

Do Humanists pray? If so, to whom or what?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

A former student sent me an interesting question about prayer. Knowing I identify as a secular freethinker and humanist, she wanted to know if I pray, and if I do, to whom or what. She was attempting to write a prayer and chose to write a poem. A creative alternative, as I see it. Many written prayers, like hymns, are essentially poetic expressions; they can utilize vivid imagery as well as highly emotive words to invite reflection, like the surface of a deep pond.

Confident of my student's sincerity, I smiled when she stated she is "basically an atheist" and doesn't pray yet wishes she could. She isn't sure "who or what to pray to." I find that honest articulation of the dilemma intriguing. I tried to respond with an equal amount of honesty and respect:

"A very perceptive question! I think it can be a revealing exercise to write a prayer since it can stir curiosity and questions. Writing a poem makes sense as an expression of your experience rather than a request, plea or praise.

I'm curious why you "wish you could pray." There are many forms of prayer in many traditions. Perhaps meditating, without the distraction of words, may be an option."

When I believed in a supernatural Eye (or Ear) in the Sky, who spent their valuable time 24/7 listening to billions of requests like mine, it felt comforting for that reason--I was listened to, cared for. As a humanist-

secular-freethinker, I am responsible for my own life including finding ways to be calm, reflective, "grounded."

Having participated for many years in interfaith prayer gatherings, I have a respectful appreciation for the diverse array of relational expressions in various traditions (this year's National Prayer Breakfast only featured two Christian speakers). I've been honored to sit among Buddhists and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Evangelicals. Every religion performs prayerful rituals in some manner, using a variety of sound, movement and objects such as prayer beads, bells and many other tangible forms of inter-relation.

I continued with my response to the questioner: "Some believe prayer is simply talking to God or with God but my perspective is that a person is speaking with their "higher self," an inner conversation to elicit meaning and a sense of belonging to something greater. I understand that, but it's no longer my interest or practice."

This is not to say I consider praying an empty action. As I say, seeking a sense of belonging is very human and can provide great comfort to many people. I'm only explaining my personal journey that left the need to pray behind. If that sense of belonging leads to acts of compassion, lovingkindness and justice, improving the human community beyond one religion or religious belief, I see no need to be critical of the practice. However, there is a hidden, darker side to prayer that should be brought to light.

"Unfortunately, prayer can often be a way to manipulate oneself or others into a mindset, to convince ourselves we're special to God. I see that as both potentially harmful and frankly quite childlike, seeking a Parent who watches over us, and will punish if we mess up." I had several things in mind when I wrote

this. Prayer can lead to "altered states of consciousness" that cause a person, or a group, to believe they transcend "this earthly realm" with little consideration for immediate needs. An ecstatic experience or rigorous ritual can cause a person to neglect their mental or physical health. They may even feel so "filled with the spirit" they put their emotional relationship with God before family relationships and responsibilities. That's on the extreme edge. Others may spend so much "time with God" they overlook time with neighbors and friends where relational involvement could potentially become "prayer in action." This is the kind of prayerful intention that can serve more than one individual, one congregation or one religion.

A pastor colleague in California recently led a Celtic evening prayer from the Iona community in Scotland (I've sat in Iona's beautiful chapel). He explained the seasonal tradition: "Within that rhythm, Evening Prayer (sometimes called Vespers) offers a quiet moment – with space to reflect on the day; silence and song to enter into the calm of night; and prayers for those who keep watch through the night." Carol and I have enjoyed similar meditative moments in Benedictine, Dominican and Trappist monasteries as well as a Zen Buddhist center. These spaces for calming silence and melodious chant can feel like sanctuary, refuge, even to a secular person. A balance of verbal expression and stillness in silence can offer meaningful moments of connection, whether to a deity or the center of the human person.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).