

# “A Wing and a Prayer 1: Hello”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Hello.”

So it begins.

A conversation that, over time, might grow into a relationship that might change your entire life.

“Hello.”

It might announce, simply, that I am present.

“Hello!”

It might express awareness that someone else is present.

Or, “Hello?”

It might be a question, a call, a wondering.  
What might also be present, beyond myself?

So many important conversations begin with “Hello.”

Prayer and meditation,  
along with all contemplative experience,  
can be seen, quite simply,  
as a conversation with Life,  
with Mystery,  
with the Interdependent Web,  
with something impossible to describe or understand...

And with something, most importantly,  
that is Not Me.

In her book “Help, Thanks, Wow: the Three Essential Prayers,” Anne Lamott writes:

“Prayer is communication from the heart  
to that which surpasses understanding.”<sup>1</sup>

Such a conversation can arise unexpectedly,  
and it will be uniquely personal.

As a minister, I hear about many such conversations,  
and I’m always struck by how specific they are.

But I shouldn’t be surprised,  
because every relationship is unique and specific.

Contemplation, prayer,  
or “the inner conversation” is no different.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (Riverhead Books: New York, 2012), 1.

It is deeply connected to our True Self,  
which is both uniquely personal, yet  
connected intrinsically to the  
Universal Whole.

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Recently I heard a member of the congregation tell a  
powerful story about finding strength from an unexpected  
source during a difficult time.

On a dark night, he found himself going outside,  
looking up at the moon,  
and speaking to it,  
as if it were a friend.

He told his friend the moon what was going on,  
and how he was feeling...  
and he found himself strengthened by the exchange.

So he returned again the next night, saying  
“It’s me again, Moon. I’m back”...  
and feeling once again the powerful sense  
that the moon was present to him  
in a way he had never experienced before.

It was, he said, as if he was not only communicating  
with the moon but “communing” with it.

I asked him if I could tell you this story, because  
I felt it spoke so powerfully to the theme of “hello”...

Of opening up a conversation  
with Life,  
or with Another,  
however we conceive of that supportive presence.

I also recently heard another member of the congregation  
speak of her experience in meditation,  
and she also gave me permission to share it with you.

She said that while sitting, she discovers  
“an immense inner world inside herself.  
More to explore there and resources within.”

She called meditation a “deep befriending of myself.”  
“An embodied experience that isn’t about the Buddha...”

She also said she feels it’s “good preparation for aging  
and dying.”

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Our Unitarian Universalist 4<sup>th</sup> Principle calls “for the  
encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

Prayer takes place in every culture, in every corner of the  
world, and has throughout history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice* (Parallax: Berkeley, 2006), 9.

Many studies have shown the numerous health benefits of meditation, including the lowering of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline.<sup>3</sup>

Carl Jung once said that there is no problem in the second half of life that cannot be solved by contact with what he called “The Numinous.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet, many of us in this room, including myself, may have felt reluctant at times to begin the conversation that takes place during prayer and meditation.

Why, I wonder, would we not want to say “hello?”...

Especially when the conversation would be completely private and we wouldn't have to tell anybody about it?

Well, at the beginning especially, it might feel really risky!

When we say “hello” in prayer,  
or sit in complete silence in meditation...  
we enter into completely new territory.

We open up to silence and Mystery.

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<sup>3</sup> The Chopra Center: “Why Meditate?” <https://chopra.com/articles/why-meditate-0>

<sup>4</sup> C.G. Jung, *Letters*, 1973, 1:377, quoted in Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (Crossroads: New York, 2003), 26.

We begin a dialogue with “Other”—  
that which is essentially connected to us,  
but it utterly unlike the “us” we’re familiar and  
comfortable with.

As we know from everyday experience,  
entering into a new relationship with someone  
or something we don’t yet know,  
can be a challenge.

And as a result, we might avoid it!

As contemporary wisdom teacher Richard Rohr puts it:  
“The ego wants containment and control.  
It is only the soul that wants meaning and mystery.”<sup>5</sup>

Our individual self loves to be in charge,  
so it might resist meditation or prayer.

Yet virtually every religious path teaches us that we  
must “die before we die”—

That is, we must surrender, not once but many times,  
our sense of ourselves—

Releasing into a larger Self, in order to grow in spiritual  
maturity.

Every time we sit in meditation,  
we experience the demise of the ego.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World from a Place of Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 3.

We become aware—sometimes painfully—  
of our personal wants and desires,  
yet choose instead to sit in silence,  
listening for whatever arises,  
being present to Life without our usual tricks,  
habits and props.

It can be very difficult to do.

But as has been proven now, scientifically,  
in so many health studies...

...saying “hello” to something beyond ourselves,  
something that might seem like absolutely nothing...

(and is certainly nothing at all  
like our separate self...)

It does us a world of good.

It’s just like opening up to inclusion in other spheres of life.

We can say “hello” to the Creator, the Universe, God, the  
Source, the Presence, the Mystery...

Or we can say “hello” in prayer to other people,  
to things, to imaginary friends, to the falling snow.

It doesn’t matter to Whom or What we pray.  
Everything can be a doorway into Wholeness.

As Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh writes,  
“We can pray to the pine tree, the moon and the stars.

The pine tree is quite solid,  
the moon is always on time,  
and the stars are always there for us,  
free and bright.

If we are deeply in touch with the pine tree,  
we are able to be in touch with the One Mind.”<sup>6</sup>

When we dare to say “hello” in this way, we open up to a  
relationship that can transform our lives.

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Once we’ve said “hello”...  
whether enthusiastically or tentatively...  
the relationship will then need tending.

But the more we return to the conversation,  
the better we get at it.

It’s much like practicing a new language.

You may have noticed this yourself,  
in other forms of contemplative communication  
that I see as akin to prayer:

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<sup>6</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer*, 69.

Take, for example, dream work.

When you notice and appreciate your dreams, perhaps writing them down and reflecting on their meaning, you'll notice that you remember more dreams.

The same is true of synchronicity.

When we affirm and delight in these demonstrations of the “interdependent web of existence,” they seem to happen more often, adding meaning to our lives in the most beautifully personal of ways.

Many artists have found, as I have, that when we are deep in the flow of creative experience, an elegant solution will often present itself, without our conscious effort, and in a way that seems to transcend our personal abilities.

When we gaze at an object to draw it, or play a musical instrument to draw out its sound... we are present to it with our full attention, in a way often lets us “lose our self.”

That's how art-making, too, becomes a spiritual conversation.

A form of meditation or prayer.

On the other hand, if we don't open ourselves up to conversations with the unknown, the relationships don't tend to flourish.

We've probably all done that... thought that we wouldn't get along with a certain person, or group...

Perhaps not even noticed someone with whom we could enter into a new conversation.

I think it's helpful to explore this.

Although we affirm that we are open and inclusive and welcoming to all—

We all are, at times, closed and rejecting and fearful.

This doesn't make us bad people; it just means we're human.

The task of spiritual growth is to grow beyond these smaller ways of relating to the world, which are completely normal and in fact protective at times, so that we can grow into new ways of being in relationship with life.

Contemplative experience has been called an attitude of “inner hospitality”<sup>7</sup> in which we welcome those aspects of life, and of ourselves, which we do not like, know, or understand.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience, of really not caring for a type of music, or a certain food, and after opening yourself up to a relationship with it... you find it enriches your life immeasurably and you would never want to live without it.

That can be how it is, with prayer or meditation.

And the really beautiful, elegant part of it is that having that conversation, with Creator, with Dream-maker, with Self, with Whatever-You-Are...

Can help all our other conversations go better!

Not the least of which is the ongoing conversation we’re always having with ourselves.

The style, timing, and address of our prayer isn’t so important, as long as we say a genuine “hello.”

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cowley Publications: Lanham MD, 2004), 145.

As Unitarian Universalists, we put a lot of emphasis on outer action in the world, as well we should.

Yet sometimes, I fear, we do this without attending equally to the inner work of contemplative experience.

In his book, “The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice,” UU minister and theologian Richard S. Gilbert writes:

“The deeper that we delve into the innermost recesses of our souls, the more intensely we identify with other human beings.

The further inward we explore,  
the more we see our common humanity.

The more the unseen moves us,  
the more we understand the hidden bonds of community.

And so the deeper we probe spiritually,  
the more we identify with others  
and cast our lot with them...

in battling all that keeps us  
from celebrating our mystic bonds.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Richard S. Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice* (Boston: Skinner House, 2000), 26-27.

At this congregation, we start our services by saying that  
“service is our prayer.”

I wonder: what if prayer could also be our service?

Our service to ourselves,  
that we might become more in tune,  
more at peace,  
more “at home” in our lives,  
no matter how things turn out.

And our service to the world:  
That we might become more deeply welcoming,  
more able to live simply,  
more skillful at making choices  
grounded in love.

Richard Rohr writes: “If your prayer goes deep,  
your whole view of the world will change  
from fear to connection  
because you don’t live inside  
your fragile and encapsulated self anymore.

In meditation, you are moving  
from ego consciousness to soul awareness,  
from being driven  
to being drawn.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still*, 18.

Now, this doesn't mean the conversation will be comfortable, as anyone who has sat for agonizing minutes in silence, or cried out to an unbeliever-in-God will agree.

But it is a conversation that I believe can enrich us, sustain us, and indeed grow us into what Life wants for us.

And so, may we open ourselves, in whatever ways we can,

To the Mystery, the Silence, the Big I Don't Know...

To the Teacher, the Friend, the Tree, the Moon...

To the Presence... that is waiting for us...

That is longing for us...

to say "Hello."