

The Phoenix Communion



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For
All Souls Unitarian Universalist Community

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The Phoenix Communion

We will begin this communion service, this celebration of community, with its opposite. Please pick up your chairs, turn them around and sit back on them facing outwards. You are now outside of community. Others aren't looking at you; you can take off your mask and be yourself. How do you feel? Free and unencumbered? Or do you feel alone and alienated? Or both?

To be alone, outside of community, is that special form of Hell that besets a large portion of humankind, a Hell that is both wretched and familiar. How do we get there? As a friend was fond of saying, things are the way they are because they got there. Our histories are way too complex to trace the causes that led us here. But as it was said on one of those beautiful messages sent cascading through the internet, it takes but a moment to create a hurt that takes decades to heal, a thought further reflected in this poem.

The Gorgon's Lament

Stone is your visage, cold and hard,
that just was warm and soft.

Foul Gorgon's deed to turn the bright so dark,
and I the Medusa whose true face none can endure.

My mask has slipped again.
Or have I let it slip,
in impossible hope you could love me as I really am?

With sun and new company,
the stone you now wear will soon fall from your countenance
to lie forever as another course on the wall between us,

mortared by the silence of statues
who dare not speak of the spells that petrified them.¹

¹ © James A. Fulton, 1997

Can we undo the past, the hurts we have done in the past, and thereby return to that community, that family, that sparkles in our memory like a phantom retrieved by Scrooge's Ghost of Christmas Past? No, the past is a fate we cannot change. But its hold on us can be overcome. Such is the power of

The Prayers of the Phoenix

Welcome!

Namaste!

Thank you!

I'm sorry!

I forgive you!

I love you!

I wish you enough!

These are the prayers of the phoenix. They are spells of healing of the spirit. They are a cleansing fire that consumes and renews the phoenix of the spirit, the spirit of the individual and the spirit of the community.

Just uttering these words to another produces a noticeable relaxation of the tension between you. Saying them and meaning them, and having the person you say them to know that you mean them, goes a long way to healing the wounds you have caused one another, to melting the walls of spiritual ice that separate you.

But wait a minute, you say. These aren't prayers. These are merely things we might say to other people. Most of them we wouldn't say to God!

To the contrary, when you say these prayers honestly and sincerely to another person, especially to people in your close community or family, you speak not only to them, you offer the prayer both to yourself and to God. And I am inclined to think that this is the only kind of prayer that God heeds!

Let's review the prayers one by one to see how that could be.

1. **Welcome!**

The first prayer of the phoenix is prayer of welcome. It is well that you come. Your presence makes my life brighter, happier, richer.

This is a prayer of affirmation. It is an acceptance of the here and now as good, as something to take joy in. It says that I am not worrying about what is not here and not now, because I have you here and now.

For me to affirm the goodness of the here and now is moreover to acknowledge my own contribution to that goodness.

For me to affirm the goodness of the here and now is to acknowledge God's creation. It says that what God has given me here and now is good. It is a prayer of affirmation to God.

2. **Namaste!**

The second prayer of the phoenix uses a Sanskrit word that is common among Hindus and Buddhists and other faiths of India, as well as in yoga classes here in the States. It is commonly interpreted as saying that I acknowledge and honor the divinity within you.

I prefer to interpret it as saying I honor the divinity that is you.

For you are divine. You are endowed with the power of choice. That is the essential image of God in which you were created. Your every choice, your every decision creates the next moment of the universe.

I should say co-creates, because it is your choices, combined with the choices of all people everywhere, together with the choices of the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, combined with the chance variations in the behavior of biological and chemical and physical and subatomic systems, all these together produce the world to be. So though you are not the only creator, what you choose influences the world that I live in. You are a source of the divine power of creation. I acknowledge and honor your divine power.

To acknowledge and affirm your divinity, transforms my relationship to you. I cannot in good conscience recognize your divinity and ignore what you are trying to achieve. I might disagree with you, and act so as to bring about a different end from what I think you are trying to achieve. But I cannot merely ignore your choice; I cannot merely dismiss you as irrelevant.

For my acknowledgement of your divinity to make sense, I must seek to bring about a world that fulfills your goals as well as mine and those of everyone else. That's hard. I cannot do it by myself. You and I and everyone else must work together to choose a course of action that we can all be satisfied with, not by counting noses and ignoring the interests of the minority, but by taking the time to achieve consensus.

But look what has happened. In acknowledging your divinity, and considering its consequences, I have acknowledged my own power of choice, my own divinity. In saying Namaste to you, I have said Namaste to myself.

More than that. In acknowledging your divinity, and that of everyone else, I have affirmed a divine power outside myself. The world I live in is subject to powers I do not control, the god of this world. I cannot force that god to my will. In saying Namaste to you, I have said Namaste to God.

3. Thank you!

The third prayer of the phoenix is the prayer of gratitude.

Having acknowledged your divine power over my life, I recognize that what is good in my life has come about, in part because of the choices you have made. I did not make you do these things. You did them, you chose them, and my life is better because you did them. It does not matter that you might not have intended my benefit when you did them. I did benefit, and for that I am grateful.

And for those times you intended good on my behalf, I am especially grateful, even when your good intentions didn't work out.

Further, in expressing my thanks to you for the things you have done that have brought me happiness, I am also thanking myself for my own role in bringing that happiness about.

Finally, in expressing my thanks to you, I am also thanking God, that is, the totality of all those factors that made my happiness possible. It is a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

4. I'm sorry!

The fourth prayer of the phoenix is the prayer of apology.

To say I am sorry in this sense is not merely to express sadness that you have been harmed. It is to take responsibility for that harm. Apology subjects me not only to my own shame and guilt for causing harm, but also to castigation and punishment, in a world whose concept of justice unfortunately seems to focus more on punishing the guilty than on creating a moral framework that minimizes the likelihood of harm.





But what am I apologizing for? – Everything!

As soon as I acknowledge my own divine power of choice, my own role as co-creator of the world, I must acknowledge my own responsibility for that world.

Suppose a director of a corporation casts a minority vote against despoiling the environment. That vote does not absolve him or her of the ecological catastrophe that results. The director participated in the process that caused that catastrophe; the director is responsible.

There are no idunno's or notme's (as we see occasionally in The Family Circus comic strip) when you participate in a process that leads to harm, even if your participation is to do nothing. There are only mea culpa's. We are all co-creators of this world; we are all responsible.

But it is not just this blanket kind of responsibility that I am sorry for. I make mistakes. Sometimes a kindly universe hides my mistakes, and for that I am grateful. But sometimes my mistakes have led directly or indirectly to your pain or unhappiness or distress, or even to risks that you would not have accepted for yourself. For that I am sorry. Mea summa culpa.

-  I am sorry for all the times I have said hurtful things to you, or otherwise acted out of spite in order to cause you pain, regardless of the circumstances.
-  I am sorry for all the times I have said or done things knowing they would cause you pain, but thinking that my benefit was worth your pain.
-  I am sorry for all the times I have said or done things not knowing they would cause you pain, because I didn't consider all the consequences of what I was planning.
-  I am sorry for all the times I have said or done things that put you at risk of pain, without your permission.

In saying I am sorry, I accept my responsibility. If there is anything I can do to compensate for the suffering I have caused you, I undertake to do it.

Furthermore I commit myself to doing better in the future. Having acknowledged your divinity, I accept my responsibility to act in ways that do not put you at risk without your consent, that is, I commit to the Golden Rule.

Note that to apologize to those I have harmed by my mistakes, is to make it possible for me to apologize to myself. In saying I am sorry to others, I acknowledge my error to myself, I say I am sorry to myself. By confessing my guilt, I make the catharsis for that guilt possible.

Further, to apologize to another, I am apologizing to God, to the universe. I am accepting my role and responsibility in sowing discord and dysfunctionality in the universe, and I am committing to do better, to make the world a happier, healthier place. It is a prayer of apology to God.

5. I forgive you!

The fifth prayer of the phoenix is the prayer of forgiveness, of absolution.

The prayer of forgiveness depends essentially on the prayer of apology. I can forgive you only for actions that you have acknowledged, for which you have apologized. For me to “forgive” you for an act you have not apologized for, is in effect to accuse you. Indeed, an apology is best understood as a prayer for forgiveness. In the Phoenix Communion, everyone apologizes to everyone else before anyone forgives anyone.

Forgiveness is a peculiar prayer. It promises a kind of fictional blindness to what might be an unforgettable incident. For me to forgive you is to say that I am going to act as though the incident had not happened. I might not be able to truly forget, but I choose to return you to the fold of my community, and to act without regard to that incident.

This is perhaps the most important prayer in the healing of the soul, of the family, of the community, of the world. To be returned to the fold brings you back into the love of the community. It restores the community to a functioning whole.

Apology and forgiveness are responses to acts that have riven the community, if only in what might seem minor ways on some absolute scale. Those acts have caused a breach of trust. By forgiving you, I commit myself to trying to restore that trust, but that might be difficult. Forgiveness does not expunge the act or the consequent harm, but it does enable the community to function, and with time it enables the restoration of trust.

For me to forgive another for transgressions against me makes it possible for me to forgive myself. Many people find forgiving themselves more difficult than forgiving others. This might be because they have not yet said Namaste to the universe; they believe that have some special monopoly on mistakes. Be that as it may, if I cannot forgive another, I cannot forgive myself, for I am far more aware of my own failings than I am of any other. To forgive another is the first step (after apology) to dealing with myself as a divine, but less than perfect co-creator rather than a criminal.

Moreover, to forgive another is to forgive a universe that conspired to wreak harm from an ill-considered choice. It is a prayer of forgiveness to God.

6. I love you!

The sixth prayer of the phoenix is the prayer of love.








Having acknowledged each other's divinity, having exchanged apology and forgiveness, we are in a state of grace. I am free to affirm my joy in your presence in my life.

This is not the I love you said by a suitor in a proposal of marriage, much less the I love you said by an amorous sailor in the back seat of a car.

This is the I love you said by a mother to her child or by a grandfather to his grandchild, or between very close friends.

This is the love meant by Jesus when he told us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to love our enemies.

When I say I love you, I am saying

-  that I am glad to have you in my life;
-  that I treasure the times when you are present, rare though they may be;
-  that I will consider the potential consequences of my actions on you in making my decisions;
-  that I am pleased with your successes, even when you choose something I don't agree with;
-  that when I don't agree with you, I will not manipulate or force you, but will treat you as an equal, persuading you if I can, but leaving you responsible for your own choices;
-  that my love for you does not depend on what you do or say or have;
-  that I love you for the person you are, not the person I would like you to be.

To love another in this unconditional way, allows me to love and accept myself unconditionally.

To love another in this unconditional way is to love God. To say I love you to another is a prayer of love to God.

7. I Wish You Enough!

The seventh prayer of the phoenix is the prayer of good wishes. The form of this prayer might surprise you, but it comes from a story by Bob Perks², which includes the following wish:

I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright.

I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun more.

I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive.

I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear much bigger.

I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.

I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.

I wish you enough "Hello's" to get you through the final "Goodbye."

Good wishes need not take this eloquent form. I often ride my bicycle around the trails and roads of my town. I make it a practice to offer greetings (Good morning. Good day. How are you? and so on) to the people I pass. A few sullenly ignore me. But most smile and respond with their own greeting. Not much perhaps, but a moment of smiling acknowledgement obviously adds a bright spot to their day and to mine.

But if a greeting from a stranger gives a moments pleasure, how much more does a sincere wish for happiness from a loved one, a wish spoken openly, not taken for granted?

For me to pray for a good day for you is to pray for a good day for myself. More than that, it is a step in bringing about my own good day. It is a prayer I realize upon myself.

To wish for a good day for anyone, especially a loved one, is to help bring about a good day for the universe, for God. It is a prayer of hope to God.

² Bob Perks [© 2001, <http://www.iwishyouenough.com/wish.htm>

Performing the Phoenix Communion

You are now invited to participate in The Phoenix Communion, a ceremony in which every one of you can direct the prayers of the phoenix to everyone else. By so doing, the hurts that stand between us will begin to heal and the community will return to health. We will all again be part of the community.

Here is how the Communion will proceed.

1. When I tell you to start, please stand and turn to your right.
2. One by one, without bunching up, you will move clockwise around the circle.
3. The person to my left will move in front of me, and I will say the first prayer to him.
4. He will then move to the next chair to my right and turn outwards.
5. As each person passes, he will say the same prayer to that person.
6. When you come to me I will say the first prayer to you. You will then move to each of the people to my right who will say the same prayer to you.
7. When you reach an empty chair, you will turn and say the same prayer to each person who passes.
8. When I have said the first prayer to each person in the line, I will follow that person so that each of you can say the prayer to me.
9. At that point we will have a loop (like a big bicycle chain or rubber band) that will roll continuously around the circle of chairs.
10. The person behind me will follow me so that others can say the prayer to him, and so on.
11. When I reach the head of the loop, I will say the second prayer to the next person, and the process will repeat for that prayer.
12. The process will repeat until each of us has said each prayer to each other.
13. When you come to me after the last prayer, just continue silently until you reach an empty chair. I will stop following the loop, and it will unroll.
14. Turn your chair to face the center. The community is now in a state of grace, and you are again completely part of the community.
15. You may then be seated.

Making The Phoenix Communion Work

Those are the mechanics of the Phoenix Communion. Here are some suggestions to make the Communion more effective for you:

1. When you speak a prayer to someone, **use that person's name**, as in "Thank you, Jonah."
2. **Look each other directly in the eye.** In our culture this is a sign of sincere connection with the other person.
3. **Emphasize the prayers with your hands.** I will use a specific hand gesture with each prayer, but using a different gesture is perfectly acceptable.
4. **Think about each prayer you speak in the context of the particular person you are speaking to**, and what that prayer might mean to him or her, given the history of your relationship, taking into account all that has been said about that prayer. Say it sincerely with that meaning in mind.
5. When someone speaks a prayer to you, **do not rush.** Come to a complete stop in front of each person while he or she says the prayer to you.
6. **Think about that prayer in the context of the particular person you are hearing it from**, and what that prayer might mean to him or her, given the history of your relationship, taking into account all that has been said today about that prayer. Hear it as being spoken sincerely with that meaning in mind.
7. **Do not respond when someone else says a prayer to you!** This may be the hardest instruction, for we are trained by our culture automatically to return greeting for greeting. But in the Phoenix Communion when I am receiving a prayer, my job is to listen, to think about the fact that this person is making this prayer to me. The Communion will be a more rewarding experience if your mind is thinking about the prayer being said, and not what you will say in reply.

The Phoenix Communion works only to the extent that you are sincere in your prayers to each other, and that you are seen to be sincere.

Let us now begin the Phoenix Communion.

**Stop! Read no further.
Begin Phoenix Communion.**

Appendix 1. Organizing a Phoenix Communion

Here are some additional recommendations for communities interested in using the Phoenix Communion. These are not to be read to participants in a particular occasion of it:

1. Use the Phoenix Communion for communities, such as families, households, churches and work groups, that is, for groups people that interact on a regular basis. Its principal function is the healing of such communities. It has little likely value to groups of people who do not know one another.
2. Use the Phoenix Communion only for communities who have had an opportunity to discuss what the prayers mean. People who have not had this discussion are unlikely to understand the significance of what is being said. Of course, a community that has all had this discussion can profitably repeat the Communion without repeating the message.
3. Do not use the Communion so frequently that participants say the prayers as a rote exercise. For the prayers to work, they must be expressions of the heart, not the tongue.
4. Allow enough time! A rough estimate for the time required for just the ritual part of the service is two minutes per participant. To that you must add the time required to explain the prayers and the ceremony.

