

Help, Thanks, Wow
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I. “Help”

Anne Lamott is a social justice activist and bestselling author, known for her autobiographical books such as [Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life](#), [Operating Instructions: A Journal Of My Son’s First Year](#), and [Some Assembly Required: A Journal of My Son's First Son](#). I first encountered her through a book she published more than a decade ago titled [Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith](#), which helped establish her reputation as a provocative and hilarious writer on spirituality.

From that book, one of the lines that resonated most with me was her confession that, **“Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me,’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’”** Given the memorable resonance of that line, I wasn’t surprised that years later she expanded that one sentence into a short book titled, [Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers](#).

As a whole, I suspect many Unitarian Universalists are more comfortable with the final two of Lamott’s three prayers (“Thanks” and “Wow”) than with the first one (“Help”). The word “prayer” in general, for many people, implies that there is “Someone” or “some aspect of reality” that is affected, impacted, or changed by our prayers, and **such claims trigger skeptical alarms for the dedicated rationalists among us.**

And back when I was a Progressive Christian minister, one allowance I would make for such concerns, was to be intentional about directing attention to the aspect of our experience that we can control most directly: *our actions*. Thus, whenever I was asked to pray publicly, I would often insert some version of the following sentence (which is not original to me): “We trust your wisdom, God, concerning how our petitions are to be answered, and **show us how we may contribute to alleviating the needs of those for whom we pray.**”¹ In other words, to quote a

¹ “*show us how we may contribute to alleviating the needs of those for whom we pray.*” — I do not remember where I first heard a prayer along these lines, but this formulation is not original to me.

book title from the New Monastic Movement, the invitation is “[Becoming the answer to our prayers.](#)”

In that spirit, Pope Francis has awed the world — and last week was named *Time Magazine*’s “Person of the Year” — for not only praying to God, but more importantly *practicing* radical acts of loving kindness for the poor and marginalized. And this vital shift from praying for help to *concrete acts of helping* others in need invokes Pope Francis’ namesake and recalls the original twelfth-century “Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi,” a prayer, which challenges us even today to do *our part* to alleviate the needs of those for whom we pray. In the original St. Francis’ words:

Make me an instrument of Your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me *sow love*;
Where there is injury, *pardon*;
Where there is error, *truth*;
Where there is doubt, *faith*;
Where there is despair, *hope*;
Where there is darkness, *light*;
And where there is sadness, *joy*....
Grant that I may not so much seek To be consoled as to *console*;
To be understood as to *understand*;
To be loved as to *love*....

All this being said, however, I don’t want you to feel like I am ducking the question of whether petitionary prayer “works.” Indeed, my observation is that there are many more Unitarian Universalists than you might think who find praying for help to be comforting, even effective. As a middle ground, however, I know that many of you have found the Quaker saying to be helpful: saying to someone in need that, “**I’m holding you in the light.**” Regarding the meaning of this saying, the Quaker singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer [writes](#) that,

What is intended by this phrase is to let the person know that in your daily mediation you will hold them in your heart. When I sit in silent prayer or meditation I usually don’t have a lot to “say.” For me silent prayer or meditation

is an opening. I open my heart and all the dark places and let in The Light. I try to tune my heart and ears to something other than the noise and distraction of the world. Often this feeling of opening stays with me and I feel it in the simplest moments of my day. So when I say, “I will hold you in the Light” it means **I will daily open my heart and send my love and concern into the Light, into the living space around you....**

May we become the answer to our prayers. May we become an instrument of Peace. May we always hold one another in the Light.

II. “Thanks”

The second of Lamott’s “three essential prayers” is *thanks*. Unitarian Universalist find ourselves on more universally safe ground here on the value of expressing gratitude. As our recent guest minister Gretchen Weis quoted the 13th-century mystic Meister Eckhart as [saying](#), “If the only prayer you say in your entire life is ‘Thank You,’ that would suffice.” And choosing to emphasize the positive and focus on the good parts of your life can be transformative.

I’m not saying that we should be naively *Pollyanna*-ish. Rather, as you’ve heard me quote before from the book [Buddha's Brain](#), the human **“brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones”** (41). This evolutionary bias toward retaining the negative helped our ancestors survive threats in the wild long enough to pass on their genes, but to compensate today, *savoring the positive can be one of the healthiest practices we can do to*. And for many years one of my most consistent spiritual practices has been, when I lie down to go to sleep, to contemplatively review my day in my mind and savor at least five things that I’m deeply grateful for. Even on my worst days there are at least five (and many more) parts of the day that I’m grateful for.

As Jane Kenyon writes in her poem [“Otherwise”](#):

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been

otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

And as we sit here this morning the day after the one-year anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting, we know deeply in our hearts that tomorrow is not guaranteed for any of us. We can only open our hearts in gratitude for all we are thankful for in our life, and open our hands to help build a more just, compassionate, and peaceful world for ourselves and for our children.

In this spirit of gratitude, in a few moment the choir will sing “Amazing Grace.” The English word *grace* come from the Latin *gratia*, which links it etymologically to our English word gratitude or the Latin *gratis*. And grace refers to that which comes to us as a gift: “free of charge, no strings attached, on the house.”²

And a consummate example of gratitude for those parts of our life that feel like grace comes from one of our Unitarian forbears, the poet e.e. cummings, who knew how to pray that essential prayer of “thanks.” He wrote

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any — lifted from the no
of all nothing — human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

For what parts of your life are you *radically grateful*? In your journey through this world, what has come to you *gratis*, as gift — “free of charge, no strings attached, on the house.” What gift in your life might you need to celebrate as an *amazing grace*.

² “free of charge, no strings attached, on the house” — Philip Yancey, [What’s So Amazing About Grace?](#),

III. “Wow”

Ann Lamott’s initial claim was that, “Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me,’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’” But more than a decade later, she wisely added a third essential prayer: “Wow.” And cultivating a prayerful sense of *awe* at the stunning beauty of the universe is another spiritual practice about which many Unitarian Universalists can agree. Indeed, **one of the most frequent formulations in our UU Religious Education curricula for our young people is some variation of “I wonder....”** We encourage our children, youth (and our adults too!) to cultivate a foundational sense of wonder and awe toward this world in which we find ourselves.

Along these lines, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel often talked about the importance of “Radical Amazement.”³ (And for anyone curious, yes, that’s the same Rabbi Heschel that I had planned to preach about last Sunday. But due to the winter storm cancelation, that sermon has been moved to mid-January.) That being said, I love Heschel’s phrase “Radical Amazement.” And although there is much truth in that bumper sticker that says, “If you’re not *outraged*, you’re not paying attention,” I think it is equally true that **“If you are not radically amazed, you are not paying attention.”**

Wow, radical amazement is watching the Olympics and seeing the heights of human athletic potential. Wow, radical amazement is wandering through an art museum and seeing the stunning creativity of human beings. Wow, radical amazement is the radiant autumnal beauty of leaves in the fall, the peaceful hush of a snow-covered landscape, the lush verdant greenness of spring, the expanse of the ocean, and the endless depth of the night sky in our universe with its more than 400 billion galaxies. Wow.



³ “Radical Amazement” — Shai Held, [Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence](#), 28-30.



What has stopped you in your tracks recently and made you say, “Wow!”? In the past few years, another of my most common spiritual practices has been taking photographs with my iPhone using the Instagram app of those moments in life when I come across sights that leave me transfixed in radical amazement. I’ve found that rather than distracting me, photography when done slowly and with intention brings me even more deeply into the present moment, often causing me to notice details, angles, and

beauty I likely otherwise would have missed.

And similar to the practice of *savoring* moments of gratitude, I invite you to savor moments of radical amazement whenever they arise in your life. **Give yourself permission to *linger* in those moments of awe, wow, and wonder.** Along these lines, there is a part of Gail Godwin’s novel [*Evensong*](#) that has stuck with me years later. She writes that one of her favorite phrases from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer is a three-word part of a prayer that asks, **“Shield the**



joyous.” And there’s something lovely to this notion of “shielding the joyous,” including the joy that arises in ourselves. There is much tragedy and sadness in this life, and giving ourselves permission to experience and process emotions around loss is incredibly important, but so too is giving ourselves permission to fully experience joy, wonder, and awe.

Anne Lamott ends her book with an epilogue titled, “Amen” — a concluding prayerful affirmation that simply means, “So Be It” or “May it be so.” And in this section, she quotes a beautiful poem by Raymond Carver that helps bring together the core hope at the center of those three essential prayers, “Help, Thanks, Wow.” Carver writes,

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.

We UUs often invoke Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of building a Beloved Community on this earth. And Carver's poem touches on the path that we must follow for ourselves and with others if we are to turn that *dream* of Beloved Community into *deeds*, into reality. **We must call ourselves beloved, we must feel ourselves beloved, and we must come to experience and treat all people, all beings, as beloved on this earth.**

Help, Thanks, Wow. Connection, Gratitude, and Awe. Three essential prayers. Or, if you prefer, three essential dispositions or practices.

Help, Thanks, Wow. May it be so. And Blessed Be.