

When Jules asked me if I'd do a presentation on prayer, there was a long pause before my answer...because my initial internal reaction was a pretty strong, "I'm not sure I want to do that", followed by "Hmmm- that's a pretty odd reaction. What's my problem with prayer? I should sort that out!" So, this is me, sorting that out. Thanks, Jules.....

Initially, my "problem statement" came pretty easily, in two parts. First, I don't believe in running around talking to God, particularly asking "HIM" to intervene in my life and solve my problems. Second, I dislike the dogma represented by most traditional prayer. All righty, then. That pretty much wraps it up, kind of a short presentation. Any questions? Not so fast, big guy.

Just for the sake of example, I thought about the words to the first prayer I remember. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the lord my soul to keep." Okay, kind of dogmatic, but not too heavy.

"And if I die before I wake," WHAT!?!?! Just what every little kid needs to hear right before bedtime.

"I pray the lord my soul to take" Great.

What a terrific message for a four year old. You've got your dogma, threats of dying in your sleep, and soul snatching. I rest my case.

DOGMA: A principle, or set of principles, laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true. It serves as part of the primary basis of an ideology or belief system, and can not be changed or discarded without affecting the very system's paradigm, or the ideology itself. That's the best dictionary definition I could find. I thought of a couple of examples.

"One must give one's soul to God above." Dogmatic statement?

"One must never recite a prayer containing certain kinds of words with a child." Dogmatic statement?

Uh, oh. Could it be that I have dogmatic tendencies? What's a UU to do? Is there an obedience class for unruly dogmas? I'm busted; like when I catch myself saying the same thing in the same tone of voice that my Dad used sometimes when he was angry, and I hated it, and I swore I'd never say anything like that.

When I'm off center, confused, stuck, or unclear, sometimes it helps me to pay attention to my process, to how I'm engaging with the world.

I've talked in previous presentations about ARIA- AWARENESS, right here right now, of what I'm actually perceiving with my senses, or picturing in my mind. REFLECTION- assigning meaning and value to the content of that awareness. INTENT, what I would like to do or accomplish, based upon my highest values and beliefs; and ACTION-

The process is both sequential, and simultaneous, and the balance is important. When I overdo or neglect awareness, reflection, intent, or action, I get off balance. Like right now, about the issue of prayer and dogma.

As I open up a bit, I have a clear memory, a picture, of saying that “Now I lay me down to sleep” prayer with my mom at 4 or 5 years old when we were living at my Grandparents’ house in Ranchester. I remember the words to that prayer in exactly the same way I remember other sing-song, rhyming lyrics to songs and poems that I loved to do. So, although the meanings of those words in the prayer are unpleasant to me as an adult, as a little kid, the definitions of the words had exactly the same significance as another favorite of mine, Three Little Fishes.... “Boop boop dittum dattum waddum, POOH! And the swam and they swam all over the dam!” Not much about fish mortality, the scary environmental impact of dams, etc

Here’s what WAS significant to me at that time. The prayer was a nightly ritual, our time together without distraction, just the two of us. I felt close, and warm, and safe as we said that prayer, and one or two other child’s stories or songs together, and my mom tucked me into my big soft bed for the night.

And I think I can speak to what was significant to my mom at that time also. In just a few years, her path led from :

being a beautiful, smart, Tri Delt, sweetheart of Sigma Chi at UW,

to falling in love with a handsome, charming, bull and bronc riding, decorated WWII veteran rancher cowboy and starting the perfect ranch family with an extraordinary young son,

to being divorced with no place to live except my grandparents’ home, working at the family lumberyard with the attendant family business politics, and feeling like a failed wife, student, daughter, and challenged mom, to an inquisitive son, who during that time, woke up one night and was quietly playing with the controls of the wall heater beside his bed, turned it up, and went back to sleep. Filled the house with smoke from smoldering bedding. My grandfather moved the bed away from the wall, Pretty tough time for mom.

So, there’s the larger context for the prayer. Way bigger than the words alone. I actually talked with my mom many years later about prayer and baptism and all of that. She had strong, somewhat traditional religious beliefs, and also was very accepting of others’ beliefs. She said that it was such a difficult time, and despite the fact that she’s never been much of a believer in Hell, she just didn’t want to take any chances in case she was wrong, and she felt that the bedtime ritual, including the prayer and other shared songs and poems, would help me to feel safe and happy. And she was exactly right, and now, I don’t like the words to the prayer, but I don’t have to say ‘em, and I’m certainly thankful that we had that prayer together.

Actually, with my kids and grandkids, I had similar rituals, minus the prayer. I actually hummed the words to one of our favorites (hum). Two choices for lyrics, as I think about it. "Go tell aunt Rhodie the old grey goose is dead," and "Bye baby bunting, daddy's gone a'hunting, gone to get a rabbit skin to wrap the baby bunting in" Where did we come up with those words for little kids songs anyhow?

So, what might all of this mean for us, regarding prayer and dogma, in our lives here and now?

Last week, on a canoe trip to Jackson Lake, I took my notebook along to work on this presentation in spare moments. In the middle of the night, lying in my hammock gazing up at the sky momentarily clear of smoke, I felt rather than spoke a prayer of appreciation for just being, and just being in this amazing place. That, for me is a prayer that I like to be ongoing, whenever I am clear and am somewhat in balance with my ARIA. The next moment, thinking about prayer and listening to the sounds in the night, for some reason I found myself considering not just a prayer, but a bear prayer. That prayer's more situational, and maybe more consistent with traditional dogma, and would probably start our with, "hey, God. Let's make a deal." I didn't pray that prayer, but just I laughed out loud, and whatever was bumping around out there ran off. See, it worked! And as I think about it, there are many things for all of us that go bump in the night...wars and illness and politics and losses.....and for me, what feels best is an ongoing prayer, with awareness in the moment, reflection on my highest values, intent to remember to see the godliness in each of us, and action that's somewhat consistent with all of that.

So, we can work to curb our dogma, and despite my opening remarks about running around talking to god, that's what I want to do- maybe minus the running. And talking to god is what I'm doing right now, and I see you, and I thank you.