

Paying Attention = Prayer
Sunday, March 18, 2018

Ralph Waldo Emerson used to tell a story about two bishops traveling by boat. From nowhere a great storm arose. Winds and waves buffeted the ship. The bishops huddled on deck, nauseous and terrified, while the crew struggled to keep the ship upright. As the captain strode by them, the bishops called out to him, “Captain, how bad is it? What can we do?” The captain replied, “Pray.” At that the bishops’ faces paled even more. “And has it come to that?” they moaned.

I thought of this story on Tuesday after President Trump tweeted his firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Not that I was that enthusiastic about Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, but he did seem a moderating presence in keeping more bellicose views from prevailing. Mike Pompeo, perhaps, not so much. So on Tuesday a wave of despair broke over me. “All we can do now is pray,” I thought.

But unlike the bishops, I don’t see prayer as the option of last resort or a sign that all is lost. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote,

*Prayer invites God,
to be present in our spirits
and in our lives.*

*Prayer cannot
bring water to parched land
nor mend a broken bridge,
nor rebuild a ruined city,*

*but prayer can
water an arid soul,
mend a broken heart,
and rebuild a weakened will.*

Prayer can help to move us from despair to hope even when nothing outwardly has changed.

Now upfront I want to say that you don’t have to believe in God to pray. In fact, belief in God can make it harder to pray – or at least belief in a certain kind of God. If you were taught that God is a being – that old man in the sky perhaps – who holds all of life in his hands and bestows blessings or withholds them – then

the very first time you prayed for something and didn't get it, you may have decided that prayer doesn't work. It may not have been the bicycle or the puppy you didn't get – we can rationalize reasons for that – but when you begged God to make the puppy well again, or to save the life of your grandfather, or your cousin, or your friend's mother, and God didn't intervene, that's when perhaps you decided prayer doesn't work. And that kind of prayer doesn't work. That's why, I think, Emerson told the story about the bishops, and why he used bishops when Unitarians have never had bishops. He was setting up a difference between traditional Christianity and the Transcendentalists. The traditional Christians, even the first generation of Unitarians, believed in a Being outside of us who made things happen - or chose not to make things happen. Emerson and the other Transcendentalists had a totally different understanding of God – not as a Being enthroned afar, but as the Spirit of Life which breathes through each of us and through our world. This isn't a God who can still the seas to save the bishops' ship, but had the bishops been able to open themselves to this understanding of God, they might have found themselves better able to face the danger and perhaps minister to the captain and the crew.

But you don't even have to believe in the Transcendentalist's understanding of God to pray and be helped by prayer. Prayer is about opening ourselves to love, to sorrow, to joy, to the wonders of the universe, and it is a natural part of being human. In a letter to the early Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul described prayer as “the sighs too deep for words” which come from our hearts. The French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, defined prayer as “paying attention.” She wrote: “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”

Pay attention. When you listen deeply to someone, so deeply that you feel what they are feeling, so deeply that you are not thinking about what you will say next but only holding them in your love, you are praying. When you feel grateful for a kindness offered to you or for a luxury or privilege you enjoy, you are praying. When you regret something hurtful you said or did – or something helpful you might have said or done but didn't, you are praying. When you are walking on the beach and stop to marvel at the power of the waves or the intricate whorls of a shell, or at the process which ground rocks to sand, you are praying. You are paying attention to Life with a capital “L”.

The very funny and very wise spiritual writer Anne Lamott divides prayer into three kinds: Help. Thanks. And Wow. The prayers I've just described are examples of those prayers. Plus a 4th – I'm sorry -though she might classify that prayer under “Help.” When we hold in our hearts people we care about or our

concerns for ourselves or the world, we are praying “help.” When we acknowledge the ways we have fallen short and renew our desire to care better, we are praying “I’m sorry.” When we feel gratitude for all the gifts which come to us - from the morning cup of tea to clean warm sheets at night - we are praying “thanks.” And when we feel awe at the beauty of creation or the power of love or the nobility of the human spirit, we are praying “Wow.” These prayers, these acts of attention, may not outwardly change anything in the world, but inwardly they change us and our relationships in the world.

Think what your life would be without them. What if you closed yourself off to all knowledge of other people’s lives and of the world? What if you weren’t able to pay attention? I imagine someone who did that would spiral down thorough the isolation into feeling hopeless and powerless. Notice that I didn’t say, “what if you were closed off” because paying attention is a choice. Our bodies may be shut away from others – imprisoned or separated by choice as hermits do, but as long as we carry others in our hearts, we can maintain the connection and the hope. Monks and nuns of every tradition separate themselves purposely in body though not in spirit that they may be “powerhouses of prayer” for the needs of the world. But a story in last Sunday’s *NY Times* offered an example of someone who is isolating his heart if not his body, and I found it very sad. The day after Donald Trump was elected president, Erik Hagerman swore that he would avoid learning anything that happened to our country from that day forward. For more than a year now, he has isolated himself from any form of news. He lives alone on a pig farm in southeastern Ohio. He refuses to watch or read any kind of news and anyone who speaks with him is forbidden to mention anything happening in the world. The only news which makes it past his blockade is the local weather – but not major storms anywhere else – and the wins and losses of his team, the Cleveland Cavaliers. Every morning he drives 18 miles to a coffeeshop in the nearest town where he wears headphones playing white noise to cover the sound of the conversations around him. The staff know to keep newspapers away from his table and not to talk to him about anything beyond the sunshine, rain, or snow. He knows nothing about events in Parkland, Charlottesville, the devastation of hurricanes, Russia, or North Korea. But he also knows nothing about the women’s marches, #MeToo, or the student walk-outs this week and Saturday’s March for Our Lives. He thinks he is protecting himself from despair, but without letting hope get in, despair and isolation will be all that is left. He is not paying attention.

No, his learning of what is going on in the world probably wouldn’t change anything now, but it would change him. The energy he puts into upholding his

blockade of all news might be put into protecting the environment or supporting an agency that works with refugees, for instance, if only he would let in the pain and sorrow of the world, sit with it in love, and let that love and sorrow flow out in whatever way seems appropriate.

That is what prayer does. It gives us hope when hope is hard to find. There are some studies which have implied that prayer can also help the person or situation prayed for, as in a famous study of patients recovering from heart surgery, some of whom were prayed for, some not, by people who didn't know them and didn't even know their names. In this study, the patients who were prayed for recovered more quickly than those who weren't, even though they didn't know they were being prayed for. But that study has never been reproduced – so who knows? I do know from my own experience, when I've dealt with illness or the deaths of my parents, that having friends tell me they are praying for me has made me feel less alone. Because of all the baggage around the word "prayer," I tend to tell people that I am holding them in my heart, rather than praying for them, and because that's how I understand what I am doing. I am carrying them – often one of you – with me as I go about my day, paying attention.

So if it isn't already your practice, how might you go about paying attention? Try saying one of Anne Lamott's prayers – Help, Thanks, or Wow. Try praying the news – giving your attention to whatever breaks your heart or gives you hope – and see where that might lead you. Say to yourself the prayer I taught the children ("We give thanks for Being. We give thanks for being here. We give thanks for being here together." by Joseph Barth) as you sit or as you walk, as you drive or as you wait in the checkout line at the supermarket, or as you lie awake at night. Try a practice of prayer beads – Cathie McGowan is our resident expert on the UU practice of prayer beads, which is really helpful for those of us who like something tactile to help us focus. It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you pay loving attention – and see what speaks in the silence of your heart.

- Pamela M. Barz