

The Five Second Prayer  
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I am so honored to be giving the sermon on New Members' Day. Welcome to all of you! In the words of my previous Chicago UU congregation: We receive you, with much rejoicing! It does, given today's main event, seem a little strange that I should also be, coincidentally, giving a sermon about how bad I am at praying. But that is one reason I'm here at a UU church – because what I felt was spiritual for me didn't "fit" into the religious community I grew up in. So consider this a reflection on the various ways one can be a UU. Or perhaps, a meditation on alternative models for prayer. It's probably not a great model for a sermon though, because I wrote it last night and it feels a little disjointed. But hey, in true UU fashion, you can take whatever you want from this. It's all good.

So. Anyway. Bad at prayer. At least, bad at sitting still, hands crossed, and reflecting on... myself? Divinity? Life, the Universe, and Everything? I never really got it, honestly. I'm just too A.D.D. to sit still that long without my mind wandering away. And when I want to really think, I have to be moving – pacing, usually. (My students complain about this all the time.) I can fake it, of course – I can put my hands together and close my eyes and all that. It might LOOK like I'm praying. But... I suspect I'm really not. I'm probably not the best person to ask, actually.

For a long time I thought this was a major failing on my part. (In fact, this is the first time I'm admitting to this in public.) After all, I'm a religious person. Religious people pray, right? But I have come to realize that I *do* pray. I just don't pray like *that*.

Instead, I practice "The Five Second Prayer." Although sometimes, honestly, it takes a little longer than five seconds.

Let me explain. I have been a life-long environmentalist. This was the principal reason I eventually came to be a Unitarian (long story). I don't always live up to my eco-ideals – who does?! – but I try. And much of this takes the form of the Five Second Prayer.

I realize that my eco-habits -- recycling, composting, turning off lights, turning down the heat or turning up the AC -- are small things in the large scale of the global climate change situation we are facing. The scope of the world is so very large, and these acts are so small, that they might be seen as meaningless. Even in the scope of my own life, these are minor efforts. After all, I eat meat (although not every day). I travel a lot. My house is bigger than it needs to be. Sometimes, when it rains really hard, I (gulp) drive to work. I know, I know. I even *drove here today*.

And yet, I keep recycling and turning off lights. Why?

I finally realized that this wasn't *just* about saving energy and managing waste, although that's important too. It was also a five-second prayer.

I care. The world matters. What I do (and don't do) in the world matters. There's still hope that I could play some small, small part in making it better.

Sometimes the five-second prayer turns into a more extended pilgrimage. When our family spent a year in Granada, Spain a while back, we lived in a neighborhood that pre-dated car traffic. Our street was only accessible by foot and motorcycle. Trash collection and street sweeping was all done on foot, with city sanitation workers pushing carts with garbage cans to carry trash they'd collect or sweep by hand. And because there were a lot of tourists – a lot of young tourists who were clearly having way more fun than we were – there was always a lot of trash: Beer bottles, wine bottles, soda cans.

Every day in Granada we would walk our kids to school at a nearby plaza and pass the remnants of the previous night's fun on the way. I developed the habit of collecting all these recyclables on my walk and dumping them into the city recycling containers in front of the kids' school. We did the same while hiking, collecting bottles and cans from their hiding places along forest paths and dusty trails. I didn't view this primarily as cleaning up garbage. Those cans and bottles might have been an eyesore, but trash is trash, whether it's on the street or in a trash can or in a landfill. I was more invested in the idea that recycling these things saved energy and reduced strip-mining for bauxite. Transforming something from "trash" to a thing of value is a small miracle. A prayer answered.

Sometimes when my husband and I were collecting forgotten soda cans stuffed into the long-blocked drainage holes in Granada's medieval walls, people would look at us sideways. Even the sanitation workers would chuckle at us, slightly bemused. Very occasionally, other hikers or bicyclists would see us on the trail with our bulging bags of junk and thank us. But we were usually alone in our prayers, and that's ok.

After a while we started keeping a tally of how much we had recycled in Granada. Honestly, I couldn't find the numbers while I was writing this. It was over a thousand soda cans, and several hundred glass bottles. That doesn't save the world, but it's not nothing, either.

Reading the news lately, I will admit I am feeling a little discouraged about the possibility of the collective power of small actions to save our world. This feeling has been heightened by a research trip I took over the holidays. I've been working for a couple years on a research project about tourism to Antarctica, interviewing people remotely and conducting surveys. My collaborators managed to get me invited on a trip as a guest this December, so I went for the first time.

It's not the sort of thing you turn down, but I did have my misgivings. I was well aware of the large carbon footprint of flying to the southern tip of Argentina, getting on a ship to go across the Drake Passage, and then returning the same way. Taking the bus and subway to JFK airport on each end of the trip was not going to offset that. I could say that ship was going anyway, that the impact of my air travel was miniscule in comparison with the enormity of the global air travel industry. I could argue, as others do, that the overall impacts of tourism to Antarctica pales in comparison to the impacts of tourism to Europe or Disney World.

And yet.

Penguins are super cute. (Sorry, I have to throw this in!) They swim like fish, but are delightfully awkward on land. They create “highways” to allow them to walk from rocky areas where they nest to the shore, carving paths in the snow that go down to the dirt. They are completely uninterested in people. Most animals I have encountered in my life are either running towards me or away from me, but penguins seem to watch us just to make sure we’ve seen them and will stay out of their way (which is what people generally do – there are all sorts of rules that tourists have to follow in that regard).

Penguins may seem indifferent to human presence, but the truth is that despite the illusion of a landscape untouched by people, Antarctica is as deeply affected by human actions as the rest of the planet. Climate change is, ironically, causing it to snow more in Antarctica, a continent which is actually a desert with a lot of ice but very little precipitation. Most penguins nest on rocks; a snowfall on their nests kills their eggs. When that happens, they don’t re-lay until the following year. In addition, warmer waters are affecting krill populations (penguins’ dominant food source), and ice is shrinking. Penguin populations are plummeting.

So I felt pretty guilty about traveling all the way to Antarctica to gawk at how cute penguins are. And I asked myself, am I doing enough? The catch with environmentalism is that one could always be doing more, of course. But am I doing enough to be at peace with myself? Am I following the seventh principal, and respecting the interconnected web of life?

There is a lot of pessimism about climate change right now, and it is warranted. The situation looks dire. But, if we believe that small things are what led to global climate change in the first place, if we believe small changes and decisions eventually do add up, then perhaps it isn’t too ridiculous to think that an accumulation of small changes can make things better as well. That those five-second prayers could add up. That our prayers could fall, snowflake by snowflake, to cover up some of the damage of the world and make it beautiful.

I have to hope so. I’ve come back from Antarctica with a new awareness of the damage plastics are causing in our oceans, and so I’m now using bar shampoo instead of what’s sold in plastic bottles (did you know shampoo comes in bars? So cool!). Another five-second prayer to add to my practice.

So, if you think right now that you are bad at praying, perhaps expand how you think about what prayer is. If prayer is the small, quiet, ritual practices that remind us of larger truths, then perhaps it can be found in all sorts of unexpected places.

And maybe if we all pray enough, we can make miracles.