

JUNE 2017

SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

Depth through reflection

WWW.UUCCHARLOTTE.ORG

IN THIS ISSUE ON:

PRAYER

2 | *Member Reflection*

Judy Ghoneim

3 | *Member Reflection*

Melissa Schropp

4 | *Fathoming*

Jay Leach

5 | *Families: Let's Dive In!*

Belinda Parry

7 | *For Further Engagement*

8 | *Contributors*

Rita Bowers

Michael Amy Cira

Kathleen Moloney-Tarr

Nancy Pierce



photograph by Nancy Pierce

Above all, I am praying for the transformation of the religious movement I love so much—and hoping for just one day when I won't have to explain why I might choose to pray.

—UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTER AND PRESIDENT
OF OUR STARR KING SCHOOL FOR THE MINISTRY,
ROSEMARY BRAY McNATT
IN "TO PRAY WITHOUT APOLOGY"



The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte is to inspire children, youth and adults to discover and articulate deeper spiritual meaning evidenced in lives of integrity, compassion and stewardship of the earth.

La mision de la iglesia Unitaria Universalista de Charlotte es inspirar a los niños, jóvenes y adultos para que descubran y articulan un significado espiritual profundo, evidente en una vida de integridad, compasión y en el manejo de los recursos de la tierra

TO THE UNKNOWN AND THE UNKNOWABLE

by Judy Ghoneim



So, what do I understand about prayer? Nothing. Except that it gives millions of people comfort, even hope. I never heard prayers at home. Even in churches or synagogues, I could not respond to “now let us pray.” At banquets or meetings which included prayer for God’s blessing, I mostly just stood with others and sometimes bowed my head to be more agreeable.

And when the words “under God” were inserted into the “Pledge of Allegiance” when I was in high school, I have never spoken them. Now my family usually asks blessings before meals and I do hold hands. I have never tried to indoctrinate my grandchildren with my godlessness, figuring they were smart enough to figure out their own way.

I lived for five years in a religious Muslim country. I heard the five times daily call to prayer. My father-in-law prayed daily. Two brothers-in-law made the Hajj to Mecca. When one brother went to visit the tomb of his mother, I asked him what he did when he said he prayed there. His answer was that he talked with God. I had a friend whose young son was killed by a speeding army vehicle. Obviously, she was devastated but her husband and in-laws said it was God’s will and she should accept it. This did not mean they did not mourn the loss. In fact, at funerals, those who come to express their sorrow are served bitter Turkish coffee to remind them, I guess, of the bitterness life can hold. But all said “it is God’s will.” When people say they will pray for me, I thank them.

So for me prayer does not exist. I did not say, “Why me?” when I received the diagnosis of cancer. I have always believed “Why not?” If it can happen to anyone it can happen to me. Prayer has not stopped the miseries humans have heaped upon one another nor those that “God” sends. For me, prayer is in the same category as miracles, mysticism and magic. If I were to find an “object” to pray to I think it would be to the energy which runs through the universe.

My husband was not religious and never prayed. I told him if he wanted our children to be Muslim and all that goes with that, he’d have to do it since I could not teach what I did not believe. Hence our children grew up with no religious indoctrination, though we did have celebratory dinners for Muslim traditions, Christmas and Passover (at my mother’s house, where my father, a non-practicing Jew, was both amused and a bit stunned to have his Muslim and Catholic sons-in-law reading from the Haggadah).



Unitarian Church of Szabed, Transylvania
photograph by Kathleen Carpenter

There is one “spiritual” experience I can claim though it does not include prayer. When I visited our then-partner Unitarian church in Transylvania, I was so moved by the Szabed residents’ hard lives and devotion to the church that I asked the minister to baptize me. I acquired two godparents and went through the required rituals. I felt I had joined something and it made me happy. It wasn’t Paul on his way to Damascus, but it was something.

“NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP”

by Melissa Schropp



*“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”*

This was the first prayer I learned as a child. I did not find it comforting, because it implied I might simply expire as I slumbered—it was a little unnerving to contemplate your own death every time you went to bed. And what about that

while asleep, I didn’t have my soul, since the Lord was apparently keeping it? Could I opt out of that? How many souls could he keep track of while their bodies slept—what if you got the wrong one back? I sometimes included the “God Bless (fill in name of loved one here)”-style prayers—kneeling bedside, hands clasped (that was the correct position, right?). I also knew the “Lord’s Prayer,” dutifully memorized and recited in unison at church, but it wouldn’t have occurred to me to say it alone, it seemed like a group thing. And I closed my eyes while Grandma said grace before Sunday dinner. But none of these prayers ever made me feel connected to something larger than myself.

Praying felt to me like one-way communication—sending a message off into deep space with no assurance your words would ever reach another sentient being, let alone an omnipotent one. These prayers seemed stock, canned—just recitations, not personal or meaningful. Since I didn’t much believe in “God” in the traditional Christian sense, I gave up on praying rather early on.

But as I’ve matured, I’ve come to recognize the real need to unweigh myself of my hopes, joys, fears, anxieties and gratitude. To share them somehow, to toss them up, to exhale them out of me—like making a wish on a dandelion, and blowing the fluffy seeds up and away. Do they go anywhere? Land somewhere and stick? Or just drift back down to where they began? Does it even matter? Maybe it’s all just whispering into the void. But I’m OK with that.

Writer Anne Lamott, in her recent book, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, defines prayer as “Communication from the heart to that which surpasses understanding.” If you’re uncomfortable addressing God, she suggests praying to “The Good”—the point being to make contact with the “Real, with truth, with the light.”

Her definition resonates with me, and I feel more authentic saying “I’m holding you in the light” rather than tripping over saying “I’m praying for you,” which feels constrained to a narrower Christian definition. The “Light” is any and all positivity we can connect to and share—gratitude, mercy, love. We all have light to offer, whether we use it to shine on others, or to help us illuminate our own way. I think of prayer as the mindful offering of one’s own light to specific people or ideas. No wrong way to do it, no wrong thing to ask for, no minimum time to spend on it, no particular place, or position, one must be in to do it, and no specific invocation need be recited.

Prayer can be like meditation, but where meditation asks that you empty your mind, prayer is more like filling your mind with a singular focus or idea, tapping into your own wellspring of intuition. If we all possess a spark of the divine, then I think of prayer as dipping one’s toe for a moment into that stream of the “collective unconscious,” and holding it there a moment to connect to its flow of energy. I like making a “tech” analogy to connecting to a server, a “Universal Server”—sometimes you’re uploading, sometimes you’re downloading. I no longer concern myself about to whom I’m praying. We’re all givers and receivers, both—God by proxy.

I’ll end with words from Kahlil Gibran, who says this about prayer in *The Prophet*:

“For what is prayer but the expansion of yourself into the living ether? And if it is for your comfort to pour your darkness into space, it is also for your delight to pour forth the dawning of your heart. And if you cannot but weep when your soul summons you to prayer, she should spur you again and yet again, though weeping, until you shall come laughing.”



Jay Leach

The poet. The chapel. The poem.

The poet

Assessing Texas writers, Larry McMurtry—he of *The Last Picture Show*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *Lonesome Dove* fame—said of Houston poet Vassar Miller, “To Vassar Miller, if to anyone we have, belongs the laurel.”

Miller was a Pulitzer Prize-nominated writer who served twice as poet laureate in Texas. Inducted into the Texas Women’s Hall of Fame and remembered posthumously with the Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry, she did not allow the challenges of cerebral palsy to quiet her remarkable poetic voice.

I knew Vassar Miller as an acclaimed poet. I also knew her as a member of the congregation where I was a minister. A cantankerous, funny, annoying, imaginative woman, I grew to love her as a person and as a poet, reading with her through *If I Had Wheels or Love*, the weighty volume of her collected poems.

Often Vassar’s work presents a kind of Jacobian wrestling with the angel of her faith. For example, in a poem about our shared congregation she writes of our moving with “tremulous tread,” “uncertain,” and “straining in deadpan tones to name what we name so badly.”

The chapel

After purchasing an initial work of Cézanne’s in the 1940s, Dominique and John DeMenil became some of the 20th century’s premier art collectors. A portion of their remarkable collection is housed in the Menil Museum in Houston.

When the DeMenils decided to create an interfaith chapel, they commissioned Mark Rothko to generate the work now defining that space. Rothko, in his last major project, produced a series of fourteen massive, somber canvases in deep tones tending toward black. They depict, in his words, “both the finite and the infinite.” These immense works strangely present as portals and as barriers, visually inviting a plunge into the beyond while standing us with fixed certainty before our finitude.

In my decade in Houston, I grew to love the Rothko Chapel. I would frequently retreat there to sit in silence before Rothko’s enigmatic works, finding in their incomprehensibility an ironic sense of peace, even comfort.

Each year, my congregation would gather in that stark, subdued space for our Ash Wednesday service. That service’s ultimate meaning is summarized in the ritual words

spoken to each participant as ashes are applied to their forehead: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” On that night, there was no denying our mortality; we faced it directly and were faced by it. Surrounded by Rothko’s vast canvases the message was amplified in a profound visual echo.

The poem

For several years, I opened our Ash Wednesday service with a recitation of one of Vassar Miller’s best poems, “Without Ceremony.” It names, and it does not name; says, and refuses—is perhaps unable—to say. Like the Rothko canvases, it offers both the finite and the infinite. It remains one of my favorite reflections on prayer.

Except ourselves, we have no other prayer;
 Our needs are sores upon our nakedness.
 We do not have to name them: we are here.
 And You who can make eyes can see no less.
 We fall, not on our knees, but on our hearts,
 A posture humbler far and more downcast;
 While Father Pain instructs us in the arts
 Of praying, hunger is our worthiest fast.
 We find ourselves where tongues cannot wage war
 On silence (farther mystics never flew)
 But on the common wings of what we are,
 Borne on the wings of what we bear, toward You,
 Oh Word, in whom our wordiness dissolves,
 When we have not a prayer excepts ourselves.



Barnett Newman’s “Broken Obelisk” in a reflecting pool outside the Rothko Chapel, Houston photograph by Jay Leach

Our spiritual journey begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. We invite parents to use the material presented in LET'S DIVE IN! to engage their children in this journey.

“IT KIND OF FELT LIKE A PRAYER”

by Belinda Parry

Marc’s friend Leslie was sad. Her grandfather was sick and Leslie’s parents had just told her that he might die soon. “Will you pray for him?” Leslie asked.

Marc hesitated. Leslie looked so worried. He said, “Sure.”

“Promise?” Leslie asked. Marc nodded.

Later, Marc asked his parents, “Leslie asked me to pray for her grandfather, and I said I would, but I don’t know how.”

His five-year-old sister Christine chimed in, “My friend told me about praying. You just talk to God.”

“But we don’t believe in God, do we?” Marc asked.

His mother answered, “You don’t have to believe in God to pray.”

“Right,” his father said. “You can just put loving wishes for someone out into the universe.”

Marc thought about this. He had made a promise to Leslie, and he wanted to keep it. That night, just before Marc fell asleep, he whispered, “Please help Leslie’s grandpa. And let Leslie know that I don’t want her to be sad.” He wasn’t sure if he had done that right, but he did feel better.

A few days later, Marc helped his neighbor, Mrs. Charles, move her garbage bins to the curb. Mrs. Charles said, “I’m so grateful to you, Marc. I couldn’t keep doing this myself so I prayed for help and here you are.”

“You prayed for me, and I came?” Marc asked.

“Of course!” Mrs. Charles answered. “Prayers aren’t always answered, but sometimes they are. Who knew I’d end up with a 10-year-old friend? And tonight, like I do every night, I will pray and say thanks for you and your family.”

Marc had struggled with math recently and wondered if praying might help him. On the bus on the way to school the next morning, he tried. “Math is so hard. I wish I could understand it better.” He waited a moment, but nothing changed. He didn’t suddenly, magically understand it.

During the math lesson that day, though, Marc listened carefully to his teacher, Ms. Hardwell, and understood the lesson a little better. Ms. Hardwell peeked at his paper while the class worked on problems and said, “Nice work! You’re really starting to get it.”

Marc was still feeling proud of himself when he got home that afternoon, but his mood quickly changed. The Lego village he had been working on was in pieces. “Christine!” he said angrily, stomping off to find her.

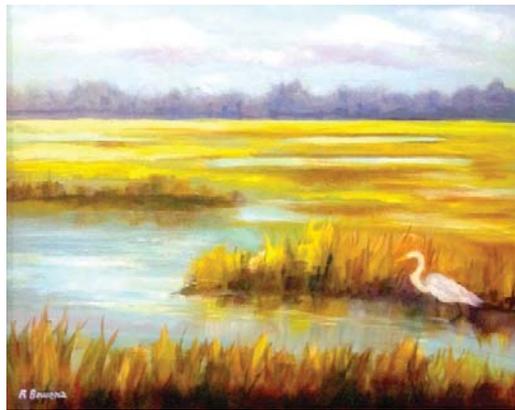
Christine was in her room playing with her own Lego village. Marc yelled at her and demanded she return his Legos. Christine yelled back. Marc grabbed two houses and ran to his room. He slammed the door in Christine’s face.

Marc could hear Christine crying. He did have more Legos than she did. He breathed in and thought, as he breathed out, “I shouldn’t have yelled at Christine. She should have asked first, but I should have talked to her about it and shared. I’m sorry.” When he finished, he felt calmer. He wondered if that was a prayer; it kind of felt like one. He opened his door and handed the houses back to Christine. “I’m sorry,” he said. She looked surprised but took the houses.

Marc closed his door gently. He still wasn’t sure if what he had been doing the past couple of days was praying but whatever it was, he liked the way it made him feel better about himself, like he was more connected to everything. He decided to keep doing it.

Talk About It:

- How do you pray? When do you pray? Why do you pray?



“Morning Marsh”
painting by Rita Bowers

“Be still and know that I am God”

On the second day of a silent retreat alone in the North Carolina mountains, a line circles over and over in my mind. *“Be still and know that I am God.”* (Psalm 46:10) This becomes the prayer of my day. As the words turn inside my head, they become a ribbon of comfort, an invitation to well-being. My heart opens; I feel more spacious.

I first heard these words at a Taize service in 2003 when they were read to introduce a time of silence. I noticed them because my body immediately relaxed when they were spoken.

Be still and know that I am God. These words alone and in combination invite me to reflect, to have faith, to let go of what I think I must do and to surrender to something far greater than myself.

Could it be that when I am still I can better know that God is in me? Is the invitation nested in this line to know more certainly the Presence of God? Could I find communion with the sacred when I am willing to let go of what I think must be done?

Be still and know that I am God. The writing of these words and some thoughts about them affirms that which lies in the undercurrents of my being. A smoothness settles in my soul. I breathe deeply and draw gratitude with each breath. Here then is the gift of silence. We are invited to listen carefully and to open to things differently than when we think of them. Wonder expands our inner spaces and then fills us, letting our spirits hum with renewal.

—Kathleen Moloney-Tarr

“Mother Earth”

solely your supplicant,
supine, immersed in the scent of this springtime-
sweet soil

rezo sobre tus pies
green glorious glowing goddess

rezo sobre tus muslos
luscious, libanotophorous, lingering lands

rezo sobre tu barriga
tender tongue; tempting, tasting, trembling

rezo sobre tus manos
fingers flirting, feeling furtively

rezo sobre tus senos
musky, my mouth—mmmm...magnetic

rezo sobre tu corazon
blessed blood brings bada-bop-ba-beats
rhythmic rushing rivers

rezo sobre tu cuello
sweaty, salty scent sends sirens soulful spasms

rezo sobre tus labios
waves of watery warmth; waltzing

rezo sobre tus ojos
Demerge deep, dark, dancing desire

Rezo sobre tu cuerpo

Todo
ay mamá,
te deseo,
te adoro,

pero perdóname.
en mis rodillas

Por Favor Perdóname,
Madre Terra
Mother Earth,
no puedo salvarte

—Michael Amy Cira

FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

Below you will find a list of books, reflections, movies, lectures and much more for further engagement on the subject of Prayer

BOOKS:

Adult

Morning Watch: Meditations, by Barbara J. Pescan, 1999

For Praying Out Loud: Interfaith Prayers for Public Occasions, by L. Annie Foerster, 2003

Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, by Cynthia Bourgeault, 2004

Meditation Without Myth: What I Wish They'd Taught Me in Church About Prayer, Meditation, and the Quest for Peace, by Daniel A. Helminiak, 2005

Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life, by Erik Walker Wikstrom, 2005

Thirst: Poems, by Mary Oliver, 2006

Becoming the Answer to Our Prayers: Prayer for Ordinary Radicals, by Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, 2008

To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings, by John O'Donohue, 2008

Mighty Be Our Power: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War, by Leymah Gbowee, Carol Mithers, 2011

Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers, by Anne Lamott, 2012

Thou, Dear God: Prayers that Open Hearts and Spirits, by Martin Luther King, 2014

Preschool-Early Elementary

One Grain of Rice, by Demi, 1997

Blessings and Prayers for Little Bears, by Linda Hill Griffith, 2002

A Child's Book of Blessings and Prayers, collected and introduced by Eliza Blanchard, 2008

A Child's Book of Animal Poems and Blessings, collected and introduced by Eliza Blanchard, 2010

Prayers for Children, by Constanze Van Kitzing, 2013

Older Elementary-Middle School

Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children, by Frank Jelenek, 2007

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God, by Sybil MacBeth, 2007

Writing to God: Kids' Edition, by Rachel G. Hackenberg, 2012

"A Letter to Nancy"—<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/windows/session15/143925.shtml>

Middle-High School

Glory, Hallelujah! Now Please Pick Up Your Socks, by Jane Ellen Mauldin, 1998

The Rock of Ages at the Taj Mahal, Unquiet Meditations, by Meg Barnhouse, 1999

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God, by Sybil MacBeth, 2007

Reaching for the Sun: Meditations, by Angela Herrera, 2012

"Unitarian Universalist Views on Prayer"—<https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-do/spirituality/prayer>

MOVIES:

It's a Wonderful Life, 1946 (Unrated)

Koyaanisqatsi, 1992 (Unrated)

Dead Man Walking, 1996 (R)

The Apostle, 1997 (PG-13)

Saving Private Ryan, 1998 (R)

Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?, 2000 (PG-13)

Remember the Titans, 2000 (PG)

Walk With Me, 2017 (Documentary)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

"A Thousand Ways to Pray"—<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/thousand-ways-pray/>

"The Call to Prayer"—<https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/the-call-to-prayer/>

"ACTS Prayers: A Unitarian Universalist Guide"—<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/acts-prayer-unitarian-universalist-guide/>

"Writing Family Prayers"—<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/families/workshop10/106965.shtml>

THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS OF ART, POETRY, AND READINGS:



Rita Bowers

Rita Bowers paints mostly in oil. She developed her artistic talents taking classes from a wide range of regional professionals while rising in her career as a graphic designer for a Fortune 500 Company in Chicago. Her travels inspire her domestic and international subjects which hang

in many homes in the US, Europe and Central America. Her work has been displayed in many juried and judged shows and has won many awards. Rita and her husband Tom have been members of UUCC since 2000.

Michael Amy Cira

Michael is an Artist, Actress, Activist, Animal-Lover, Beachcomber, Birth Doula, Buddhist, Dancer, Death Doula, Director, Drummer, Editor, Funeral Planner, Gardener, Healer, Herbalist, Hiker, Massage Therapist, Medicine Woman, Pagan, Poet, Reader, Runner, Screenwriter, Stargazer, Teacher, Tree-Hugger, Vegan Chef, Yogi...among other things.



Kathleen Moloney-Tarr

During more than four decades at the UUCC, Kathleen has served in a variety of leadership roles including the UUCC's Writing Your Spiritual Journey groups and Healing Threads, our prayer shawl ministry. Her spiritual essays are published by Shalem Institute where she trained as a spiritual director, a contemplative relationship she shares with seekers of varied faiths. Kathleen splits her time between Charlotte and the NC mountains as she weaves, knits and plays with her three grandchildren.



Nancy Pierce

UUCC member Nancy Pierce has worked as a documentary photographer all her adult life. Her client list reflects her interests in land and water protection, sustainable communities, active transportation, social justice and the common good. She has photographed General Assembly for the Unitarian Universalist Association every year since 1993.



Judy Ghoneim

"Over, and under, educated. Still too bookish. Always felt a bit of the outsider. Yearning still for the farther shore and if I make it to 2018 will make the trip with granddaughters from Vezelay to St. James of Compostela."



Melissa Schropp

Melissa Schropp joined the UUCC, with her husband, Greg, in 2000, after they relocated to NC from Harrisburg, PA in 1994. She's been a teacher in the CYRE program for many years, and currently serves on the UUCC Communications Team. A native of Rochester, NY, she is a graphic designer, mother of three, and an avid reader and daydreamer.



SOUNDINGS

CHURCH OFFICE HOURS:

MONDAY-FRIDAY, 9 AM - 5 PM

PHONE 704-366-8623 | FAX 704-366-8812

EMAIL: UCC@UCCCHARLOTTE.ORG

WEBSITE: WWW.UCCCHARLOTTE.ORG

UCC PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Unitarian Universalist
Church of Charlotte



Kathleen Carpenter, Director of Religious Education for Children & Youth

704-366-8623, ext. 6034

kathleen@uuccharlotte.org

*Children and Youth Religious Education (CYRE),
Denominational Connections, Young Adult Group (YAG)*

Donna Fisher, Children's Choir Director

donnfish@bellsouth.net

Children's Choir

Kelly Greene, Membership Coordinator

704-366-8623, ext. 6039

kelly@uuccharlotte.org

*Membership Team, New Members,
Stewardship, Visitors, Volunteer Coordination*

John Herrick, Director of Music

704-366-8623, ext. 6037

john@uuccharlotte.org

Music, Stewardship, Worship

Alesia Hutto, Office Administrator

704-366-8623, ext. 6030

alesia@uuccharlotte.org

Administrative Support, Communications

Martha Kniseley, Adult Programming Coordinator

704-366-8623, ext. 6036

martha@uuccharlotte.org

*Adult Religious Education and Spiritual Development (ARESD),
Community Building, Congregational Care, Environmental
Transformation*

Jay Leach, Senior Minister

704-366-8623, ext. 6032

jay@uuccharlotte.org

Chief of Staff, Coordinating Team, Social Justice, Worship

Belinda Parry, Administrative Assistant

704-366-8623, ext. 6033

belinda@uuccharlotte.org

Part-time Administrative Support, CYRE Support

Doug Swaim, Director of Administration

704-366-8623, ext. 6031

doug@uuccharlotte.org

*Building & Grounds, Communications, Coordinating Team, Envi-
ronmental Transformation, Finance, Memorial Endowment Trust,
Open Door School, Security*