1-18-09 “Service is Our Prayer” Compiled Readings

Opening Words
From “The Art of Spiritual Healing” by Joel Goldsmith
“When you can find something in your work that is in the nature of a service to be performed, never again will your work be a burden. When you have found something into which you can put your heart and soul and you can pour out some measure of service, even if inn the beginning it is the most menial of labors, it will lead you to the joy of expressing yourself.”

Reading from Martin Luther King, Jr.
Looking forward to tomorrow’s celebration of Martin Luther King, Junior’s birth, we offer these words from Dr. King’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, given in 1964:
"Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflict, a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."

Opening Hymn #121 “We’ll Build a Land”

On Our Knees – by Rick Kimball

As a fifth grader, I sat in the Bennoch Street School of Orono and muttered a prayer under my breath about some test or other.

A girl nearby caught on. “I heard that!” she said. “You were praying!”

“I was not!” I retorted, in a lie that surely canceled out any positive relationship I would have with God for the next three months.

Whether that event led to the problem or not I do not know, but never since have I engaged much in spoken prayer. It sometimes strikes me as odd that I, a writer, find words inadequate for communing with the Great Mystery.

This has seemed even stranger in the last eight years, when the administration of George W. Bush has brought the whole country to its knees, a natural attitude for prayer. Still I send no verbal petitions to the gods. The idea of spoken prayer discomforts me.

I turn instead to the idea voiced in our unison affirmation every week that “service is our prayer.” I think we best express our alarm about the state of the universe by at least trying to do something about it. If we are going to be on our knees anyway, let’s not just complain. Let’s start scrubbing the earth’s dirty floor.

What better time than now to commit? Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, who led the way for years in service to humankind. Tomorrow is a holiday that Barak Obama has urged all Americans to devote to community service. The day after that we inaugurate Obama as the president we hope will get the country back on its feet. Martin Luther King's memory and Barak Obama's purpose will both be served best by a united effort to propel ourselves upward through service, both tomorrow and beyond.

The image of being on our knees reminds me of the five years I spent mentoring a local youth though a community agency. He and I went together each week to a cat shelter in Cumberland, dropped to our knees, and cleaned the litter boxes of close to one hundred cats. I am not trying to impress you by telling this story. After all, I finally gave the project up, in fear that it would otherwise continue forever. I speak of it now to indicate how little it takes to make a difference. When we tire of the world as it is, all we need do is drop to our knees, and start sifting through litter boxes, or perhaps pulling weeds.

Of course, more organized efforts are also good. I salute you members of the church Social Action Committee who meet at least once each month to ask what you can do and make plans to do it. I will not join you; one more regular church meeting might break my schedule if not my soul in two. But I will attempt to follow your lead and do more, and I hope others will do the same.

Let us start today. Let us use this weekend and week for review and recommitment. Let us move forward together in the spirit of Martin Luther King and with the hope of a new administration.

Let us pray.

My Personal Prayer Journey – by Patricia Lehmann

The birds sing their prayers announcing the morning
of another day of work,
or play – depending,
Their prayer floats skyward upon a clouded dawn to be swallowed by the sun.

My childhood prayers were desperate cries
in confessionals to uncaring witnesses on achy knees
said in rote memory, over and over to an unknown God.

A journey to learn prayer with lessons learned universally taught
some harder to grasp than others that
service not power,
humbleness not greed,
pride in self not arrogance,
go before bended knee.

Great men and women have gone before us in service
and some not so recognized as great.
To show us action and a prayer forever linked as examples
Not pedestals for the past as for the future.

Service is prayer,
washing dishes is my new confessional. It cleanses my soul with a
penance I can see and love.
It is a prayer in action.

Every good action is a prayer in service,
a smile for a world weary face, a penny given
a shoulder to cry on.
We share hope when we service, we pray and we don't
even know it.

The birds sing their prayers announcing the
deepening of the day.
Their prayer floats skyward upon the red-blazed sunset
to be swallowed
by the moon.

Praying for Service – by Lenora Trussell

The idea of prayer is not foreign to me though because of my evangelical past it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. As for service, I am not sure I know what that means. Deep in my heart I don't think I often do anything unless I am getting something back. I don't consider myself generous. I have so much and I give so little.

Take for instance a patient I recently had. Lovely, generous, woman. I called late in the day one Saturday to confirm that she was doing okay. She was doing as well as could be expected but as fate would have it she had relatives visiting from out of town. They were questioning the medications available in the Hospice Comfort Pack. They wanted me to come and remove it from the house because they considered it to be mislabeled and inappropriate.

This visit would mean yet another long day for me. Not something I was looking forward to. Yet I knew if I did not go, my patient would have nothing to make her comfortable should she develop those cumbersome end of life symptoms. To make matters worse, I was explaining these medications to family members who were medically trained, though not in the area of helping people be comfortable. Their training was in helping people get well and it was clear to them that I was not doing any thing to help this dying woman get well.

After I was able to convince them that the medications had enough merit to at least leave in the home, the family started reminiscing about their matriarch. She was quite an inspiration to them all as she had won so many awards for all the volunteer service she had done her whole life. They recounted stories of how she got others involved in the charitable services she gave from her heart.

I left that home, thinking about how little I do in the way of service. It seems that after I get off work my energy level is drained so much that all I want to do is rest. So for me to talk about service seems a little difficult.

Another caregiver shared with me her technique of prayer. She told me that if you focus, and I really mean focus, on something for 17 seconds it is amazing how often it happens. She told me about one time she went to the beach to get beach glass for one of her projects. She said that she decided to try out this practice of focusing on what she wanted for 17 seconds and she thought about picking up blue beach glass for that length of time. She said she was amazed in the first five minutes she picked up more blue beach glass than she had ever picked up in her life. Another time her husband was growing increasingly frustrated with his attempts at fishing a wire through some pipe. She made him stop and they both focused on visualizing his successfully getting the wire to where it was supposed to go. Within 5 minutes the job was done.

So this brings me to the fact that I did not vote for the topic of “service is our prayer”. Truthfully saying it as part of our mantra on Sunday mornings has always caused a glimmer of discomfort in me. I do not tell people that I pray for them. I do tell them that I will send them energy. My partner Kathy thinks that what I do for a living is service. I disagree because I get paid to do what I do. And I don’t think my work on the Worship Committee is service because I get so much out of it. I think service is when you give something with nothing expected in return. Even when I donate blood, I usually get a Pizza Hut Certificate.

If any of you feel as I do, I mean service and prayer challenged, I want to offer a short meditation that can possibly alleviate some of this inadequacy. I want you to take a moment and think about someone who would appreciate some of your intention. It has to be something that someone else reaps all the benefit. And the trick to the 17-second idea is to start small. Spending 17 seconds on world peace might not be a great way to start. Think of someone who is going through a hard time and they just need a little break in their circumstances. Try thinking of the person doing something that maybe they are not able to do now. I have a friend who is dealing with cancer and her energy levels are very low and she is having difficulty sleeping. I will visualize her waking up, rested from a good nights sleep, springing out of bed and energetically going down stairs to start her day.

Now that you have someone in mind, I will measure 17 seconds.

Time is up. You have now done your good deed. You have not only done a service to someone else, you have done it in a prayerful manner. Congratulations on being a good UU.

Service is Our Prayer – by Erica Bartlett

The primary definition of prayer, according to dictionary.com, is: "a devout petition to God or an object of worship."

This explains why I've never been all that comfortable with the idea of prayer. I don't have any particular object of worship, except perhaps the universe itself, and asking the universe for anything is always fraught with peril because you never know what you might get. But even if that weren't the case, I'm a Yankee born and raised, very much in the tradition of being expected to "do it myself" (whatever "it" may be). The idea of asking for help, particularly from some amorphously-defined being, goes a bit against the grain.

The second definition, though, makes it something a little more palatable to me: "a spiritual communion with God or an object of worship, as in supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession." I'm not sure about the supplication or confession parts, but I have many times felt a spiritual communion with manifestations of the universe, in thanksgiving and/or adoration. Feeling the glide of snow beneath me as I ski through hushed woods. Spending time with friends and family, sharing a meal and laughter. Being transported by a piece of music written by someone who returned to dust long before I was born.

As wonderful as it is to simply experience that communion and connection, I find that my gratitude and love for those manifestations is greatest when I put myself in service to them. Even small acts – recycling, conserving water and fuel, buying local, ringing the Salvation Army bell, donating to charities – fill me with serenity and deep appreciation for what I have. They increase my desire to share what I can so that others, too, might have that experience. By those actions I feel linked, thread by thread, to everything around me, a reminder that we truly are interconnected.

While I have always felt this way, I know that others haven't, that many have focused only on themselves. What excites me now is having seen that change over the past year as a result of the presidential campaign and election. No longer are just a few people eager to be involved – it has become a widespread phenomenon. I witnessed it first for myself when I heard Obama speak briefly to massed thousands in Bangor last February. It was the first time in my life that I had ever been part of such a large crowd of people all eager and willing to answer the call to serve, to help return our country to its ideals.

That desire to take action has only increased, spreading like wildfire as the election approached, and now continuing unabated as we await Obama's

inauguration. A sense of hope fills the air, eagerness to take part and take heart. Though I have volunteered my services before, I now feel an even greater call to do so, to work with others to effect broader change. I know that many feel the same, and in that shared communion I find myself praying after all.

I entreat - not God, or even the universe - but rather ourselves, all of us, that we not let this opportunity pass us by, that we serve with full and grateful hearts. And in that service may we be the answers to each other's prayers. Amen, and blessed be.

Closing Hymn – 1024 "When the Spirit Says Do"

Closing Words
"No ray of sunshine is ever lost, but the green which it awakens into existence needs time to sprout, and it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in faith." – Albert Schweitzer

"Our worship has come to an end, now let our service begin." - Anonymous