

**Help, Thanks, Wow**  
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield  
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READING            Prayer 101            Anne Lamotte

I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple.

Help. Thanks. Wow.

You may in fact be wondering what I even mean when I use the word "prayer." It's certainly not what the TV Christians mean. It's not for display purposes, like plastic sushi or neon. Prayer is private, even when we pray with others. It is communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding. Let's say it is communication from one's heart to God. Of if that is too triggering or ludicrous a concept for you, to the Good, the force that is beyond our comprehension but that in our pain or supplication or relief we don't need to define or have proof of or any established contact with. Let's say it is what the Greeks called the Really Real, or what lies within us, beyond the scrim of our values, positions, convictions, and wounds. Or let's say it is a cry from deep within to Life or Love, with capital L's.

Nothing could matter less than what we call this force. I know some ironic believers who call God Howard, as in "Our Father, who are in Heaven, Howard be thy name." I called God Phil for a long time, after a Mexican bracelet promised to write "Phil 4:4-7" on my bracelet, Philippians 4:4-7 being my favorite passage of Scripture, but only got as far as "Phil" before having to dismantle his booth. Phil is a great name for God.

My friend Robyn calls God “the Grandmothers.” The *Deteriorata*, a parody of the *Desiderata*, counsels us, “Therefore, make peace with your God, / Whatever you conceive him to be— / Hairy thunderer, or cosmic muffin.”

Let’s not get bogged down on whom or what we pray to. Let’s just say prayer is communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or Goodness, or Howard; to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something unimaginably big, and not us. We could call this force Not Me, and Not Preachers Onstage with a Choir of 800. Or for convenience we could just say “God.”

### **SERMON “Help, Thanks, Wow”**

A number of years ago, as some of you know, I was the Youth Director of the First Parish in Wayland, working closely with the staff and, when there was a Ministerial Intern, collaborating with her or him. So it was that I got to know and become now life long friends with your former minister, Mary Louise Schmalz. And so it was that I sang with my group TVS (The Vocal Section) at her Ordination which took place in Wayland the June before she came to you. On that occasion either the sermon or the Charge to the Minister was given by Jane Rzepka, then minister of our congregation in Reading. Mary Louise wanted something spirited and we sang the old gospel tune, *I’ll See you in the Rapture*. This song had nothing at all to do with Mary Louise’s theology but everything about singing from the heart and with energy, bulging the walls of that historic Unitarian humanist stronghold of First Parish. She wanted to get to the “really, real” or as she used to say, “the zoomy stuff.” She wanted to get beyond the words—which in the case of the *Rapture*, I have to say do not represent anything to do with our normal UU thinking:

I’ll see you in the rapture, I’ll see you in the rapture  
I’ll see you at the meeting in the end

There with my blessed savior  
We gonna live and reign forever  
I'll see you in the rapture some sweet day.

No, those words don't come up much in our UU theologies. She wanted to get beyond all words for that moment in her Ordination, get to the call to the really real that sent her into ministry in the first place, get to *her* rapture, if you will. It is that movement to the really real that is what prayer is all about. At least for some of us.

I chose music for today that is all about prayer, either explicitly in the words or implicitly in the space it provides for the light to get in. All three of our hymns are from the African American spiritual tradition, as was *Standing in the Need of Prayer*. All talk about getting to what matters: taking the time to hush ourselves and feel the spirit, however you or I define that—spirit of life, life force, God, Goddess, or Howard. All express longing or listening—listening for the voice of the really real, whether it is speaking from the mountain or from some place deep within ourselves, if we could quiet ourselves just to listen for it.

Choosing the music reminded me of a time not too long after Mary Louise's Ordination when Jane Rzepka, had me come to sing as part of a Sunday morning service in Reading, something I did for her a number of times before I became her Music Director in the mid Nineties. On this particular occasion she asked me if my repertoire suggested some theme. I told her I had all these songs about prayer. "Prayer," she says! It was like I threw her a curve ball. But then she went ahead and crafted a service around all those songs about prayer I came up with, including, I remember, *Hear My Prayer*. As a good humanist UU who says she doesn't pray, she was willing to consider it for a morning, as she does in her book published last year *From Zip Line to Hosaphones: Dispatches from the Search for Truth and Meaning*.

I wonder if I took a poll of those of us in this sanctuary this morning, how many would say that they pray, however loosely defined. I know I do. I even told Jane, one of my UU idols, that. That's because we don't have to think all the same about things as UUs. So I admit it, I do pray. I pray when I am alone. "Help me to figure out how to get through this pile of papers on my desk, this crowded schedule, this difficult hospital visit." **Help!** In the morning when I am getting out of bed, "Thank you for being able to put my feet on the floor and stand up," something I never forget to be thankful for after the horrible car accident that broke both of legs and kept me flat on back for months. **Thanks!** And when I walk around the Jewish cemetery at the end of my street as the sun is going down and the sky is turning mauve and purple, just a one word prayer can do it, **Wow!** Same deal when I hear some music that brings me to a place of transcendence. **Wow.**

Even when I went through my atheist/agnostic/humanist/searching years after high school, there was that space inside and that questioning that seemed to often have some impetus begging to put words to it—not unlike how Anne Lamott, whose book *Help, Thanks, Wow* inspired the service today, puts it:

helphelphelp

thanksthankthanks

wowwowwow Wow!

Back then I don't think I was articulating who or what I might have been talking to—praying to—especially with my anti-church feeling of the time. Or maybe it wasn't exactly anti-church but more of a "Is church relevant at all?" Is church relevant, I asked myself when we are sending our young men to fight in Vietnam, when the place that talks of the love of God seems to ignore the poor, people of color, and gay folks, not to mention, at least the church I went to at the time, no place for women. Of course I hadn't discovered Unitarian Universalism at that point. Church and traditional religion seemed to me to be part of the problem,

not part of the answer. Praying to the God that I thought they were talking about seemed useless.

But I had an urge for praying. I kept trying to figure out how to meditate—a form of prayer. Maybe it was seeing the Beatles with the Maharishi and all that sitar music. Or maybe it was that prayer that my mother said every night when I was little. Probably many of you know it but don't know how really old it is. It was included in something called *The New England Primer* way back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is probably way older than that:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
If I should die before I wake,  
I'd pray the Lord my soul to take.

My memories of my mother saying this prayer as she cuddled me and tucked me in feel comforting, safe...but wait just a gosh, darn minute! “If I should die before I wake?!” Who knew that could happen when you were five? How scary! And *who* is taking my soul *where*? And what's a soul? I probably thought at that point it was my mother's favorite fish, the sole she pouched in milk. Lamott talks about going to her friends' houses when she was little and hearing her friends and parents saying that prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” Lamott says, “Wait, what? What did you say? I could die in my sleep? I am only seven years old....That so, so did not work for me, especially in the dark in a strange home. Don't be taking my soul. You leave my soul right here in my fifty pound body. Help.”<sup>1</sup> As an adult and a UU I look back in memory to my mother singing it to me and wonder about it all, but as a child in a busy household with three younger siblings, that night time with my mother was precious and it did not feel scary. It felt like being in touch with the really real. It felt more like thanks than help as a

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<sup>1</sup> Lamotte, Anne (2012). *Help. Thanks. Wow.*, NY: Riverhead Books, 3.

kid. But it also named that the world can be a scary place. There is joy—birthday parties, swimming in the summer, sledding on my flying saucer in the winter, getting new books and toys—but there can also be illness and death, as the writers of the prayer knew 300 years ago and the parents of the 50s knew before the days of the polio vaccine and in the decade past World War II. **Help.**

A couple of years ago a dear friend of mine who is a singer songwriter was visiting as he often does. We share a lot of things, including music and growing up in Wayland where I still live, as well as similar family and cultural references. One evening we went out for a drive around town, stopping at familiar spots that are almost sacred to Peter, with a CD in playing some music he had recorded that afternoon.

I threw a penny on the railroad track  
and the freight train come and smashed it flat.  
I keep watching them iron wheels  
rolling down the rails of polished steel.  
Fire burning in the belly of the beast  
what you want the most you need the least.  
Parallel lines go on and on  
they seem to meet on the horizon.

I love that line, “what you want the most, you need the least.” Talk about getting in touch with the really real. And then he sang:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
If I should die before I wake,  
I’d pray the Lord my soul to take.

And then he sang on a part I dimly seemed to remember:

God bless mommy and daddy too  
Grandma grandpa the captain and the crew  
And all the ships at sea

That's how my father prayed with me.

And after the last chorus he added:

The list grows longer year by year  
With family and friends and children dear  
I saved them all from my worst fears  
So far, so near, so far so near.<sup>2</sup>

Sitting in a car somewhere in the dark night, the two of us listened to this recording where Peter was remembering, remembering, as he told me, his “da” singing him to sleep, but also trying to get in touch with what was most real to him, in this *Night Prayer* which is the name he gave this song. He saved them all—family, friends, children and the ever growing list we experience in life of those who have gone from us, those who have gone through the greatest challenges and those who just struggle to live day to day—saved from his worst fears, perhaps of fading to oblivion. As we sat in the car with tears streaming remembering his parents and mine, failed marriages, car accidents and all the stuff of life, the blessings of the night prayer kept those dear close. So far, so near, so far so near. Was that **thanks** or **help**?

To pray or not to pray, that is the question Jane asks in her little volume that talks about the lives of contemporary UUs, with all the depth and breadth that implies. She says, “Here’s how it looks to me: something in our hearts says, ‘**Help** me I need somebody to lean on, to depend on, or to guide me, or to rescue me,’” or ‘I’ll do anything, just make my baby get well.’ The root word for prayer is from the Latin, *precarious*, ‘obtained by begging.’” Jane asks, “Don’t you know that feeling? That’s just how it seems to work with human beings.”<sup>3</sup>

But as Jane goes on to point out and which resonates with my conundrum in my younger days, this is pretty awkward for many UUs. Who or what are we

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Rowan, *Night Prayer*.

<sup>3</sup> Rzepka, Jane (2012). *From Ziplines to Hosaphones*. Skinner House, 27.

praying to? According to an article that appeared in Newsweek a while back, “Prayer presupposes a God who can be addressed.”<sup>4</sup> That is a pretty big problem for UUs who don’t believe in a God. Or maybe we are of the “spiritual but not religious sort” who don’t believe in a puppeteer in the sky, tugging on the marionette strings to make stuff happen in our lives or in response to our pleas. Or as Jane says, “While we know we would appreciate some guidance now and then, we have trouble postulating a divine twenty-four hour texting service.”<sup>5</sup>

But does it rule out Lamotte’s help, thanks, wow? I think it depends on what you think prayer is. For Lamotte, “prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union, even if we are bitter or insane or broken.”<sup>6</sup> I think that for some UUs, the word prayer is used in the broader sense of Lamotte’s help, thanks and wow. It can be finding silence, it can be singing with folks in a nursing home as I did yesterday, it can be serving a meal at My Brother’s Table or bringing the bags of cans from the church to the Food Pantry. As my colleague Mark Belletini writes:

“...prayer can be words, silence, song, or as Paul of Tarsus says, ‘a sigh.’ Prayer can be one prophet breaking the bread of affliction with tears in his eyes and another breaking a clay pot with eyes ablaze. Whatever cuts through our defensiveness, whether it’s disguised as a sense of worthlessness or a sense of hubris, is a great prayer. Crafted or spontaneous, elegant or halted with sobs, sung to God, danced to Love Most Deep or simply uttered into thin air, prayer...is the life-breath of worship.”<sup>7</sup>

Whatever prayer is for you—or for me—it seems that at its most fundamental it is that expression of total engagement—in life, in the moment, in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> Lamotte, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Rzepka, 29-30.



being here now, in yearning for a whole future, in healing a difficult path, in trying to come to grips with a hurting world, or just saying **Wow**. It is putting ourselves in the place where what we articulate to ourselves and to the greater mystery, changes us. Or as Lon Ray Call once said and it says outside on our Roadside Pulpit this week: “Prayer does not change things; prayer changes people and people change things.” Perhaps that is just semantics for you.

Or perhaps you think as C. S. Lewis who wrote: I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I am helpless. I pray because need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God. It changes me.”

Whatever words you use, it is all pointing to the really real. You can call it prayer. Or not. Or as Jane says, “Call it your religion. You are a UU. You have a choice.” **Wow**.

William Schulz: “The best way to experience spirituality is not to chase it—and surely not to run as if we’re being chased. The best way, I suspect, is to pause and ponder it in silence. In silence we can feel our breath return. And occasionally, if we are very very quiet, even the wind itself may speak.”