

Prayer means different things to people of different faiths



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Most of us are taught that prayer is “talking with God.” That is one definition, but it doesn’t cover all the ways human beings try to connect with something greater than themselves.

As a chaplain I was often asked to pray for someone. I was happy to stop whatever I was doing and sit with the person, to ask them what was troubling them. More often than not, the person would forget their request for me to pray with them. They really wanted someone to pay attention to their concerns and to hear them. This is much easier and perhaps more meaningful when you can actually see the person you are speaking with.

Of course, Christians aren’t the only people on the planet who pray. Jews, Muslims, Sufis, Hindus, Buddhists and many others have practices of prayer. Some see prayer as primarily contemplative — reflective and quiet — some like to chant, sing or dance; some meditate, breathing silently while sitting or walking. And silence itself is, for some people, a form of prayer.

Generally speaking, prayer could be

understood as a practice of attentiveness, or as Buddhists say, mindfulness. Gautama from India was called “The Buddha” because he had found a way to “wake up” through peaceful meditation. Waking up and paying attention to our surroundings and our lives seems simple, but it can be difficult. Yet, understood in this way, everyone prays (or meditates) in one way or another.

As an interfaith chaplain I was privileged to be with people who were praying in synagogues, mosques, temples and other traditional sanctuaries. Some of us organized multi-faith prayer gatherings where many religions including Native American, Baha’i, Mormon, wiccan and even evangelical folks shared their prayers.

I say “even” evangelicals because I was sometimes told “we can’t pray with non-Christians.” As a former evangelical myself, I understood what they were saying and why they were saying that — it was just so disappointing.

When you pray with others who pray differently than you, it can be a wake-up all by itself! And what’s to be afraid of when we learn from new experiences?

But what about nonreligious people? Can a person pray who does not believe in a God or the supernatural? Once again, it depends on who defines prayer. If a practice of mindful awareness

— being awake and attentive to the present moment of living — is “prayer,” then of course a nonbeliever can pray. Yet I don’t know anyone who is an atheist or agnostic or freethinker who “prays,” as such. Prayer has been strictly defined by religious authorities and doctrine for many centuries. It has too much baggage for many who were raised with prayer and no longer view it the “orthodox” way.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous line puts another spin on this: “Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view” (“Self-Reliance,” 1840). I’m not being flippant or disrespectful to say there are times I take this quite literally. When I climb a tree or ascend a trail to a mountaintop, I can’t help but contemplate the facts of life! To get to those “higher places” for new perspective, to fill the lungs with mountain air and fill the senses with life’s beauty and wonder, is prayer enough for me.

Some may be shocked to hear there is such a thing as “secular prayer.” I completely understand. In my youthful days, people said I was so good at prayer they wanted to pray like me. I was so proud of my humility! Seriously though, it felt as though the Lord of the Universe was my Friend and Brother — I talked to Him constantly. With more life experience, a “higher point of

view” brought me down to earth. It became clear that when we stop looking to other worlds for help, we learn to accept that this world is good all by itself — it’s all we have. We may find that “real prayer” is giving a word of encouragement, showing kindness or working for justice.

It may be uncomfortable to hear that most prayer is actually talking to ourselves, wishing Someone would pay attention to us. This may not be bad, as long as we realize what we’re doing and why we are doing it.

In his first book, “Nature” (1836), Emerson offers a delightful way for spiritual and secular people to “pray” together: “To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again.”

If this is prayer at its best — at its most awake, aware and alive — then, by all means, “Let us pray!”

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