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LET US PRAY.

BY

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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

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LET US PRAY.

PRAYER is about the last subject one would willingly treat with rude or reckless freedom; for it reaches into the realm of sacred mysteries, and concerns the most intimate relations between man and his Maker. If such a subject needs to be cleared of hurtful misconceptions, the process must be something like the surgery which ventures to cut away false growths near to the heart. Yet, for the heart's own sake, the knife cannot always be spared.

We have all become suspicious that our traditional ways of thinking about religious matters, as about most other human affairs, need to be overhauled or re-examined, and cleared of unreal and irrational elements. We owe no more respect to religious nonsense than to any other. Yet in no department of thought does error grow so rankly. The more fertile the soil, the more abundant the product, whether of wholesome plants or of useless and poisonous weeds. Precisely because the spiritual part of our nature is like a rich tropical garden, it is liable to be infested and choked with all sorts of tare and tangle. The very ground is sacred; but it does not follow that it will produce only what is fair and comely. To give the good seed a fair chance, we must remove the cumbersome and obstructing growths of rant, cant, superstition, and absurdity. Can we do this necessary work with firmness, yet with tender

carefulness, so as not to root up the nobler plants of reverence, trust, and duty? You must have observed that when a man hates error more than he loves truth, he is apt to treat both with a kind of roughness, like the deacon whose minister described him to me as "violently all right."

But to many minds this is the puzzling problem: Is there any room for prayer in the natural order? or are we to expect interferences with the natural order? Professor Tyndall thought that light might be thrown on this question by methods of science, or by a careful observation of facts. For instance, when one farmer puts seed into the ground, and prays for a good crop, and another puts seed into the ground with never a thought of God, we might observe whether the praying farmer gets a larger harvest. In some of the churches, prayers are offered for deliverance from sudden death. When there is a railway collision or a loss of life by shipwreck, we might observe whether Providence distinguishes between those who have offered this prayer and those who have not. The test is not exactly modern. In an ancient temple of Neptune the priest showed to a visitor the votive offerings which had been brought by grateful sailors who had come safe to land. "But," said the skeptical visitor, "I see no offerings from those who prayed to the god, and yet perished in the waves."

Every year in some part of the world there is a drought, and sometimes prayers are offered for rain. Sooner or later the rain always comes, whether prayers are offered or not. The prophet Elijah lived nine hundred years before Christ. A Jewish legend, repeated in the Christian Scriptures, tells us that "he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months. He prayed again, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."

In that case the greater miracle would seem to be that anybody could have lived so long without water or food. The theory of the legend was that the withholding of rain was a punishment for the sins of the people; but a greater prophet than Elijah has taught us that the heavenly Father "maketh his sun to shine on the evil and on the good, and sendeth his rain on the just and on the unjust."

Prayer has often been regarded as a sort of last resort in human extremity. Because God is "a very present help in trouble," we forget that he is also a present help in joy and prosperity. A Portuguese proverb says, "He that would learn to pray, let him go to sea." It is true that in hours of helpless weakness we are recalled to our dependence. When a sick man was exhorted to turn his thoughts toward God, he replied, "The doctor says I am getting better." A little boy was wont to say at night,

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

but he excused himself from saying any morning prayer, because in the daytime he could take care of himself. An active business man explains his indifference to religion by saying, "I have never been hurt enough."

These anecdotes may illustrate the spiritual uses of adversity; but they also show the danger of falling into a miserable, sneaking selfishness, which tries to use God as a willing pauper uses the charity office. So, between superstition and selfishness, prayer has suffered, and man has wronged himself by his very devotions.

Many have given up prayer, or they think they have given it up. They reason, off-hand, in this way: "If sincere, it is a childish delusion; if insincere, it is a hideous hypocrisy." Do these conclusions apply to real prayer, or only to a confusing and irrational theory?

Certainly, if we think of prayer as a means of moving God or of producing any change in the laws of the world,

we shall give it up as soon as we come to our senses. Let us frankly admit that much of our praying has no rational use or meaning; that millions of petitions are never answered; that no answer is expected or even wished; and that the people who offer certain forms of prayer would be half scared to death if taken at their word.

The Creator does not need any information from his creatures. "He knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him," is the teaching of Jesus. Did Paul forget this when he said, "Let your requests be *made known* to God?" Perhaps, like the rest of us, he dropped into the use of language which is true to the simple mind of a child, and which indeed contains no dangerous error. To the child or to the philosopher nothing is more natural or more helpful than the unbosoming of the deepest thoughts, feelings, and desires in the presence of trusted sympathy, human or divine.

But neither does the Creator need to be persuaded by our human pleadings. Is not the Perfect Goodness more willing to give than we are to take? Are we not continually dealt with by a generosity which is above all we ask or think? Yet a part of that generosity—perhaps the greater part of it—comes in the form of those inspirations which waken our aspirations. "The preparation of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, are from the Lord." To cultivate our own receptivity by cherishing and expressing right desires may be a necessary condition of good living. One sign of life is the power to take in. Vitality is absorbing. To live and grow, the tree must continually ask and receive from the sun and earth and air. In this sense, to pray is as natural as to breathe. We hardly need ask whether prayer can be used instead of an umbrella or a sunshade, or as a motive power to drive machinery, or to bring customers to one's shop, or

to set broken bones, or to win worldly advantages. But is there not some true and reasonable sense in which we may speak of man as asking and God as giving? We ask and receive from each other, and do not feel it to be any disturbance of law and order. Are our relations with God less real? May we not think of prayer as a movement of our own minds in harmony with the nature of things, in harmony with law, reason, and experience?

Well, we live in a very large universe; we live in an order so varied that a great many different things may be true. We have learned that in nature there are forces which work in exactly opposite directions without conflict,

“As sunbeams stream through liberal space,
And nothing jostle or displace.”

Gravity, electricity, heat, wind, may operate within the same space and at the same time, downward, upward, sidewise, and in every direction, without a jar. While these physical forces are active within their spheres, the powers and passions of the human mind may be equally active and equally masterful. The love of liberty and knowledge, the love of wealth and power, the love of God and man, may all find room in the same mind, and may also work outwardly in the world, creating societies, systems of industry and trade, civilizations, and institutions of religion. There is room, then, for the play of more than one kind of force. It is also possible to make the lower forces and laws subservient to the higher.

The order in which we live is large enough and free enough to permit an endless system of exchanges. Among all creatures, intelligent and unintelligent, there is something which is very much like asking and giving. Our human life is full of it. It is the richness of our experience. But asking and giving are figurative expressions. We need not use them in the coarse, literal, and childish

sense; but we may use them, like all metaphorical language, as a ladder on which thought may climb to a high spiritual meaning, or as symbols which stand for something finer and truer than we can put into words.

We are only receivers; everything we have or can have is given. We exist under a law of dependence; for the power we call our own is itself a continuous gift. This means, and must mean, that we are related to some helping Power which is superior to ourselves. It means, and must mean, that we are in perpetual contact and connection with that Power. But many forms of benefit are given to us only on compliance with some condition. We receive if we comply; we do not receive if we do not comply. Does this conditional state of things imply chance or change in the order? No; it means that this is a part of the order, because the order is large enough for the movement of all the forces, physical and spiritual, human and divine.

One condition of receiving is that we must apply in the right way, or, as one may say, at the right office. For example, we apply to the resources of nature for our daily food. All mankind cannot create a particle. The farmer creates nothing; the hunter and fisherman, the butcher and baker, create nothing. All human industry is simply an application for help. It complies with fixed conditions, and the universal Providence does the rest. Every process of cultivating, transporting, or preparing food is simply a reaching out of man's hand to take what is freely given. Industry, like hunger, is the body's prayer for daily bread. Unless we ask or apply, we do not receive. There is a high sense in which the hand which toils moves the hand that moves the world. "To labor is to pray."

But man does not live by bread alone. He is capable of a higher life than the body's; he is endued with a deeper sense of need, a finer kind of hunger. There is a

realm of outward nature in which the body lives and is subject to physical laws and necessities; there is a grander realm in which man lives as a mind and is subject to spiritual laws and necessities.

Here, too, man is simply a receiver, — a conditional receiver. He cannot create the truth which his mind requires to make him wise, nor the love which his affections require to make him good and glad, nor the strength which his will requires to make him righteous. He is just as dependent for these spiritual supplies as for his daily food.

Now we have found a reason for faith. Unless the universe is ordered on a false and deceitful plan, and unless our own being is a wretched mockery, there must be as ample provision to meet our nobler needs as to meet our bodily wants. Our relations with the ever-giving Providence through external nature are no more real than our relations with the ever-giving Providence through our mental and moral faculties. Then we may reasonably conclude that the condition upon which our spiritual wants may be met will be analogous to those by which our bodily supplies are provided. In both cases we must ask, seek, knock; that is, we must put ourselves in the way to receive. To apply for help by complying with the conditions upon which help is given, — this is the essence of prayer. For the bodily supplies we reach outward; for the spiritual supplies we reach inward. In either case, our desires and expectations turn toward the Invisible. The divine generosity meets us in the resources of nature to satisfy our bodily hunger; the same divine generosity meets us in the resources of truth and grace to satisfy our aspirations.

For one precious moment, let us try to think of the supreme and universal Spirit as an exhaustless source of wisdom, or truth; of goodness, or love; and of righteous

will-power, or purity. Then let us inquire, How can that wisdom come into our understanding, that goodness into our affections, that righteousness into our will?

I hold it just as impossible for a man to increase in wisdom, love, or righteousness, without receiving something from the deeper Source, as that his bodily powers should be increased without nourishment. The child weighing ten pounds cannot become a man weighing a hundred and fifty pounds without taking a hundred and forty pounds of new material. We say he grows, — as if that were the simplest thing in the world! Yes; but he grows by receiving; he grows by compliance with conditions; he grows because he is alive and shares the nature of the things he feeds upon. There must be a corresponding provision by which he receives truth, love, and moral power out of the infinite supply.

In childhood, when I heard a blessing asked at the table, I wondered if God did something just then to the food, — if he worked some miracle of transubstantiation, making the bread and meat more fit for human use. In later years it grew clear to me that when food is received in that grateful, cheerful, and companionable spirit which favors both good digestion and mental elevation, it may yield a double blessing. By reminding us of our dependence and of the divine generosity, it may nourish the mind as well as the body. And in considering the processes by which we procure, prepare, appropriate, and enjoy our daily bread, I see now an illustration of the whole method of intercourse between God and man. We continually take, by thought and industry, what he gives in wisdom and love. We are ever asking and receiving, seeking and finding; and because he lives we live also. Whether we realize it or not, our life, like Christ's, is hid in God.

Prayer is not a magical method of securing blessings,

temporal or spiritual ; and we are not to look for magical answers. We are simply to put ourselves in the attitude or inward condition which makes it possible for benefits to come. This implies no change in the law ; it means, simply, that we conform and keep step to the music of the universe.

Indeed, the more we know of natural law, the more surely we trust ourselves to its keeping ; the more confidently we appeal to its provisions ; the more largely we draw upon its resources. Thus we learn to pray without ceasing ; for life itself becomes a prayer. Our souls seek the true, the beautiful, and the good, as our eyes seek the light. We ask after the love of God and the will of God as we ask for the companionship and sympathy of our friends. We get what we desire when our desire is in harmony with what is best.

“According to your faith, so will it be unto you,” is the doctrine of Jesus. If we expect only what is rightfully ours, we cannot expect too much. We grow more susceptible to impressions as we yield to them. There are fine forces and influences which enter into our being whenever our thoughts, affections, and choices make us receptive. Our passions are calmed ; our troubles are soothed ; our vision is cleared ; we feel the attraction of heavenly powers and pure spirits ; our faculties are invigorated ; we are bathed in soft waves of light and peace.

There are some who tell us that prayer is merely an invocation or address to one's self, — a kind of spiritual gymnastic exercise. Well, this might be useful. But a little reflection shows that even bodily exercise does not *create* strength. The athlete draws in more force from nature by using what he has. His practice is a kind of prayer ; it is the expression of his desire. It is not necessary to think of God as sitting in the sky, and bending to listen to our requests, and then sending down what we

ask. The whole transaction may take place in a man's own mind, and yet it may be a transaction with the Power by which he lives. For I think God is as truly present and active within us as in any part of his creation.

“Every inward aspiration is His angel undefiled;
And in every ‘O my Father!’ sleeps the answer, ‘Here, my child!’”

The spirit of Jesus is the spirit of prayer. We cannot know what took place in the solitude of his own mind when he turned away from the haunts of men to be alone with the Father. I cannot believe that he spent the midnight hours in agonizing pleadings and wrestlings, as if he would overcome some unwillingness in the mind of God. It seems more likely that he was listening for instruction, that he was absorbed in contemplation, that he was submitting his whole being to the influences of that unseen Spirit which flooded him with such wonderful light and love and power and peace. We might learn from him that communion with God—coming into some share of the divine qualities—is the truest prayer.

Oh, if we half believed, would not our whole souls lie open to the sunshine and warmth of heaven? But as we have eyes and do not see because we do not look, as we have ears and do not hear because we do not listen, as we have minds and yet are low in intelligence because we are not thoughtful and studious, so we have a religious nature and yet remain unspiritual because we give so little *attention* to the greatest of all realities. A thousand vanishing spectacles blind our eyes to the heavenly vision. A thousand rattling sounds make us deaf to the one still, small voice which alone can teach the true wisdom.

If we are confirmed in a habit of mental distraction, even the outward forms of worship may be a part of our worldliness.

Just as a good night of rest prepares us for a good day

of toil, so may a season of withdrawal and meditation prepare us for the better discharge of our social and secular obligations. We greatly need more calmness, self-possession, serenity; and if we find these blessings on the mount, we shall bring them down into the valley. Then the spirit of prayer will mix with our common moods, and hallow our common pursuits. We shall learn to ask for wisdom and guidance, just as the seaman watches the constellations and studies the chart of his voyage. We shall seek our spiritual exercises and comforts, just as we go every morning to our tasks and return every evening to the shelter of our homes. We shall ask forgiveness and inward cleansing, just as we would wash our hands or brush the dust from our garments. Then, wherever we rove or rest, the invisible Presence will be as real as the dearest human companionship. But the art of spiritual living requires practice; and the Lord is found only by them that seek him with the whole heart.

“When thou prayest, enter into thine inner chamber, and having shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall recompense thee.” “For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those that seek him.”

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