

Simply Pray
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This week I spent time in the Garden of Beaden. You heard correctly. Not the Garden of *Eden* but the Garden of *Beaden*. It's a store in Upland that is filled with beads – beads of all shapes, colors, and sizes. I went to the Garden of Beaden to select the beads for my prayer beads. You are surprised to know that I have prayer beads? So am I. I am a very unlikely person to have prayer beads. I have layers of reservations about prayer. First, I was raised Lutheran, and I associated prayer beads with the Roman Catholic rosary.

I knew that Catholics and Lutherans both said the Lord's Prayer, but the prayer to Mary felt to me like a foreign religious language: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst 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." This is often recited 10 times, preceded by the Lord's Prayer and followed by this concluding prayer: "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen."

Quite apart from theological differences between Catholics and Lutherans about the role of Mary, I was skeptical about the value of recited prayers, period. How could they be very meaningful to the person praying or to God? Should not prayers "come from the heart"? Should not they be spontaneous and original? Memorized and recited prayers seemed to be laziness or like riding on someone else's coattails. Some deeply spiritual person hundreds or thousands of years ago composes a prayer, and subsequent generations get credit for merely repeating it? Only recently did I come to understand the way that the ego must bow out of the way with repeatedly recited prayers. .

As I moved from youth to young adulthood, I doubted the efficacy of prayer for different reason. I began to doubt the existence of God, and then I stopped believing in a personal God who had a capacity to respond to prayers. There seemed little point in praying then, except to indulge a sense of nostalgia or to honor the sensibilities of praying people who I happened to be with. I am

delighted to have my mother and sister here today; they are visiting from Wisconsin. Sometimes before meals we still pray these words, which were taught and learned decades ago: “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed. Amen.”

I believe that Jesus was a great teacher, though I do not think of him as “Lord.” I continue to say that prayer on occasion with my family because it reminds me in a positive way of my early upbringing. I also continue to say that prayer on occasion because gratitude never goes out of style. Gratitude, especially including gratitude for family and gratitude for daily bread are to be encouraged. Prayer encourages gratitude.

As I moved from young adulthood to middle adulthood, I doubted the value of prayer for a third reason. I have felt silly praying because for me it means praying, in part, to myself. That is because I believe that I am part of what some people call “God.” To clarify, I believe that none of us, individually, are God. However, I believe that all of us, collectively (and I mean collectively through all time and space), are participants in this creative and destructive mystery that may be called “God.” We participate in the amazing process of helping the universe to become aware of itself. We have an obligation to keep evolving, to keep on influencing each other and to keep on being open to being influenced by each other.

On my recent plane trip from Wisconsin to California, I saw a woman wearing a t-shirt that said “Why wait for evolution? Mutate now.” ;) Except spiritual development does not usually work that way. In general, we human beings are slow learners. We cannot simply mutate on demand into a higher level of consciousness. We cannot simply mutate on demand into wiser, more compassionate people. We need training wheels on the bicycle of our religious development. Those training wheels can be made of prayers. Prayer can keep us from wobbling. Prayer can keep us from falling down and wiping out quite so often.

We cannot simply *mutate*, but we can simply *pray*. Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom has written *Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life*. The modern spiritual practice to which he refers is creating a set of prayer beads and using them in a daily practice. The daily practice involves prayers of your choosing. There are four basic types

of prayers, and there should be a balance among the types. For this reason, Erik Walker Wikstrom encourages us to include each of the four types of prayer in our daily practice.

Erik Walker Wikstrom writes, “If you long to connect with the Sacred, if you desire to live a life that is more in touch with the Holy, stop listening for *something* and start simply listening. If you have given up on an anthropomorphic deity – the old white guy with the long white beard, or any of his stand-ins – yet can’t figure out what to put in its place, stop looking for *something* and start simply looking around you . . . In other words, simply pray. Pray without any preconceived notion of what you’re doing or why. Simply do it, and see what happens.”

He continues, “After you pray, *then* begin to think. Think about what your experiences tell you about the holy. Think about what those experiences tell you about the way the world works and the spirit moves. Build your theology on your experience, rather than the other way around. Define the divine for yourself through your own experiences rather than seeking experiences that match someone else’s definition.”¹

I encourage everyone to develop a daily religious practice. In preparing for the service this Sunday, it became clear that I need to practice what I preach. That is how I found myself in the Garden of Beaden, following Erik Walker Wikstrom’s instructions. I selected 28 beads in all: one large centering bead, four medium sized beads representing the four types of prayer (Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving), and 23 small beads.

The centering bead is like a “speed bump” – that is what my friend Eugene said when he saw the prayer beads. It is a reminder to slow down and focus on the prayers to follow. The point of this modern spiritual practice is that you select the prayers that are authentic for you. I will share with you my minimalist prayers; I may or may not elaborate upon them later.

Touching the centering bead I say to myself the words from the song “Circle ‘Round for Freedom”: “Circle ‘round for freedom, circle round for peace, for all of us imprisoned, circle for

¹ *Simply Pray: A Modern Spiritual Practice to Deepen Your Life* by Erik Walker Wikstrom, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2005, p. 5.

release. Circle for the planet, circle for each soul, for the children of our children, make the circle whole.” Then I touch the next four beads, which are the equivalent of “warming up” before exercise, and say “prepare,” “prepare,” “prepare,” “prepare.

When I reach the first medium sized bead, I think of Naming. This could be naming the Sacred, naming the Holy. That feels a little too theistic for me, so I use the naming bead as a reminder to count my blessings. As I finger the following five small beads, I say “compassion, wisdom” as I touch each bead. Compassion is the movement of immanence, and wisdom is the movement of transcendence.

At the next medium sized bead, Knowing, I bring into my awareness my failures and limitations, not beating myself up for them, but simply acknowledging that I have limitations. As I finger the next five small beads, I say “compassion, wisdom” as I touch each bead. At the next medium sized bead, Listening, I am quiet. There is no guarantee, but something may bubble up from my subconscious or bubble down from somewhere else.

As I finger the following five small beads, I say “compassion, wisdom” as I touch each bead. Now I have reached the fourth medium sized bead, Loving. I bring to mind three people and think of their situation relative to my own. The first will be someone who is close to me. The second will be someone who does not play a central role in my emotional life though there is some relationship between us.

The third person is someone with whom I am currently at odds. As Erik Walker Wikstrom notes, “All of us have people in our lives who rub us the wrong way, people whose very presence can annoy and irritate us. There may be people whom we experience this way chronically, and others who have moved into this category because of transient circumstances . . . Taking the time to lovingly pray for the people who grate on our nerves may not do much of anything for them – although it might – but it will almost certainly do a great deal for our own peace of mind.”²

² Page 41.

After that fourth bead, the Loving bead, there are four “cool down” beads. As I touch each of the four, I say to myself, “return,” “return,” “return,” “return.” The practice takes me about 10 to 15 minutes. I have made a commitment to do this practice daily for three months and then evaluate whether I will continue. It feels like a good time for me to do this because I have been feeling somewhat scattered and preoccupied. Feeling the cool, smooth, solid beads helps me to feel grounded and reminds me of my aspirations, which are larger than any worries.

May we welcome into our lives a practice of Naming, Knowing, Listening, and Loving. May we enlarge our capacities for compassion and wisdom. May it be so!