

Homily – “Praying to No One?” Molly Housh Gordon

“On Prayer” by Czeslaw Milosz

You ask me how to pray to someone who is not.
All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge
And walking it we are aloft, as on a springboard,
Above landscapes the color of ripe gold
Transformed by a magic stopping of the sun.
The bridge leads to the shore of Reversal
Where everything is just the opposite and the word ‘is’
Unveils a meaning we hardly envisioned.
Notice: I say we; there, every one, separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh
And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

When I first started theological school, we students were admonished about the importance of a spiritual practice to aid along our personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth, and to help keep us sane.

What are you doing, we were asked, to feed and water your soul? After all, as Unitarian prophet and poet A. Powell Davies once said, “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.”

My fellow students named yoga practices, zen meditation, praying the rosary, walking a labyrinth, reading the bible.

Ummm, I said, I like to bake. Baking can be a spiritual practice right? It counts?

The thing is, baking **can** be a spiritual practice – any mundane thing can be, if we bring to it our intention and attention, our full presence and desire to connect with something larger than ourselves. After all, what is prayer but speech?

The thing is, though, I just wanted baking to count, to check the box. And that’s exactly why it didn’t.

Later in the year a mentor pulled me aside and said something like “Listen, the path of spiritual growth is not the path of least resistance, and there’s no one out there keeping score. You either make a commitment and go deep, or you don’t.”

“But I’ve never found a practice that works,” I told him.

“Keep looking,” he said.

And imagine my surprise when the practice that fit my life and called my spirit was prayer.

I had never even considered it.

My conception of the divine has little to do with a personal God with ears to hear and eyes to see. Why would I pray, with no one to pray to?

“All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge, and walking it we are aloft.”
Says Milosz.

All I know is it helps me be centered and connected. It helps me find the trust and compassion that slip away over the course of the day. Prayer helps me love the world, every day, which is no small feat.

Religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, writing in the 19th century claimed: “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.”

This is, in essence the pragmatic view of prayer that I hold. Prayer for me, is not about the hearing, it is about the speaking into the depth. It’s efficacy lies in the impact that it has on the one who prays.

And I do think prayer changes things. It changes me, and ripples around me.

So, as consistently as I can, I sit on a silk cushion next to my bookshelf, and I pray. For me this looks different every time, though it always begins with the lighting of a small chalice and usually a bit of singing. Often I read from a book of poems or prayers – the spirit of poetry easing me from words into the space beyond words.

Then I sit, and I never know quite what will come next.

As with love, prayer is a many splendored thing.

Sometimes it looks like chasing around my monkey mind, and I get up thinking – ah well, next time... This happens more often than not.

Sometimes it is the place and time where I let out the tears I have been saving, and give them over to the depths. Those times I get up feeling wrung out and light as air.

Sometimes my prayer is full of song and thanksgiving; sometimes it is rich with silence. The silent times are rare and precious.

Often I pray for you, my community, by thinking of your faces, by sending my love. And I do believe it makes a difference to me and to you and to how we live together. It makes a difference that I sit and love you every day. It makes a difference that you sit and love each other every week and probably more.

Always in prayer I ask for an open heart – for the capacity to love more freely and more completely – because it is so hard to do. Who am I asking? I have no idea. But it never hurts to ask.

Sometimes an image or a phrase comes to mind. Often when I am afraid or hurt or feeling remorse, I imagine God as an old woman sitting next me in a rocker, knitting a hat, saying nothing but, with her presence there, accepting my foibles and flaws with grace. I sit and imagine her and I practice loving more and better, and I am grateful for the grace.

And where are my prayers directed, and where does that feeling of grace come from?

My answer is more than “I don’t know.” When I am at my best, my answer to the question of where my prayers go is a spirit of deep and humble unknowing. The kind of unknowing that connects me with capital-M Mystery itself.

How paradoxical that it is precisely an agnosticism toward prayer that can put me in the kind of submission to mystery that the mystics of every tradition lift up. Perhaps our uncertain prayers have more effect in the transformation of the soul than every sure and strong word hurled at God.

And that *is* why I pray. For the transformation of the soul. For the deepening of the spirit.

For the growth of love and trust and connection beyond what I find possible in the every day.

Whether praying to no one, or something, or everything, I feel less alone through prayer.

In a rare sweet moment on my silk cushion by my bookshelf with my chalice burning before me, every now and then I truly experience my faith as I profess it.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that there are sparks of good and worthiness at the core of every person, for us to nourish through the practice of love. Every now and then, I can feel them sparkling inside.

And we believe that we are bound with all beings in a great web of life and love that holds us all and never lets us go. Every now and then, I can lean back and know it to be so.

That is why I pray.

Won’t you join me. We will pray now out of our own tradition, with a spoken prayer, a time of silence, and a time of sung prayer with our beloved hymn #123 Spirit of Life.

Let us pray.