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Thunder Bay

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## That Mercedes Benz

### Reading

These are the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick:

“Desire is the elemental force in human experience. . . .

“[Say a person] wants money. That is [their] real demand on life . . . . How [their] mind, then, puts on servile livery to wait on [their] dominant desire! How quick [their] wit becomes, how sinewy [their] thought[,] in the service of [their demand]! Wherever [human beings] concentrate their wills, apply their minds, and submit to toil, back of this visible consequence is dominant desire. . . .

“Dominant desire gathers up the scattered faculties, . . . nerves the will, and drives hard toward the issue. . . . Wherever there is low pressure in the atmosphere, thither the wind rushes to fill the need. . . . [I]n every enterprise now on foot in the world, [human beings] are endeavouring to supply [others’] desires – churches to meet the desire for worship, saloons to meet the appetite for drink, schools to supply the thirst for knowledge. Behind every organization lies a craving. Human wants are the open bays that call the sea of human effort in.”

The Meaning of Prayer, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1949, pp. 138-140.

## Sermon

### That Mercedes Benz

We have two surprises this morning.

“O Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

My friends all have Porsches, I must make amends.

Worked hard all my lifetime, no he’p from my friends.

O Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz?”

Which introduces our topic this morning: prayer. [Surprise number one!]

That little ditty “Mercedes Benz,” is a “gimme prayer.” Like those lists for Santa Claus that kids make at Christmas -- Santa, gimme this, Santa, gimme that.

How can you spot a gimme prayer? Look for the pray-er’s reaction, when the response is negative. If the result is a tantrum, it was a gimme prayer.

Kids pray gimme prayers naturally.

Once, when I was ten or twelve, I prayed one night that our team would win the big soccer game tomorrow – and that I would not embarrass myself, as the goalkeeper. The next afternoon, it turned cold and rainy. The winning goal -- for the other team -- rolled into the net as I sprawled, face down in the mud, the ball having just dribbled off my fingertips.

Well, that settled that. God had his chance, and he blew it.

I gave up on God, and prayer, for the next 25-30 years. I wanted a God that was a little more -- cooperative. More graceful about taking orders.

Good prayer is hard. Sometimes I wonder if we Unitarian Universalists avoid prayer, because we don't like to do things that we're not good at.

Still, prayer can be learned. It gets easier with practice.

This morning I propose to tackle five common questions about prayer.

1. Can you pray, without believing in God?
2. How come some prayers are apparently answered, and others aren't?
3. Does prayer really work?
4. Must we be sincere when we pray?
5. Finally, what to make of that familiar statement, "We never pray"?

I take up prayer this morning, in part because next year you are on your own, and you will need all the help you can get.

1. Some people say, I can't pray because -- I don't believe in God.

Can you pray if you don't believe in God?

Absolutely! It happens all the time.

Suppose you're walking down the street and stub your toe on a crack in the sidewalk. As you're flying through the air, you cry out, "HELP!!!"

Are you praying to God? Probably not. You're praying to whoever or whatever's listening. You don't care what it is. Somebody! Anybody! Anything!

And, in case you are wondering, "help" is not the only Anglo-Saxon four-letter word that works as a prayer.

In 1942, in a field sermon on Bataan, a Catholic military chaplain named Cummings supposedly said, "There are no atheists in the foxholes."

He was wrong, of course. But atheists can still pray.

Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and a self-described "stand-up atheist," once found himself instinctively praying to a God he did not believe existed. The Boston Globe told the story. (July 17, 2004).

“[Sinkford] abandoned his ‘rabid’ humanism, he said, when his teenage son took a drug overdose. Sitting with him as he lay near death in the hospital, Sinkford began to pray.

“First the selfish prayers for forgiveness [Sinkford recalled] . . . for the time not made, for the too many trips, for the many things unsaid, and, sadly, for a few things said that should never have passed my lips . . .

“But as the night darkened, I finally found the pure prayer. The prayer that asked only that my son would live. And late in the evening, I felt the hands of a loving universe reaching out to hold. The hands of God, the spirit of life[?]. The name was unimportant. I knew that those hands would be there to hold me [and my son] whatever the morning brought. . . .

“His son lived [the reporter concluded]. As did the father's memory of that desperate night, when the love for a sick child merged with reverence for an unseen divine.

The novelist Ken Kesey reported a similar experience. A long-time atheist, he got word that his son had been involved in a serious motorcycle accident, and he found himself praying to a God he didn't believe in either. I am told his son also survived.

Does it matter who our prayers are addressed to? I don't think so. The God of my understanding will listen to practically anybody.

That God also has a sense of the absurd, as well as a sense of humour.

Years ago, a Humanist 12-Step meeting I sometimes attended in Berkeley adapted the Serenity Prayer to suit their theology – that's the prayer, “God grant me the serenity / To accept the things I cannot change / The courage to change the things I can / And the wisdom to know the difference.” Practical prayer.

That Humanist meeting just eliminated the distracting word “God” at the beginning – instead, they started off, “Grant me the serenity . . .” This worked fine -- until they got a new secretary for the meeting, and wouldn't you know it, his name was Grant. Didn't faze them. The next week, they just started their prayer, “Grant, grant me the serenity . . .”

Some of our critics say, of course, that our Unitarian Universalist prayers are addressed, “To Whom It May Concern.” Better that than “Occupant.”

## 2. How come some prayers are apparently answered, and others aren't?

In one sense, all prayers are answered, if we understand the universe of possible answers to include Yes, No, and Please Try Again Later.

The story is told of a nun who taught a fifth-grade class in a poor part of town. The first morning in the fall, she told them that they had everything they needed, except a crucifix. So, she said, they'd pray for a crucifix, every day.

They prayed, and they prayed – but no crucifix. Finally, in the spring, on the very last morning of school, the nun walked into class – and she was smiling.

“All year long, children, we have prayed for a crucifix,” she said. “And this morning we have our answer. The answer is No.”

It is said that we can pray for anything we want, provided we can accept No for an answer.

Some prayers may be answered but we don't know it, because they're not answered the way we expected. You know that old story about the flood, and the waters rising, and this fellow, on the roof of his house, praying to God for help. God supposedly answers, I will provide.

Some rescuers come by in a boat, but the man says -- No, God will provide. A helicopter comes, but -- No, God will provide. Finally the waters rise too high, and the man is swept away, and drowns.

At the pearly gates, he complains to St. Peter that he was assured that God would provide -- but he didn't. St. Peter says, "Well, gee, we sent you a boat, we sent you a helicopter . . ."

We tend to talk when we pray, but it's good to listen too.

We usually know how our prayers should be answered -- if God had any sense. But who then are we really saying is God around here – us, or that other guy? Prayer can clarify what has been unclear.

Sometimes the lesson of an apparently unanswered prayer is that we are praying for stuff that we shouldn't be praying for. Or that we're praying when we ought to be doing -- something else.

During the Exodus, the Israelites are encamped by the sea, and the Egyptians in pursuit have them trapped. The Israelites come complaining to “Little Pulled

Out,” from our children’s story, now grown up as Moses, and Moses responds, “Do not be afraid! . . . Yahweh will do the fighting for you; all you need to do is to keep calm.” Ex 14:13 (NJB).

And then Moses goes off to pray, no doubt asking Yahweh, What do I do now?

Yahweh flings that prayer right back in Moses’ face. “Why cry out to me?” he says. “Tell the Israelites to march on. Your part is to raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites can walk through the sea on dry ground [that’s their part], while I, for my part, shall make the Egyptians soooo stubborn -- that they will follow them . . .” Ex 14:15 (NJB).

“Quit wasting time praying,” God says. “Forward, march.”

Sometimes prayers aren’t answered because they’re not persisted in.

Shallow prayer seldom accomplishes what people hope it will.

Long ago, one midwinter evening, in New York City, I was mugged by three teenagers. Two of them were 16, short and skinny. The third was just 14, tall, heavysset, not too bright. His mother had left him alone over Christmas – alone except for his 16-year-old sister, who was out turning tricks, to put dinner on the table. The mother was visiting a boyfriend in South Carolina over the holidays. This poor kid had a lot of strikes against him.

Two or three days after the incident, I met at the courthouse with mother, son, and social worker. The mother did most of the talking. She was moaning: Well, it’s all up to you. Well, it’s all up to the judge. Well, it’s all up to the Lord.

I listened to as much of this as I could. Finally I said, "How much of it is up to you, ma’am, you and your son?"

The social worker told me that the two or three days the boy had spent in Juvenile Hall were about optimal -- just enough to scare him, assuming he was still scareable, but not so much as to harden him, assuming he was not yet hardened.

I concluded the criminal justice system hadn’t the foggiest idea what to do with him, and neither did I. So I dropped charges against him, though not against his buddies. And, I polished off my application to the law school, outside of which I had been mugged. I remember to this day how troubled I was by the mother’s shallow, evasive prayers.

### 3. Does prayer really work?

You know those so-called scientific studies of the efficacy of prayer – with people praying for these 100 hospital patients over here, compared to no one praying for those 100 hospital patients over there, at least not as part of the experiment? Every time I read about these studies, I imagine a divine presence somewhere, chuckling. What are those people thinking -- that science has the answer to absolutely everything?

There is no agreement in the results of the studies, of course. For every study that finds, Yes, prayer does seem to influence outcomes, there is another study, or a critique of the first, that says, No, prayer does not influence outcomes.

So -- maybe that tells us it's the wrong question to ask, Does prayer work? Maybe the better question is, What do you mean by "work"? After all, some people's idea of a prayer that works, is a Mercedes in the driveway.

And that's a gimme understanding of prayer. That's all these "scientific" studies are measuring – gimme prayers, albeit gimme prayers on behalf of other people, intercessory prayers. Press-a-button prayers -- will God, or the universe, click their heels?

Yet clearly prayer must accomplish something, must "work" in some fashion, otherwise people wouldn't have employed it for so long.

The mistake here, I think, is to believe that prayer supposedly "works" by somehow changing the mind of God, or Nature, or the universe, or whatever. That's not the point of prayer. The point is to discern the will of God, or Nature, or the universe, and then to align our own will with it. Prayer does not work to change God or whatever, but it can work to change the pray-er, the person praying.

So prayer asks more of us than we may realize, and therefore changes us more than we may realize. How exactly do we pray?

First, we have to fully engage the situation, perhaps see it fresh. If we can, we prepare ourselves. I try to find a quiet place, and take off my glasses, because I can't see well without them, and not being able to see outward turns me inward, which is where I want to be in prayer.

We minimize distractions. Calm our body, calm our mind. Prayer does really calm us down. In that sense, it works. Every Sunday morning, the pastoral prayer and the communal silence are the quietest moments in our liturgy.

If we're petitioning for something, petitionary prayer, we acknowledge, that we want something, something we don't have, and we are open to the possibility, at least, that something beyond ourselves might help us get it.

These all sound like small, subtle adjustments, and in a way they are, but they're seldom easy, particularly at first, because the shifts in attitude run deep.

Prayer encourages us to be right-sized. It is hard to pray effectively without becoming who we most deeply are. Prayer challenges us in humility. Which is why prayer is particularly difficult, for those of us who struggle with humility. So persisting in prayer is important. Persistent prayer, as we will see, can purify itself.

Effective prayer may leave us slightly different people afterwards, quieter, more grounded, closer to right relationship with the universe. When we become right-sized, the rest of the universe often tags along. Sometimes I have prayed because the people I met seemed to have a better day when I prayed.

Finally, prayer asks us to detach from the possible outcomes. Plan the action, it is said, not the result. I have a little trick I use. To each petition in prayer, I add the phrase, If it is your will – and never mind who or what “your will” means. To me, it doesn't matter, so long as it isn't my own will.

When you pray for a whole series of things and attach, If it is your will, to the end of each one, pretty soon you start to sound like, Blah blah blah if it is your will, blah blah blah if it is your will. Why not then leave out the specific things you are praying for, the blah blah blahs, and just pray for “your will” to be done?

It is more efficient that way. You can finish your prayers sooner, and get back to running the world.

4. Some people say, Well, I could pray, but it wouldn't be sincere.

Will insincere prayers work?

Surprisingly, the answer is yes. Insincere prayers can work just fine.

Years ago, I had a law practice in Berkeley, California. When an office in our building became empty, I persuaded the landlord to take in an acquaintance of

mine as a tenant. But he was struggling, and kept paying the rent late. The landlord grumbled about this fellow I had recommended.

One day this fellow wandered into my office, seeking my wise counsel on whether he ought to buy a \$100 watch, or a \$400 watch, for his girlfriend. I didn't have the money to buy a fancy watch for my girlfriend, plus -- I didn't have a girlfriend. So instead of wise counsel, I gave him a piece of my mind.

I was still feeling righteously indignant a few days later, when a friend, after hearing me out, said, quoting now, "Why don't you try -- praying for the bastard?"

I said, What?

He said, "Take whatever you want most for yourself -- [which happened to be financial security] -- and pray that instead of you, he get it himself. Try it every day for a couple of weeks. See what happens."

I was sceptical, big time, but I was also unhappy. So I tried -- I prayed.

Talk about insincere prayer! When I asked that he receive the financial security that was my own dominant desire, I did not mean a single word of it. Clenched-teeth prayer, I called it. Yada-yada-yada prayer. But I stuck with it for a couple of weeks, even when the prayers felt mechanical and meaningless.

Then one morning, I came to work, and poked my head into his office to say good morning, and something looked -- odd. "Is that a new computer?" I asked.

"Yup," he said. "My ship came in. I just settled a big case."

I discovered, to my surprise, an involuntary wave of delight running through my body, and a smile on my face. I was genuinely happy for him.

What in heaven's name had happened?

Apparently, sometime during those two weeks, my insincere, clenched-teeth, mechanical prayers, had somehow been transformed, without my realizing it, into sincere prayers. They had a kind of mysterious, gyroscopic quality, a self-purifying quality, that caught me unawares. I had been ambushed by sincerity.

My praying had nothing at all to do with his prosperity. But it had everything to do with the transformation of my resentment, into something unexpectedly kind, and even gracious. They do say, Fake it till you make it.

The good feeling lasted, too. We never became the friends we might have been, but we got along better. I ran into him on the street in Berkeley, years later, and found he'd bought a house in town, and I was still glad for him. Prayer had delivered me to a happier place, in spite of myself – insincere prayer at that.

5. Finally, what to make of the common statement, “We never pray”?

Harry Emerson Fosdick writes, “Prayer regarded as a definite act of approach to God may be shut out from any life. But prayer regarded as [dominant] desire, exercised in any realm and for anything, at once includes us all. In this general sense we pray without ceasing. We are hunger-points in the universe; the elemental fact in every human life is desire. To [one] who disclaims any act of prayer we may retort, ‘Your life is an organized prayer; your body craves food, your mind craves knowledge, your affection craves friendship, your spirit craves peace and hope. You [say you] do not pray? Rather every stroke of work and every purposeful thought are endeavours to satisfy inward prayers.’” *The Meaning of Prayer*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949, p. 137.

We pray. All of us. All the time. Prayer is as natural as breathing.

I am praying each week, when I tell the children my hope or wish for them. We offer prayers of gratitude for the generosity that is shared each week, in the joys and concerns, and in the offering.

And [here is surprise number two!] we are praying, whether we acknowledge it or not,

when we sing, as we have this morning, *May Nothing Evil Cross this Door* – that’s a prayer;

when we sing *Spirit of Life, Come Unto Me*; and

when we sing our final hymn, to which we now turn.

Number 15, *The Lone, Wild Bird*.

Amen.