

Mindful Prayer: Creating personal prayer through mindfulness – an experiential workshop

Title of Presentation:

Mindful Prayer: Creating personal prayer through mindfulness – an experiential workshop.

Identification:

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Abstract:

Mindful Prayer: Creating personal prayer through mindfulness – an experiential workshop.

The states of mindfulness and prayer may seem to be in different realms, one focusing on here and now and the other, seemingly, on the future. Bringing them together can “fine tune” us to the essence: Here and now, what is my prayer?

The heart of prayer has been known to mankind from the very beginning of time, but has been somewhat lost in the helping professions in the western world.

Building on ancient Jewish sources and Buddhist meditations, this paper gives a step by step description of a workshop designed to help participants create a mindful, personal prayer, that ripple out far and beyond ourselves.

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The state of mindfulness, in its open, accepting form, is itself a goal. Focusing on body and mind - breathing, remembering - facilitates a way of “being” and an awareness that can enhance our lives on many levels.

Mindfulness and prayer seem to be in different realms: In mindfulness we attend fully to the present here and now, while in prayer we often turn our attention to the future. Furthermore, prayer, especially in its classic western form, and certainly in its written formal liturgy, can sometimes be detached from our innermost recognition, realization and yearning. Mindful attention to our spirit, on the other hand, could extend our awareness to our deepest selves, thus creating a holistic connection of body, mind and spirit.

It is in this state that we can formulate our own personal prayer and “fine tune” it to the essence of the truth of the moment: Here and now, what is my prayer?

The essence of prayer has been known to humankind from the very beginning of time, and is embedded in our very being. In times of suffering and despair, the human being cries out for help to a higher force beyond, and in happy times - coming out of danger or wonderful events - in gratitude and deep joy.

Whereas in ancient society, as well as today in eastern and traditional cultures, the healer/therapist/adviser/spiritual leader are one and the same, in western society most helping professions have put spirituality out of the picture for many reasons. However, people

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in distress are still turning to spiritual realms in deep yearning for connecting above and beyond themselves for meaning and comfort.

Therefore, bringing the practice of creating personal prayer into any form of helping has the potential of enhancing and deepening the process by connecting to the very essence of the human experience. Doing so with mindful attention and intention is essential to the process, so as not to invade but rather to discover and unveil the authentic innermost feelings and aspiration of the person.

The process of creating personal prayer can take place in individual or group settings, with the usual pros and cons: The individual setting is more intimate and focused on one person's experience, whereas the group enhances the participants experience and connectedness in a powerful way.

While it is true that sometimes, the most authentic personal prayer arises spontaneously from the depths of one's soul, creating personal mindful prayer in a helping setting requires mindful attention and fine tuning in order to be a meaningful experience.

The workshop "Creating mindful prayer" is designed to create a group setting and process that enables the participants to connect to their own inner world of prayer while being guided in the process through mindfulness to body, mind, spirit and soul to the personal, communal and universal dimensions of prayer.

If this is a first or one time workshop, naturally we begin with introduction. Adding to our name and where we are from, we also relate to the question: What is prayer for me? If this is a

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session within an ongoing group, we begin with the same question, to be related to in turn by each participant: When I hear the word Prayer – what does it mean to me?

This creates a recognition in the group that each person relates to prayer differently, and the message is that each feeling and point of view are acceptable and cherished. At the same time, it enables the facilitator to realize what the different ideas about prayer are in this particular group and adapt him/herself accordingly.

In the second stage, we engage our minds in the idea of creating personal prayer: Does this make sense? Have scholars written about it? Is it within our tradition? Is prayer supposed to be created or repeated from a traditional form? What do we think about this idea? Does prayer have meaning even if one does not believe in God? Is prayer an ongoing conversation with a higher power or something to prepare for and be in a meditative state for?

In order to create real dialogue with these ideas, we share some relevant readings and poems, working in pairs for about 15 minutes to enable one on one learning and sharing.

The collection of readings should include about 3-6 different sources, depending on the group's interest and literacy level. Ideally, the sources should include materials from both one's own and other cultures, of diverse forms such as prose and poetry, and be both religious and universal in nature. In this way, readings will have both familiar and thought provoking ideas that will speak meaningfully to each person. It is best to also include one poem/song which has been put to music and can be sung and/or listened to.

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In the sources used in the conference, (to be found in the appendix), two ideas among others were introduced:

One, from the teaching **Maimonides**, a Torah scholar from the middle ages, talks about the original commandment to say a private prayer at least once a day, as a “service of the heart”. According to this teaching, this prayer should include 3 themes: Praise, Giving thanks, and Asking for what you need. It is only later in history, we are taught, that prayers were written down in liturgy to be cited from the book. Another idea introduced in the reading is from a poem about prayer by Ehud Manor, and it tells us how even if no one hears our prayer, a heartfelt prayer changes the person who says it.

The reading and sharing in pairs, thinking about different aspects of prayer, give a basis for the process to follow.

Coming back to the group, some ideas can be shared in open discussion before moving to the next stage. (it is best however, not go all around so as to leave time for the following exercises).

After having been engaged in thinking about creating personal prayer, we are now invited to prepare for the experience itself.

Using mindful practice, we first pay attention to our body, both to painful/tense and relaxed/wellbeing parts of our bodies. Then, we focus on our thoughts – noticing what comes up, and notice our feelings. This mindful awareness of body and mind can connect us to our inner experience.

Once in this state of awareness, we ask ourselves what has emerged, here and now; usually there is one concern, pain, thought, or sorrow that comes up more than others. For example,

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we may be worried about one of our children, or our parent/s, concerned for a loved one. We may be in pain physically, worried about our health, our job, our next meal, our next step in life, the ecology or the human condition.

We stay with whatever came up, allowing it to BE.

Then we write it down.

Looking at what we wrote, we now ask ourselves about this concern/worry/pain/anxiety:

Here and now- what is my prayer?

And write it down too.

At this point, we are guided to add our spiritual point of view, so that body- mind as well as spirit/soul are involved in the awareness, and ask ourselves:

Is this really my prayer?

To this question, sometimes the answer is yes and the prayer remains the same. However, many a time at this point the person realizes that their prayer is different. For example, a mother is worrying about her son who is in a relationship with someone who seems to be wrong for him. Her first prayer may be, "Please God help my son see his worth and help him end this relationship. Please may he find a woman who will be truly his soul-mate and who will encourage him on a good path in life as I know he deserves." Then asking herself for the second time "Is this really my prayer?" from an added spiritual point of view, the mother may

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become aware of a very different prayer that emerges within her: "I hope and pray that my son will find his way to happiness and have a good relationship that brings him joy".

The choice of the revised prayer emerges from the participants themselves through simple, conscious awareness in response to the question "Is this really my prayer?"

The inner work is done in silence, and even if shared, the new prayer is **not nor should it be a response to a suggestion of any kind by participants or the facilitator**, but rather come from within.

Sometimes, it takes a second repetition of the same question before participants feel that they have fine-tuned their prayer to one that resonates with their deepest being. Going back to the example of the mother, she may now add "Please may I open my heart to accept his choices and may they be good for him."

Often, this stage is accompanied by tears of relief or of being deeply moved.

Now, the participants write their revised prayer on their page.

At this point, a variation of the "Loving Kindness Meditation" is introduced into guided meditation. In Loving Kindness Meditation we expand our love and kindness first to close ones, then to people we do not know, and then even to people we dislike. Taking the notion of the expansion of love, kindness, light, and prayer, we now bring that same ripple effect to the practice of creating personal prayer. We describe to the group the idea, that when a person is in a particular state or situation, he has a potential empathy, understanding and connectedness for others in similar circumstances. Thus in the example of the mother

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described above, who better than her to pray for all the mothers worrying about their child's unfitting choices. Having come to her true prayer, she can imagine sending a Loving Kindness prayer of acceptance and calm to all those mothers in her neighborhood, city, country, and in the whole world.

This outward motion of prayer adds a further dimension, as it may replace our loneliness with a new awareness of connectedness and belonging to a broad human community of people who share our experiences. This in itself can have a healing effect.

After completing the guided meditation of sending the prayer to all those in a similar predicament, all participants write down, in addition to their personal prayer, the prayer that they have sent to ripple far and beyond themselves.

This brings us to the last part of the process. Whereas most of the work done so far has been inner work – imagining, praying quietly, writing down our prayers and meditating – we are now ready to share our prayers aloud with the group.

Each person in turn reads their written prayer to the group: The final, fine-tuned private one, and the loving kindness one. Some might share the process they went through while fine tuning their prayer. The facilitator invites the group to answer "Amen" or "so be it" after each prayer is read. After the first round, the participants are asked to continue reading it repeatedly, while the next person and the next begin and continue reading their prayers aloud too.

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This creates a communal reciting of personal and loving kindness prayers, while the group facilitator invites one after another of the participants to join their voice in prayer, thus "conducting a choir" of prayers to be sent up far and beyond, encouraging the group to continue reading their prayers again and again.

Slowly, the voices subside and the group sits in silence, allowing the experience to come to its end.

At this point, the poem or song that was included in the reading materials may be played, to allow for closure for each person in his or her own rhythm.

Finally, we facilitate a round asking each person to share what blessings they take with them and wish to leave the group with.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the participants in the "creating mindful prayer" workshop in the June 2014 spirituality and social work conference in Fredericton, and send my prayer for blessed times of clarity, energy and renewed hope and peace to us all.

Amen.

Appendix:

Naava Zohar-Sykes – Spiritual Support JDC Ashalim Israel

Readings for Workshop - Spirituality and Social Work Conference 2014

It is a positive Torah commandment to pray every day, as [Exodus 23:25] states: "You shall serve God, your Lord." Tradition teaches us that this service is prayer, as [Deuteronomy 10:12] states: "And serve Him with all your heart" and our Sages said: Which is the service of the heart? This is prayer. The number of prayers is not prescribed in the Torah, nor does it prescribe a specific formula for prayer. Also, according to Torah law, there are no fixed times for prayers... it is not a time-oriented commandment. Rather, this commandment obligates each person to offer supplication and prayer every day and utter praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; then petition for all his needs with requests and supplications; and finally, give praise and thanks to God for the goodness that He has bestowed upon him; each one according to his own ability. A person who was eloquent would offer many prayers and requests. [Conversely,] a person who was inarticulate would speak as well as he could and whenever he desired. Similarly, the number of prayers was dependent on each person's ability. Some would pray once daily; others, several times.

Rambam- MEIMONIDES – sefer Ahava – teaching of Prayer

"Teach me my God, a blessing, a prayer

For the mystery of a withered leaf

For ripened fruit so fair

**For the freedom to see, to sense,
To breathe, to know, to hope, to despair.**

Teach my lips a blessing, a hymn of praise

As each morning and night

You renew Your days,

Lest this day be as the one before

Lest routine set in my ways."

(- Leah Goldberg- freely translated)

Perhaps the being up above

Does not hear my voice

But prayer, and crying, pain
and love,

Does give my heart a choice

(- Ehud Manor- freely
translated)

Cat Stevens- Morning Has Broken

Morning has broken like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning
Praise for them springing fresh from the Word

Sweet the rains new fall, sunlit from Heaven
Like the first dewfall on the first grass
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden
Sprung in completeness where His feet pass

Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning
Born of the one light, Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise every morning
God's recreation of the new day

Morning has broken like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning
Praise for them springing fresh from the Word

Take a moment to get to know each other

1. Read out loud with your partner, share your thoughts and understanding:
how are the readings similar/different?
2. What is your own idea of prayer?
3. Each choose a phrase, a word, a line that speaks to you most and share- what, why...