

I'll start with a brief anecdote. When I was in high school, the psychology teacher taught us about the concept of a schema. He described it as a cognitive organizer. A schema, he said, is a way of categorizing objects, behavior, relationships, and other things we experience in our lives. It's a conceptual framework for our minds to work from. For example, if I said to you, "Picture a cat," you would close your eyes and an image of some kind of cat would come to mind. No doubt, each of us would have different images in our minds, but these unique images represent our own experience of cats. Let's try another. A relationship this time. Close your eyes and imagine the relationship associated with "mother." I'm sure most of us have a very different schema of mother. Okay, one more. A behavior. Close your eyes and picture prayer. If we thought our schemas of a cat were widely varying, it is likely nothing in comparison to how differently we perceive the activity of prayer.

There is good reason for this variety; the religions of the world offer myriad versions of prayer. The one I am most familiar with is the Christian version. In the book of Luke, Jesus Christ informs His disciples that to get God to open His door, they must first knock at it. He tells them that prayer looks like this: in a peaceful place away from from others, you say, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen." The Catholic church offers a similarly formulaic prayer that can be offered up to the holy mother, Mary. "Hail Mary, full of grace. Our Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." For many Christian evangelicals, prayer is far less formal than those two examples. Instead, it is more of a casual, ongoing conversation between God and the supplicant. As one pastor described, it's "coffee with Jesus." Anglican churches have a Book of Common Prayer that is filled cover-to-cover with suggestions of prayers for the devout and is similar to the Siddur of Judaism. Some religions focus on prayer at certain times of the day. For a Muslim worshipper, the schema of prayer may look like salat, one of the five pillars of Islam. It is a formal, required prayer performed five times daily at prescribed times. This ritualistic prayer and worship involves

greeting God by reciting the first chapter of the Quran. Though many of us picture this when given the prompt of “Islamic prayer,” Muslims also have *dua*, or informal supplication prayers. If you are Buddhist, perhaps your schema of prayer looks less like communication with a deity and more like a meditation on thoughts of loving kindness to mankind. Yet another schema for prayer could be in repetitive Hindu mantras dwelling on Brahman, the divine source of all things, or even in Bhakti yoga. And what about the atheist faith? Purposeful non-prayer is a part of their religion. As you can see, there are many possible schemata for prayer. So how do we know which is right for us as individuals? As UUs?

Here’s another anecdote for you. I sought counseling after my dad passed away when I was in college. I went to the mental health center on campus and ended up in the office of a middle-aged, balding, Jewish, father of 2 named Lee. On paper, we were as opposite as two people could have been. And I have never learned more about myself and others than from Lee. The most profound session we had began with my upset at how after my father’s death I could no longer hear God or pray to Him anymore. (I subscribed, at the time, to the “coffee with Jesus” schema of prayer.) It was really distressing. To go from constant communication and company to silence and isolation is a jarring experience. By that point, Lee knew how important my faith was to me, and he asked me about what I had identified as my greatest spiritual gift. I told him that I feel that my gift, the special God-given talent or calling, is simply the ability to love others no matter their circumstance. Lee suggested that using my spiritual gift could be a type of prayer. Understand that, at the time, this was a very radical statement to me. It seemed sacrilegious to claim that anything other than a one-on-one conversation with God could be called prayer. But at the same time, the statement resonated with me in a way nothing in my religion ever had before. It suggested to me that *people* might have a bit of divinity in each of them. I could *pray*, have communion with God, by simply practicing love. This opened a floodgate of prayer for me. So long as I felt that I was being purposeful in my actions and interactions, I could be in communion with the divine on a much larger scale almost all the time. My picture of prayer changed that day, and it is still evolving. It might not look the same to you; maybe your connection with the divine is through music, maybe through medicine, or through teaching. The thing I’ve learned is that it does not matter what prayer looks like. Prayer can happen anywhere, in any stance, at any time of day. It can take many forms, ranging from reciting

sacred text, to coffee with Jesus, to meditation, to simply interacting with your fellow man in a way that makes their life a little better. But prayer doesn't just happen because you are alive. It must be mindful and purposeful, with the clear intent of communing with a higher power, sending energy into the world, or using spiritual gifts through the course of everyday life. I have learned that anything can be prayer, but only if you are willing to stop and think, to purposefully connect your thoughts and actions to a greater good. In a world where every person is vastly different from the next, and faiths range across a broad spectrum, it makes sense that prayer looks as different as the many gifts we have to offer. Throughout this month of prayer, I hope you can stop and consider your own personal schema, your collection of life experiences that inform the way you understand and conceive prayer. Know that your schema can shift and stretch to embrace the many interpretations of what prayer looks like and the role it plays in your lives.

**Reading #1:**

699 in hymnal

**Reading #2:**

Buddhist saying:

“Be lamps unto yourselves; be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within as to the only lamp.”

Closing words:

<http://www.cowboypoetry.com/badger.htm#Pray>