

I'd like to start today by gathering a little data. How many of you believe you have a soul? Keep your hands up and take a look around the room. Ok now put your hands down. How many of you pray---even sometimes? Take a look around. Anyone surprised? I am. Didn't know we had so many prayerful people here.

Now lets be careful here. This is where numbers might provide a faulty picture. Thich Nhat Hanh says "prayer is food for the soul". So we have to wonder if we have starving souls among us today. Fortunately, I've never read that he also says prayer is the only food for the soul so maybe we may not be in deep trouble.

You've probably figured out by now that I'm going to talk about prayer. I came to this by way of a book that caught my eye while in the bookstore. I've been reading *The Energy of Prayer, How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, by Thich Nhat Hanh.

He's a Buddhist and he prays---apparently often and a lot. I've never associated Buddhism with prayer, so I was intrigued. He prays to Buddha and says that we should not be fooled by words. He says, what is God to some, is "one mind" to the Buddhist, or collective consciousness. He also says collective consciousness is in each of us and each of us is part of collective consciousness. In other words there is no duality, no separateness. Our 7th principle makes this assertion a well.

Paul Tillich, the renowned German-American theologian says that we all have a "ground of being", meaning we all have something that is foundational, something that grounds our being. For some, that grounding is called God, for others maybe it's nature. Others may be grounded in known and knowable "facts", while others ground in an identifiable moral code of rights and wrongs.

Many Unitarian Universalist might say they believe in the Spirit of Life, or the Spirit of Love or the interconnectedness of all existence. In order to talk about prayer in mixed company we need to define our terms broadly enough to encompass us all. Let me be clear, one does not have to pray to a G.O.D. in order to pray. We do pray to someone or something; it's a form of communication.

I've heard it said, I think by an Episcopalian Bishop, that prayer is a conversation we have with our higher selves. I like that concept because it got me past, my aversion to prayer. Once I discarded an anthropomorphic definition of God and let go of a "God the Father" image, I had no-one to pray to, so I stopped praying.

I pray more often these days. I have substituted my old definition and image of God with a more comfortable view of God. I now see God as a concept, manifested as the ALL, as the glue that holds it all together, the energetic force behind all life. And that God is both wholly separate from me and at the same time, wholly integrated within me. Both God and I are part of the interconnected web of existence. And I believe you are too!

Over the years, I found I needed some way to think about and talk about that life-force I was familiar with. I needed some way to conceptualize an energetic force that I knew existed...in trees, the cycle of the seasons. It has sufficient power housed in a seed to break through a concrete sidewalk. It's a life-force I came to recognize inside my own body.

Many of you have heard me say this before, I have intentionally chosen to call that force God. I don't want any weasel words for something so significant. The concept of God exists in every historic culture, so it has a certain cache. When the term God is used we know we are either talking about something of complete fiction, a myth OR we are talking about something of significance—however we personally define the term.

When I pray, I don't pray to an old man in a rocking chair. I pray to the concept of collective consciousness, as Thich Nhat Hanh says or to the life-force that connects all. I pray for the embrace of that power, I pray for better access to that consciousness, that I might enlist it in support of something of importance to me.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that prayer is a way to be in touch with the essence, THE essence. And, to be in touch with that essence creates new energy and opens our hearts. It's the interconnection between essence and ourselves that makes our praying powerful. It's the interplay between individual consciousness and collective consciousness that provides an added oomph.

He identifies two elements that are necessary for effective prayer. 1) Communication between self and to whom/to what we are praying. He notes it's important to understand that communication is instantaneous---because we are already connected. We don't need to wait for the letter to be delivered.

2) We need to bring love, right-concentration and mindfulness to that communication. He says that the body and the mind must be peaceful, in the moment, in order to have mindfulness, which itself is concentration. With mindfulness, we can open to insight and transcendent wisdom he tells us.

Interestingly, he explains that many people pray on bended knee or prostrate themselves while in prayer. It engages the body in the act of prayer...its not just the mind or speech that prays, but the totality of who we are. By kneeling, we diminish the ego's natural resistance to collective consciousness. The ego wants to stand alone, self differentiate...that's its job.

Like anything else, the more we pray the better we get at praying, the more effective our prayers become. In this context, effective does not mean we get what's on our Christmas list, or better at having our wishes answered. It means we get better at creating and mobilizing energy.

Often our prayers are for ourselves. There is an aphorism that says, "there are no atheists in a foxhole". Often we pray for good health, success, love or good relationships and happiness. Not all of our prayers are answered. They may not be in alignment with the greater scheme of things or with collective consciousness. It is a mystery after all.

We may pray for clarity, guidance or in gratitude. We may pray for ourselves and those we know and love. But seldom do we pray for the stranger. Less often still, as in almost never, do we pray for those we hate or who have brought us pain and suffering. Forgiveness and prayers for our enemies does not come easily to us, but it does have great value in healing the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that when we use prayer to deepen our spiritual practice---he implies, any spiritual practice--- we find that prayer is more about questions than answers. We begin to question, "where do I come from?" "why am I here?", "what is mine to do?". As we deepen in our spiritual practice, we more and more engage the "big questions" in life, in a body, here on earth.

The Buddhist understand that prayer is much more powerful when done together with others of like intent. They even have a term for it, they call it Sangha. They may chant in unison, as a form of prayer that centers and enhances the individual.

We, in our community, have at least one example of the power of prayer, which can come in the form of spoken words or be manifested as the energy of loving-kindness. I, like many of you, have read emails from Ron Kamen thanking this community for the prayers and well wishes sent to him and Linda. He has been very clear in the belief, for him, experience, of the healing powers of our collective prayers.

Dr. Larry Dossey, in the introduction to *The Energy of Prayer*, says, "...more than 200 controlled experiments in human, plants, animals and even microbes suggest that the compassionate, loving prayers and intentions of one individual can affect another individual or object at great distances. These studies paint a picture of human consciousness that is "infinite"...our individual mind appears to be connected with all other minds, no matter how far apart..."

We said earlier that individual consciousness is connected to collective consciousness and vice versa. Each influences the other. The world around us is a manifestation of collective consciousness. It is not in good shape. By dint of our connectedness, we are affected by collective consciousness. So we need to heal ourselves.

Bringing this notion closer to home, our individual consciousness affects those we live with and those in this community. And the consciousness of this community affects each of us individually. If we accept this notion, we each must take some responsibility for our collective consciousness here, within our walls.

One way to take responsibility for our collective consciousness is to pay attention to our own, individual level of awareness, to meditate, pray or otherwise deepen our spiritual practice. I have recommitted myself to that endeavor. For some of us, it may call for us to begin a spiritual practice.

Another way for us to impact the whole is to be willing to allow yourself to be affected by the consciousness of the whole, a willingness to be connected, to be touched by the totality of who we are as a community. The central question is “will you allow this community to help grow your spirit, to help feed your soul?”

As this community increases its spiritual vibration, we will, without question, transmit that sense of spirit to our families and the community at large. We do have the ability to have a positive impact on the world at large. Deepening spirit is a worthy cause. It benefits us as individuals; it benefits our community and that has a ripple affect, perhaps beyond what we can imagine.

We are already connected. Our 7th principle puts words to our connectedness. I pray that we can deepen our understanding of the interconnected web of existence. I pray that we can apply mindfulness to our connection with each other and the All. May we quest, yearn to deepen our spirit, for our own well being and the well being of this community and the world. May it be so. Amen