



**Neighborhood Unitarian
Universalist Church**

Pray Without Ceasing

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November 25, 2018

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Picture this – a Facebook post with the caption, “Hard to believe...” and below a photograph of two hardback Bibles at a used book sale, with big red stickers that say, “Signed Copies!”

I strongly doubt that there are signed copies of the Bible floating around out there, but I do believe in the power of continuing to interpret the meaning of these ancient words.

The verse, “pray without ceasing” has been on my mind ever since I met D a couple months ago. She was the mother of one of my patients, a young woman with a serious illness. D was a devout Catholic, with the kind of faith that was expressed in exquisite kindness, humility and hope. She shared that her favorite verse from the Bible has always been, from 1 Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

It surprised me, and inspired me, when she shared this. D said, “I used this verse at my wedding,” what I imagine to be one of the happiest occasions, *and* that this verse gave her strength at the current moment, when she felt most broken hearted about her daughter’s illness. During that visit I held her hand, and passed her a box of Kleenex, and tried to hold back my own tears. Afterwards, I sat with our palliative care team in a moment of silence. We were silent in awe at the resiliency of the human spirit. In awe at D’s ability to be hopeful and thankful in a time of such tragedy.

And we were moved to consider for ourselves, what are the words that give us strength and hope in times of crisis? What would it be like to have a faith that sustains us in happiness and sadness, times of celebration and times of grief?

Pray without ceasing. Unitarian Universalists certainly have many ways of understanding prayer. Prayer as a petition, as a meditation, as a cultivation of values, prayer as gratitude, prayer as a walk in the mountains. As UUs, we may be more unlikely to say, I rely on the power of prayer, but that does not mean that we do not engage in prayer as a spiritual practice that centers, grounds, and renews us.

Anne Lamott writes that prayer can be distilled down to three types, three simple phrases, “Help, thanks, and wow.” Help. Thank you. Wow! She also says that prayer is less about a special moment designated for prayer, and more about a shift in one’s consciousness. She writes, “It’s sort of like blinking your eyes open. ... It’s sort of like when the Wizard of Oz first — when Dorothy lands in Oz and the movie goes from black and white to color, and it’s like having a new pair of glasses, and you say, ‘Wow!’”

Our Unitarian ancestor, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s first sermon was entitled “Pray Without Ceasing,” and preached in 1826 in Waltham, Massachusetts. I’ll give you the short version, as Ralph could be a little wordy, but in it he reflects on the material world and the spiritual world, and how all our thoughts might be oriented towards the spiritual. He writes, “It is not only when we audibly and in form, address our petitions to the Deity, that we pray. We pray without ceasing. Every secret wish is a prayer. Every house is a church, the corner of every street is a closet of devotion.”

What does that street corner look like for you? I think of one of my favorite walks with my dog Myrtle, in our neighborhood in Silverlake, coming up one of lesser known Silverlake staircases, to stand considering an expansive view of the reservoir, of Glendale, and the San Gabriel mountains in the distance. A view that looks different but equally beautiful at sunrise or sunset, and never ceases to make me pause, take a deep breath, and pray a brief Thank You and Wow. Perhaps for you it is a corner of your neighborhood, or your

house, or a view on your drive to work. Perhaps it is a moment of ritual, like our apple communion last Sunday, or the shared silent hush after music ends and before the applause. The grateful moment around the Thanksgiving table, giving or receiving a kind word or gesture. What are the moments that shift your consciousness, to an orientation towards the spiritual, that imbibe our day with gratitude, courage, or compassion? And how can we invite more of those moments into our lives?

So by pray without ceasing, I do not mean that we spend all our time on our knees, or with our eyes closed, or even all of our time at church on this beautiful campus. But the direction to pray without ceasing refers instead to an attitude, a perspective on our everyday actions, as oriented towards the spiritual life. As UUs, it might look like examining our actions in light of the seven principles, trying to discern what our faith is calling us to do in this particular moment. I think of how we give our offering away to folks in need as a prayer. Or how we are loud and passionate about the rights of LGBTQ people in our community and in our politics. I think of UUs all over the country who are devoted to causes of justice and liberation for all people, those who show up at legislator's offices, make calls, give their time and money, and partner with people striving for freedom and equity. These are ways that UUs have prayed and will continue to pray without ceasing.

Barry C. Black is the 62nd official Chaplain of the United States Senate, the first African American and the first Seventh Day Adventist to hold that office. After serving for 27 years in the US Navy as a chaplain, Barry Black now has the position of opening each session of the Senate with a prayer and providing pastoral support for members of the Senate, their staff and families. Now that is a chaplain job that I do not envy. Barry C. Black writes, "As I grew and matured spiritually, I began to believe that it is indeed possible to pray nonstop. It's possible because we can cultivate a spirit that is habitually devotional, keeping our hearts attuned to the transcendent. The Greek word for "without ceasing" in 1 Thessalonian 5:17 is *adialeiptos*, which doesn't mean nonstop — but actually means constantly recurring. In other words, we can punctuate our moments with intervals of recurring prayer."

Constantly recurring. Constantly returning to a spiritual orientation. Make no mistake, this is a difficult task. There is much that can distract us from prayer and from maintaining our spiritual lives. This is a difficult task especially because for the last couple years and especially months I have been in a mode of "just make it until..." syndrome. I'm talking about, "let's just make it until the midterms." "Gotta make it through Thanksgiving." "Gotta make it through the holiday seasons." Or everyone's favorite game, "Let's start the countdown to the 2020 election!" And as much as I believe in the power of focusing on these dates and goals, and pushing as hard as we can to achieve our goals, sometimes with the focus on "just until this date" syndrome, we can forget the need to return to grounding ourselves in our spiritual values that sustain us and call us onward. We can sometimes forget that we do not stop being grateful after Thanksgiving, or being compassionate after the holidays, or stop working for our democracy and the causes of justice after an election. This week I'm inspired by two people who have taken that perspective, the long view, that's not limited to specific dates or wins, but practice continually, constantly recurring to their guiding values.

Mia Mingus is a writer, educator and community organizer. Her work focuses on disability justice, addressing child sexual abuse, and building communities for transformative justice. When asked about how she cares for herself in doing this difficult work, she said:

"It is always surprising and humbling how effective simply caring for my basic needs is to my overall wellbeing. Sometimes I think we frame "self-care" as an "event." I am going to take the whole day off to do art! But self-care for me can also be watering my plants for 15 minutes in the afternoon sun, eating my favorite dessert while listening to a favorite song, taking 20 minutes to handwrite my friend a letter, doing my laundry, cooking food for myself, or taking the long way home so I can pass by one of my favorite trees.

Cultivating a daily, hourly, weekly ethic of care for myself and my wellbeing has been much more sustainable for me, especially as a disabled person, than only holding out for grand gestures

of self-care scattered throughout the year. Plus, “sustainability” is one of my values and I want to be in integrity around practicing my values every day as much as I can.”

Stacy Abrams’ remarkable speech a week ago is also an example in my mind, of praying without ceasing. After leading an inspiring, dynamic and coalition-building movement in her bid to become Georgia’s first Black woman governor, and after protesting and fighting against the many instances of documented voter suppression, Stacy Abrams pointedly did not concede to her opponent, now Governor-elect Brian Kemp. She stated, “Concession means to acknowledge an action is right, true or proper. As a woman of conscience and faith, I cannot concede.” She continued, “I implore each of you to not give in to that anger or apathy but instead turn to action. Because the antidote to injustice is progress. The cure to this malpractice is a fight for fairness in every election held – in every law passed – in every decision made.” She ended her speech with an announcement of launching Fair Fight Georgia, an operation to fight for accountability in elections and preserving voting rights for all.

Why am I connecting Stacy Abrams with Mia Mingus on self-care and sustainability? Because the fight for justice is deeply connected to our abilities to sustain and renew ourselves when despair and apathy seem to be the easier path. Because to pray without ceasing means not conceding a defeat in one election, and instead continuing to struggle for our values no matter the odds. Continuing to uphold the worth and dignity of every person, continuing to strive for justice and peace in our communities and country, continuing to love and protect one another, especially the most vulnerable. We cannot wait for one day to do the work of caring for our spirits and those around us, but must cultivate a daily, hourly, ethic of care.

Now we are living in times of chaos, destruction and suffering. Now we are listening to the world and saying, “We are ready and wholly attentive.” Now is the time to return and return again to our faith, which calls us to respond to the suffering around us with compassion, hope and action. Now is the time for singing, walking in nature and nurturing our spirits. For gathering and sharing food with others, for rejoicing even as we protest injustice, and for practicing a sustainable and loving faith.

Our poet Joy Harjo writes, “All acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice.” Let us be in the practice of constantly returning to a daily practice of prayer, whether it is through a daily moment of silence, or action, or giving, and may all of our prayers be acts of kindness.