want him to experience any more failure; and I was terrified of how he would react to the sensei correcting him in the way senseis do, no less. But I could not just stay home and never try. So I withheld judgment, met the sensei, gave him the information, and trusted him.

Well, it turned out that Asher was right. Karate has been a big gift to him; so much so that Levi goes now too. So I am glad for his sake that I listened to him, and I am happy to have my notion of what parents are required to do reinforced. But I also have been learning. What I see in karate is something I could have used, even though part of me still struggles with accepting the world view it comes with. The students get ready by being in what is called fighting stance. I have to work at listening to this -- I just react to the word "fighting"; but what it means is they are ready; centered and flexible, assessing what is happening, and able to anticipate what is coming next. It is a strategic position; neither offensive or defensive, but ready. It is a way of life that assumes we -- each of us -- are worth fighting for. If liberalism teaches this at all, we don't do it very well. We assume there is value in not fighting, and that assumption makes us quite vulnerable. It is hard for me to look at the world as full of opponents, but prayer reminds us of something: Change does not happen easily or naturally. Sometimes we are changed in brutal ways. We resist it; put up a fight; but we do not have a strategy -- maybe because our belief that life is good and that people are good make it hard to be prepared. We switch from being everything to being nothing; just a sinner in need of mercy.

Sending Asher to karate is a prayer, in itself; and his practice is also prayer. Real devotion is a way of life, not something to be called upon in an emergency. It means we can listen, and see, and be ready -- ready in the way Moses was when he was tending his sheep, thinking he would go on living on the plains with his father-in-law and that all would be well, now that they had left Egypt behind. But suddenly he saw a burning bush, and heard a voice telling him it was his turn to lead, and he was ready, and everything followed from that.

CLOSING WORDS from Lie Back, by Philip Booth

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's-float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.