

The Power of Prayer Revisited

By

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As the author of two books on prayer and psychological healing, it is hard for me to believe the level of skepticism about prayer in the year 2006. In the Spring of this year, a new scientific study was released, suggesting that prayer is not really very effective. Many of my skeptical friends brought it to my attention. "What do you think?" They asked. They were really probing me to see if I had finally come to my senses and give up on this God and prayer stuff. Of course, it did nothing of the kind. This paper is an answer to the negative study and an update of my ideas on prayer and healing.

I was trained as a psychologist in the 1970s. I liked psychoanalysis, especially the ideas of Karen Horney, M.D. I thought that if I was completely analyzed, a la Horney, that I would be completely mentally healthy. I had been exposed to some "New Age" thought in my training-but I thought psychoanalysis was the answer. Religion and prayer were under no consideration as relevant to my life or the therapy I conducted with patients.

As I entered the 1980s, the New Age Material was gaining ground. Psychoanalysis wasn't enough for me. I practiced transcendental meditation, read the "Seth material" which said that we "create our own reality" as part of "All That Is" (God). Thus, my new concept of God was that we are all God (not to be confused with the ego). However, prayer is not addressed in this philosophy. Rather, releasing negative beliefs and affirming positive beliefs to replace them was suggested. We are told that we "are much more than we think we are." In other words we are more than just bodies with egos. This was an integration of body mind and spirit, but I did not really see it as spiritual. I saw it as psychological. There was some change in my therapeutic outlook, but it did not include prayer.

In the late 1980s I faced a personal crisis, initiated by a very difficult patient. I had incorporated a "New Age" spirituality into my practice, but it was not helping this man. He was in a deep depression after breaking up with a girlfriend he loved (he was married to someone else). When his girlfriend told him she was marrying someone else, he became suicidal and blamed me. Nothing I said or did could help. Hospitalization and medication did not help. Daily therapy did not help. He had to blame someone and that someone was me. I began to fear he might kill me. That was a bad belief to harbor-due to the law of attraction. What I feared was soon to come upon me. He wouldn't leave therapy and I was afraid to terminate him and refer him elsewhere. I sought supervision-with two different individuals-it did not help. The patient called me night and day, alternately pleading and threatening. I became depressed and agitated. I thought no one could help me. Then one day I thought maybe God could help me. I began to pray fervently. At first, I prayed for him to get better, he didn't. Then I realized he didn't want to get better and I couldn't pray for something he did not want. So, I prayed for both of us

to be released from our bondage. As I prayed, a strange thing happened. I heard an inner voice say, "It will end soon, in an unusual way." Every day, I got the same answer. What did it mean? I found out soon. On the night before Passover (the Jewish holiday of freedom), I was released from my bondage. Right in the midst of a session he got up and said, "You are not helping me, you have ruined my life... I am going to kill you!!!" He leaped at me, knocked me off my chair and began to choke me. I tried to free my arm to punch him but couldn't. Instead I was inspired (By God or my spirit guides) to repeat "calm down" several times and he let me go. He was so embarrassed at what he had done that he left me and went to another doctor for help. I was free. We were both free. Later I realized that God had answered my prayer...in an unusual way. It was probably the only way out of the bondage for both of us. About a year later...on Christmas Eve, I saw him on the street. We shook hands and he said he was a little better. I had closure. Prayer had helped me. This kind of scenario cannot be repeated in a laboratory. Thus, I am undaunted by recent reports that prayer may not work. It "worked" for me, when nothing else did. I set out on a search to understand *how* prayer works.

. I began to research prayer and started to write a new book (later published as - *When Therapy Isn't Enough: The Healing Power of Prayer and Psychotherapy*). I began to pray for my patients. I sometimes prayed with my patients. I suggested they pray for themselves. I learned through my research that there are four different types of prayer; petition, intercession, adoration and meditation. I saw that prayer was not to be used to get external "things". Rather, prayer was for character change-asking God for guidance and strength in changing what needs to be changed for psychological and even physical healing. The petitions became thankful affirmations. For example, I would say "Thank you God for healing the roots of my discomfort / illness." "Thank you for healing -----(fill in name) for the highest good of all concerned." The prayer is the same for oneself or someone else. Soon I realized that even prayers of adoring God were helpful- The personal will and it's "vibrations" were then in accord with God's will-this tends to produce healing. The same is true of meditation. Entering the stillness of God-the gap between thoughts and staying there-with no attempt to cajole God has a healing function. God knows what to do. This is where I was in the 1990s. I found excellent results with my patients. Many patients were helped by a combination of prayer and psychotherapy. The scientific studies, especially Dr. Randolph Byrd's studies with heart patients seemed to confirm my experience. I noticed that prayer and meditation helped people with a wide variety of anxiety and depressive disorders. Even physical ailments tended to get better faster than expected. I remember once praying for my daughter, who was in Israel and felt flu like symptoms. She called the next day, completely better.

As the twenty first century dawned, I knew that prayer is very helpful in healing. However, it took a personal illness to add a new dimension to my prayerful therapy. In 2002, I had a heart attack. I was out, completely unconscious. The doctor told my wife I might die that night. A group of friends (including one atheist) held hands and prayed for me. The next day, others in my synagogue, several churches, the Association for Spirituality and Psychotherapy (ASP) and many others began to pray with love and intention for my recovery. I made it, and I believe that prayer was the essential element in my survival, but there was much more than a physical recovery to negotiate. The trauma of the attack and resultant anxiety has taken a lot longer than the physical healing.

I believe my ideas about God and prayer have advanced quite a bit due to my need for healing. I continued with affirmative prayers for healing on all levels. Nevertheless, I had a variety of symptoms, including shortness of breath, anxiety,, gastrointestinal symptoms and pain. I believe I spent entirely too much time evaluating and obsessing about my physical symptoms. I had to find some way of letting go of the obsessive negative thoughts about heart problems and death. I needed a new perspective- something to take me beyond the physical body. Even my manner and understanding of prayer needed a revamping. I found that using the words “I am” was necessary for the effectiveness of the prayer. Remember God’s response to Moses as to who sent him to Pharaoh. “Tell him “I am” sent you.” Once, when having difficulty breathing, I began to affirm, “I am breathing freely and easily. After about 5-10 minutes my breathing eased. I created a daily prayer-“ I am happy, healthy, peaceful and strong-thank you God” I repeated it endlessly and started to feel better. I began to practice the lessons from “A Course in Miracles”

The “Course” is a philosophy that the separate “ego” (not the Freudian ego-but the sense of a separate self) is an illusion-we are actually pure Spirit, one with our Creator. The path to peace and happiness is forgiveness, which then reveals the love that is our source (God). There are 365 lessons. Each lesson is an affirmative prayer to be used all day long. One lesson is: “I am as God created me-his son” (we are all his sons and daughters). On this day I felt so good I could hardly believe it. I believe that these prayers work on healing the mind and body. It is not just forgiveness at a behavioral level, but a true joining with God in prayer that leads to a forgiving ATTITUDE. This is the healing. The forgiving attitude leads to the switch from a body-ego dominated life to a spiritual life. All the research focuses on healing the body. Hence, they miss the main point of healing through prayer. The body will last as long as it is necessary to make as much spiritual progress as one can in this life.

When we think we are separate from God and disconnected from each other, we are necessarily guilty, angry and afraid. Look at the state of the world. Almost all human beings are guilty, angry and afraid. As a result we compete with each other for resources that seem scarce, often feel we are not good enough or successful enough and blame others (anger) or ourselves (guilt and self hate) for our unhappiness. On an individual level, we become angry, resentful, guilty and afraid. Our bodies often become sick. Negative thinking and emotions create a host of illnesses. We are supposed to get sick if we are engrossed in negative emotions and thought. Then, we are supposed to learn from the illness which will then heal. If God said “yes” to every simple request for healing, no learning would take place. Hence, sometimes God has to say “no.” This way, we may learn to make the positive spiritual cognitive shift suggested by a Course in Miracles. On a worldwide level we create war, famine and disease. How can we reverse the process? If enough individuals make the shift, the world will shift.

I believe that affirmative prayer is the answer. However, we are not to use prayer as magic to heal physical symptoms. There has to be a real attitudinal healing and understanding of God and our relationship to Him/Her. If God is our source, we are actually still part of Him/Her. Thus, we are not really even in relationship, we are part of

the Oneness. The nature of that oneness is love, peace, kindness and joy. Forgiveness is the path to realizing and experiencing this good. Prayer involves three steps. First, we must let go of negative beliefs and emotions. Second we need to “Let Go, Let God” (Invite God to replace the sense of separation and its resultant guilt, anger and fear). Finally, we need to accept healing. The healing cannot be completed until we signal God, through prayer, that we are ready to see that Spiritual Oneness is reality, while separation, anger fear, guilt are the illusion. When we follow the three steps of real prayer, healing becomes much more than just an alleviation of symptoms. We are led to wholeness. In other words, the symptoms lead us to the healing on all levels. Dr. Thomas Hora, founder of Metapsychiatry, once wrote, “God is not there to solve our problems, Our problems are there to bring us closer to God.”

To return to the recent prayer research, we can see its fundamental flaw. The well intentioned researchers are looking at prayer as a magical physical healing technique. They are looking to a powerful sky God, separate from us to see if he can heal the alleged “real problem”, physical symptoms. The only measure of the prayers “working” to prayer researchers is physical healing. Might there not be other measure?. What about a person who dies more peacefully than he would have without the prayer? What about the person who simply lasts longer than expected? What about the possibility that the sick person had just finished his life and did not need to go on living? Prayer is much more than just a magical technique for symptom relief. It is a movement toward holistic healing of the entire human being. I do not believe that this can be measured scientifically. It can only be experienced holistically. A person knows when he is being healed. He can sense the changes in a spiritual orientation to life. The prayers become affirmations of what lies beneath the turmoil of the usual physical reality. Thus, I can only continue to affirm healing for myself and my patients and friends, becoming a beneficial healing presence to anyone I encounter. I cannot presume to know what is good for anyone else. That is up to the other people with whom we are connected in God. That is all anyone can do. We must use prayer to deepen our understanding of the spiritual nature of life, making the spiritual cognitive shift, experiencing deep peace This will result in many healings, some spiritual, some psychological, some physical. Sometimes it will seem that God said “no” to the prayers. Actually it means that physical healing was not right at that time in the way we think of it. In the end, our bodies all die, but if we die with spiritual vision and enlightenment, our lives have been worthwhile.

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