

## **Praying Attention (Praying The News)**

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Ministry is in many ways a complicated vocation. Which may explain why there is an abundance of books out there written by or for ministers about the various challenges, pitfalls, and best practices of ministry. Less common, indeed I can't think of a single title, are books written by or for people preparing for the ministry, which is, I must say, not at all what most people I know envision the process to be like. My feeling is that if a person doesn't emerge from the process with a collection of strange, harrowing, and funny stories, then they weren't really paying attention.

I've shared some of my stories with you in sermons this church year, so you know I paid at least some attention during my preparation for the ministry. One of the more memorable experiences from that process for me came out of a miscommunication concerning prayer.

Now if there's one area in which you really want to avoid miscommunication its prayer. Prayer is after all, about communication. Communication, according to writer Anne Lamott, "from the heart to that which surpasses understanding."

But alas, back when I was in seminary and enrolled in clinical pastoral education, my fellow students and I all heard our supervisor-in -training, Will, an Episcopal clergyman, tell us not to pray with patients at the hospital where we were doing our training.

After two or more rounds of verbatim presentations of patient visits to our peer group, it dawned on Will that not a single one of us mentioned praying with our patients. Naturally he inquired about this. He was shocked to hear that we believed he had told us not to pray with patients. An extended discussion ensued and we learned that his intended instruction to us was not to avoid praying with patients but rather not to rush to prayer before really listening to patients...to hear their pain or joy, hopes and fears. From then on, we began to pray more frequently with patients.

Whenever I talk with my ministry colleagues from that time we always laugh about being told not to pray and the cake I brought to our last day together at the hospital that I had decorated with an image of praying hands inside a circle with

a diagonal line across it in red icing. Will was a good sport about it and his intended instruction on prayer had a powerful impact on my understanding and approach to prayer.

I'm aware that many Unitarian Universalists don't include prayer among their regular spiritual practice, or if they do they don't call it prayer. Prayer for better or worse, is not a neutral term. It means different things to different people, some of which are rooted in or inextricably linked to certain theological assumptions that are untenable for some.

Personally, I prefer and adhere to a far simpler understanding of prayer as first and foremost the simple, yet not so easy, act of giving attention. Thus prayer is not confined to that window of time we set aside during our day or in a worship service. Prayer, as an act of giving attention, is a way of continually communicating, engaging, and appreciating life, the good, the bad and the vast in between.

Giving attention to life or, praying attention, if you will, is far from a revolutionary or original idea. In fact, it's pretty much Spiritual Life 101 in most of the world's religious traditions regardless of the number, conceptualization, or even existence of deities. Jesus taught it, the Buddha taught it, Native American, Religious Humanist traditions, and Unitarian Universalism too.

Praying attention is directly related to perhaps the most profound purpose of religion... Transformation.

Whether you begin from a rejection or assumption of concepts like Original Sin, or perceive as Buddhism does, that people may be neither good nor bad, but "clingy" in ways that perpetuate suffering, one thing most religions agree on in one way or another is that the world is a pretty messed up place and it's not likely to change if we don't change. Praying attention opens us to the possibility for change, a sentiment echoed by author Kathleen Norris, who says, "Prayer is not about asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine."

This idea is at the heart too of an article written about ten years ago by Carol Zaleski entitled "To Pray The News" (in "The Christian Century" October 1, 2014) which inspired today's sermon (and the adult faith formation group I hope you'll consider participating in starting next Sunday.)

Zaleski begins her article by saying, "Lately there's been too much death—in faraway places from terrorism, epidemics, hate crimes, honor killings, war; in our own cities from drugs, gang warfare, domestic strife, suicide, arson, accident; and

in all places (there is nowhere to hide) from the long list of causes we deem natural.” She is of course referencing the continual, 24/7 barrage of news thrust at us with such intensity of quantity and graphic detail that it, as she notes, “loses all sense of proportion.” And her words, though written some ten years ago, still ring true to me today.

I read the news daily. It’s rarely a joyful endeavor. The sheer magnitude and depth of suffering, cruelty and obstacles to peace, justice, and wellbeing for so many can become numbing after a while. The news often cites statistics or describes situations that I find difficult to comprehend even in my imagination. When this happens over and over it can wear us down into a passive approach, turning hearing and reading the news into a daily habit of data collection without any clear understanding what we can or are supposed to do with it as it accumulates.

Like many people, I have taken occasional breaks from reading or listening to the news. For a while I signed up for a service that only published inspiring or “good” news. The effect of this hiatus from the news however, wasn’t what I expected. Initially a relief, I soon discovered avoiding the news, or at least bad news, to be, as Zaleski observes in her article, “too extreme and too self-absorbed.”

Indeed, I began to feel even less connected to the world and its people. It became far too easy to think in terms of me and them or us and them rather than we. In retrospect, this effect makes sense. It is said ignorance is bliss, but the world’s religions have long taught and human experience has shown, that ignorance of the truth of humanity’s interconnected relationship to itself and the world, is in fact not bliss, but quite hellish.

Thus, in our responsive reading, the Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka reminds us to turn toward, not away from the realities of the world...”the streets of the city, the worn tapestries of brokerage firms, drug dealers, private estates, personal things in the bag lady’s cart”, if we are to transform our despair to hope.

This is not to say it that we should read any and all news available to us. In her article Zaleski stresses the importance of restraint when it comes to the media, including, “not dwelling upon horrific details, indulging in mere gossip, or expressing opinions about economic and geopolitical factors that are largely beyond our ken.” She does not presume to know what amount or balance of good and difficult news is right for each person, rather she suggests there’s a way we can approach the news we do take in that is somewhere between passive reading and extreme avoidance.

That way, inspired by Western monastic traditions, is praying the news. As Zaleski writes, “To place oneself within the web of intercession and fellowship strikes me as the broad path of sanity.”

“To place oneself within the web of intercession and fellowship.”  
That’s a pretty powerful way to describe what it means to pray the news.

There are websites and blogs online which approach this way of praying the news quite literally, by reading the news and composing a prayer afterward. Here is a prayer from a blog called Spirituality and Practice. This prayer was written in response to a news article on mental health...

*Compassionate One, in the United States and elsewhere around the world, mentally ill people and their families are not getting the help they need. Forgiving One, pardon our callous and inhumane treatment of these vulnerable people. Help us find ways to provide them with both care and compassion.*

This is an example of praying the news by praying attention. The concern, reflecting the author’s listening to... not merely taking in... the story, is plainly expressed: people aren’t getting the help they need. And it invites the possibility of change/transformation...through forgiveness and an openness to seek or practice new ways of being in relationship with others.

It is a prayer that not only bears witness to another’s woe, but knows it as their own by virtue of their humanity. Rooted in this personal knowledge of the human condition, it is, as Anne Lamott describes in our reading, “a cry from deep within to Life or Love, with capital L’s”.

There are of course other ways to pray the news that do not even involve words. I noted earlier that prayer as an act of giving attention is a way of communicating, engaging and appreciating life, all of it. Indeed, as we heard in our story for all ages, The Breaking News this can include actions great and small. I know of people who live into this understanding every day, including when they read or listen to the news, by lighting a candle or pausing in silence after each news item they read. There are people who dedicate the time they spend reading the news to the benefit of those they read about. These are ways of praying attention, forms of intercession and fellowship for and with people whose person we may never encounter, but whose humanity we know intimately through our own.

Now some might say, but lighting a candle or reflecting in silence won’t cure disease, stop terrorists, or create jobs for the unemployed. Such observations, while well intentioned, miss the point. Praying the news by praying attention is not intended to cure disease, stop terrorists, or create jobs. Rather, it is intended

to cure us of our ego and ethnocentrism, stop the numbing or hardening of our hearts through passivity, and create space within us for a deeper sense of interconnectedness, empathy, and compassion to grow.

When we practice praying the news by praying attention we're actively cultivating that deeper awareness of our interconnectedness to others and the world. This has the potential to motivate some toward efforts intended to treat and cure diseases, prevent violence, and create a more just economy. For many more it has the potential to move us towards lives of greater spiritual integrity.

The Buddhist teacher John Tarrant describes attention as the most basic form of love. When we pray the news by praying attention we we acknowledge the human condition in love, listening to the cries and laughter of the world and noticing how it reverberates within us.

When we pray the news, no matter what form it takes or whether we even call it prayer or something else, we are recognizing and thereby getting involved, interceding, as Zaleski suggests, in the struggles and triumphs of people around the world. By turning our attention toward the world and its people we enter into fellowship with one another, reconnecting in the words of Thandeka, to “the legacy of caring.”

Understood this way, praying the news by praying attention, regardless of our individual theologies, connects us to the lifeblood of generations who refused to surrender their humanity in an inhumane world.” And in so doing has the power to transform despair into fertile ground from which justice may grow.

Amen and Blessed Be