

# UU Views of Prayer

*Edited by Catherine Bowers*

*In this pamphlet, eight Unitarian Universalists respond to the questions "How do you pray?" "Why do you pray?" and "What role does prayer play in your life?" These questions, of course, assume an affirmative response to the previous question, "Do you pray?" Some Unitarian Universalists would simply respond, "No."*

*The responses in this pamphlet reflect the wide variety of approaches to prayer among Unitarian Universalists. We have within our congregations a rich diversity of opinion and belief about prayer and many other religious matters. We invite you to join with us and bring your own perspective to our ongoing dialogue. —Catherine Bowers, editor*

## **Roger Cowan**

In a desperate moment, I cried out for help, and I was answered. Some years later I am still a humanist—I believe that religion is about this world, about bringing justice and mercy and the power of love into life here and now. Yet I am a humanist who prays, who begins each morning with devotional readings and a time of silence and prayer. Why do I do this?

I need a quiet time.

I need to express my gratitude.

I need humility.

I pray because—alone—I am not enough and also I am too much.

I express gratitude for the gift of aliveness.

I assert my oneness with you and all humankind and all creation.

When I pray, I acknowledge that God is not me.

*Roger Cowan is minister of the First Unitarian Church of Palm Beach County, Florida.*

## **Lynn Ungar**

During the moment of silence in our Sunday service I close my eyes and sing, silently, inside my head, "Guide my feet while I run this race for I don't want to run this race in vain." As I sing in silence, I imagine myself and the congregation enfolded in arms of love.

At a hospital bedside I hold the hand of a dying woman. The words form in my mind—or perhaps in my heart—"Goddess, be with her, give her strength and courage and comfort for this journey."

The full autumn moon rises, huge and orange and glowing, and I feel my spirit lifting along with it. "Thank you," I say. "Thank you." In the moment of beauty it doesn't matter whom I am thanking or even whether I am heard. It is enough to be grateful and to be a witness to wonder.

*Lynn Ungar is minister of the Second Unitarian Church in Chicago, Illinois. She is the author of the UUA Meditation Manual, Blessing the Bread (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996).*

### **Daniel Budd**

The best advice on prayer I have yet found was given long ago by Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said that prayer was nothing to flaunt about or show off. It is a personal matter, an intimate aspect of our living, and not the public proof of our righteousness. Prayer begins in the heart, that secret place within us all.

Other living traditions have taught me that prayer is an honest expression of how we are in the very depths and doubts of our souls. Prayer is the admission that we are fragile, fallible, and finite. Prayer is giving up, a way of creating a place within ourselves for this Mystery to dwell. Prayer is a covenant we make to be of service. Prayer is a way of living with the very questions that perplex us.

Prayer is an opening of the human heart. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said, "Pray like this," simply, from the heart.

*Daniel Budd is minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, New York.*

### **Lucy Virginia Hitchcock**

One morning many years ago, in those trance-like moments between sleeping and waking, a dream image came to me which has affected my subsequent life. A mist was streaming down into my body from above. It flowed through my limbs, but when it reached my hands, it was stopped by the blunt ends of my fingers. I woke up and held my hands before my face. I knew that, if I did not move my hands and feet and voice, the holy spirit would be trapped in my body and unable to do my share of its work in the world.

Prayer for me is taking time to be present for that gracious spirit and aware of the gifts that come to and through me simply because I am alive. One word for this time of presence is gratitude. Another word is meditation, in which, by observing my breathing, I become ever more aware of creation in process. In addition, prayer is theological reflection and social strategy, alone and in groups. This leads to a return of gifts bestowed, as in the wonderful Universalist affirmation which I love to recite in our communal worship, "Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament *and service is our prayer. . . .*"

Service, especially the prophetic, artistic, dogged work of systematic change for economic justice, is my prayerful response to all I have been given. When I act for justice, when I act with compassion, the spirit in me is no longer trapped at my fingertips. It can move and shake and shape and sing.

*Lucy Virginia Hitchcock is extension minister for the Puget Sound Unitarian Universalist Council, based in Seattle, Washington.*

### **James Ishmael Ford**

I've found through ordinary attention I can know enough to find authentic peace and joy.

We can know ourselves and our place in the play of the cosmos through sustained attention to what is going on. I've found the beauty and mystery and grace of our existence are revealed in prayerful attention. Through attention we can come to know the connections.

In my thirty years delving into the Zen practices of bare attention, this has been my experience. At the moments within our complete nakedness to what is we find our foolishness and glory are all revealed. Here our hearts and minds open. And, here, we come to an experience that is worthy of those wonderful words "meaning" and "purpose." Within this prayer, within this attention, we can find our connections as a deep intimacy. And out of this knowledge we find a moral perspective, a call to justice, and a peace that passes all understanding.

*James Ishmael Ford is minister of the Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Chandler, Arizona. He is also author of This Very Moment: A Brief Introduction to Buddhism and Zen for Unitarian Universalists (Skinner House Books: Boston, 1996).*

### **Nick Page**

I composed a piece of music called "Healing Prayer," to be sung by combined choirs and congregations. I wrote it because a dear friend had been diagnosed with leukemia. He asked that his friends neither visit him nor call him, but rather that we simply pray for him. And people prayed—even many who had never before given prayer a thought. My friend is now well on his way to recovery. I am far too scientific to say that our prayer healed him, but I know that those of us who prayed found a deeper connection to him, to each other, and to the world we live in—and I know that my friend also found that connection between self and all things. I also know that this connection was more than mere thoughts—it was tangible—as tangible as the medical treatment he also received.

Growing up in the Unitarian Universalist faith has been a wonderful evolution for me. The words from Psalm 42 have become very meaningful: "As the deer longs for the stream, so my soul longs for Thee, O God." My longing is for the elation of compassionate connectedness—that incredible feeling of being a part of all actions—God or Creation as a verb—a self-organized interdependent event. I composed the "Healing

Prayer," not because I believe in a higher power, but because I believe in a living universe with energies both powerful and subtle—all mysterious. At the end of "Healing Prayer," members of the congregation may offer the names of those in need of healing. It is a powerful moment—an emotional moment—a spiritual moment. We touch that which we long for—the living spirit of Creation.

*Nick Page is a Unitarian Universalist composer, songleader, and conductor of music at schools and universities around North America. He is the author of two books, Sing and Shine On! and Music as a Way of Knowing.*

### **Dan Harper**

I don't pray. As a Unitarian Universalist child, I learned how to pray. But when I got old enough to take charge of my own spiritual life, I gradually stopped. Every once in a while I try prayer again, just to be sure. The last time was a couple of years ago. My mother spent a long, frightening month in the hospital, so I tried praying once again but it didn't help. I have found my spiritual disciplines—walks in nature, deep conversations, reading ancient and modern scripture, love—or they have found me. Prayer doesn't happen to be one of them.

*Dan Harper is director of religious education at First Parish in Lexington, Massachusetts.*

### **Anita Farber-Robertson**

When I was in my thirties, still early in my ministry, I was stricken with a mysterious illness. My world turned upside down. I was hospitalized while the doctors ran tests, and my body did its own thing, separate from what I wanted of it. I was frightened, too frightened to pray. For the first time in my life, I understood intercessory prayer. I needed the connection, and I was not strong enough or grounded enough to establish it for myself. I needed someone to keep the lines open and clear, to maintain them and make sure they were secure in the turbulence that was ahead. I couldn't do that. It was all I could do to get through one day at a time, not knowing what was happening to me, a prisoner of a body that was becoming my enemy, rather than my connection to the sacred.

I asked my friend to pray for me. He did. I was astonished at its power. I felt the tears, the release, the comfort, and the assurance that the world and all that was sacred would wait for me, would hold a place for me, when I could not do the work of holding it for myself.

In that moment I could feel that the spirit of the universe held me, as it held every living creature. My friend's prayer had touched that spirit as surely as it had mine, and it had done so in my behalf.

I pray for people now. Every day. It is one of the most important parts of my prayer life. When all the rest of it falls away out of busyness or distraction, I can still, each morning,

lift up those I love and those in pain, through prayer. And fortunately, there are those I know who pray for me.

*Anita Farber-Robertson has served as minister of Unitarian Universalist congregations in Swampscott and Canton, Massachusetts.*

*Catherine Bowers, a former member of the UUA Pamphlet Commission, served as associate minister for the First Unitarian Church of Belmont, Massachusetts.*

**For Further Reading**

Some of these resources are available from the UUA Bookstore (1-800-215-9076, <http://www.uua.org/bookstore/>) or from your local bookstore or library.

*Blessing the Bread: Meditations* by Lynn Ungar. Skinner House Books: 1996

*Evening Tide* by Elizabeth Tarbox. Skinner House Books: 1998

*Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* edited by Scott Alexander. Skinner House Books: 1999

*In the Holy Quiet of This Hour: A Meditation Manual* by Richard S. Gilbert. Skinner House Books: 1995

*Life Prayers from Around the World: 365 Prayers, Blessings and Affirmations to Celebrate the Human Journey* edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon. Harper San Francisco: 1996

*Meditations of the Heart* by Howard Thurman. Beacon Press: 1999

*Morning Watch: Meditations* by Barbara Pescan. Skinner House Books: 1999

*The Power of Prayer* edited by Dale Salwak. New World Library: 1998

*Rejoice Together: Prayers for Family, Individual and Small Group Worship* edited by Helen Pickett. Skinner House Books: 1995

*Taking Pictures of God: Meditations* by Bruce Marshall. Skinner House Books: 1996

*A Temporary State of Grace* by David S. Blanchard. Skinner House Books: 1997

*This Very Moment: Introduction to Zen Buddhism for Unitarian Universalists* by James Ishmael Ford. Skinner House Books: 1996