

## **Prayer: Proceed with Caution**

**by Donne Hayden**

Can you imagine a world in which there was a God who answered *every* prayer? How would that work? How can the opposing football team (whose loved ones pray as fervently for them as we pray for ours) and our own football team all be victorious? If every prayer were answered, no one would ever die or be sick. The entire natural system would disintegrate in over-population—it would, in fact, have to be an entirely different system, not the one we have, in which thankfully many human prayers go unanswered.

I'm not speaking today about whether a person should pray or not—whether or not one prays at all is highly individual. No—I'm not dealing with “should” or “should not”— but *if* one does pray, to whom, with what motives, and what consequences.

In all times and cultures, people have prayed. Jews pray to *Ha-Shem*, the Name, which is how they refer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; orthodox Christians pray either to Him or to Jesus, whom they equate with God. (When I was a kid in the Southern Baptist church, we used the words “God” and “Jesus” interchangeably; I thought they were the same being.) Catholics add the Virgin Mary to their list, as well as hundreds of saints who specialize in particular concerns. Muslims pray to Allah. Hindus pray to Brahma, Atman, Shiva, Krishna and Vishnu, and on different occasions to various lesser gods. Buddhists do not have a theistic religion (i.e., they don't believe in a supernatural, personal god), so they don't pray, but instead, meditate and focus on the teachings of Buddha. Native Americans pray to forces in the natural world personified

as Father Sky, Great Spirit, Mother Earth, etc. Even agnostics pray. Here is one of my favorite agnostic prayers, a prayer-song from the Crow tribe:

*You Above, if there be one there who knows what is going on, repay me today for the distress I have suffered.*

*Inside the Earth, if there be anyone there who knows what is going on, repay me for the distress I have suffered.*

*The One Who Causes All Things, whoever he be, I have now had my fill of life.*

*Grant me death, my sorrows are overabundant.*

*I do not want to live long; were I to live long, my sorrows would be overabundant. I do not want it!*

Those of us who *do* believe in something higher than humanity—if, say, we understand what people refer to as God as a *force* or *source* beyond comprehension characterized by *love* beyond measure—we may find prayer problematic because we have no particular *face* or *image* for God. Since human beings use metaphor and image to anchor belief and prayer, even the Quaker conceptualization of God as “the Light” can create awkwardness in verbal prayer. To whom do I address my prayer? “Dear Light”? In my own case, I believe that the Force, Source or Spirit is *immanent*, that it permeates everything; that it is inside me as well as outside me; so my own prayers begin simply by turning my thoughts toward that Force, Source or Spirit within. Thus I am uncomfortable praying aloud with and for others because I can’t begin a prayer with what is natural to me—an inner and *wordless* turning toward the immanent Force, Source and Spirit of Love. I also tend to pray in fragments and unfinished sentences. I may begin fervently, “Dear \_\_\_ (and here I may have no word, no name, but an intense *feeling* of the Force, Source or Spirit), please protect so-and-so” or “Please help me do

such-and-such” and then trail off into silence or finish with, “Well, *You* know.” It seems enough to indicate my concern about something, trusting that the Immanence already knows anyway. As for the content of my prayers, I have learned to be very careful about what I ask for because at times I actually get it.

Which leads to another problem with prayer.

Some people take prayer very seriously and believe they know exactly what God thinks, wants, and intends because they read the Bible literally. When I lived in Colorado Springs, I saw a group of people walking through my neighborhood one afternoon. I watched them as they walked down the sidewalk, then stopped in a tight cluster in front of a house, bowed their heads and prayed for about five minutes. Then they walked to the next house, stood in front of it, and prayed again, and so on down the block. What were they praying for? I didn't know, but I didn't want them praying for me; it seemed arrogant and presumptuous.

I personally believe that prayer can be extremely powerful and for that very reason should be used with great discretion. Even if one thinks there is nothing to prayer, or perhaps that there is no God who responds and answers prayers, the power of the human mind to influence events is well-documented. So I am not entirely comfortable with prayer for this very reason: what humans can conceive of, they can and do create or call forth.

And some people's prayers sound more like demands, specific checklists for God so He gets it right. A good example is the following admonition by Dr. David Jeremiah, pastor, author, member of the George Bush's Presidential Prayer Team's Honorary Committee:

*How often have we prayed something like, "O Lord, be with cousin Billy now in a special way"? Have we stopped to consider what it is we're requesting? Imagine that you are a parent who is preparing to leave your children with a babysitter. Would you dream of saying, "O Betsy, I ask you now that you would be with my children in a special way?" No way. You would say, "Betsy, the kids need to be in bed by 9 pm. They can have one snack before their baths, and please make sure they finish their homework. You can reach us at this number if there's any problem. Any questions before we go?" We are very specific with our requests and instructions for our babysitters. We want them to know specifics. It should be no different with prayer.*

Here is another example. Last week in a meeting of Quaker ministers and Clerks, one of the ministers of a small programmed meeting in New Castle, Indiana, told this story. A woman in his congregation, a teacher, had a spinal tumor surgically removed ten years ago, but it had returned and she was losing the ability to walk or use her hands. Surgeons were unwilling to operate this time, considering it too dangerous because of the location of the tumor. The minister said that he and seven members of the meeting "initiated a small group of F/friends to 'labor in discernment and prayer.'" Here is his description of that first meeting: "We listened for an hour. Then we prayed. Everyone prayed actively with silence, touch and words. Tears flowed and a deep sense of hope ensued." The group met again and "listened, talked [and] prayed." During the second meeting, the teacher reported that a new kind of surgery was possible and that she was going to try it. A third meeting "occurred during a Sunday meeting for worship." The minister began by explaining "the importance of corporate prayer," which, he said, "was new territory for New Castle Friends." Throughout the meeting for worship, all focus was on prayer for the teacher. "Members found the prayer time moving," he said,

and afterward, the teacher had “a deep sense of already being healed.” The surgery went “exceptionally well” and the woman continued to recover; she danced at her daughter’s wedding a few weeks ago. This is a heart-warming and inspiring story. But it is also a dangerous story.

If the woman had *not* recovered, after all that prayer, what conclusion would the meeting members and the minister come to? The danger of this story was pointed out by the other Quaker ministers and Clerks present when the minister told it. The danger comes in the assumption that if we pray hard enough, long enough, and in the right way, miracles will happen—we can expect disease and even death to be reversed. In addition to the sorrow we feel because someone we care about is ill or dying, we may experience a crisis of faith if we expect a miracle and don’t get one.

In terms of getting what we ask for in prayer, one of the most fascinating ideas I’ve encountered is in a book by Dr. Larry Dorsey, a medical doctor who “explores the convergence between science and religion.”<sup>1</sup> In his book, *Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search*, Dr. Dorsey recounts the results of experiments conducted on the efficacy of prayer in healing.

*One of the most important contributions made by the Spindrift researchers is the distinction between “directed” and “nondirected” prayer. Directed prayer occurs when the practitioner has a specific goal, image or outcome in mind . . . directing the system, attempting to steer it in a precise direction. . . . he may be praying for the cancer to be cured or the pain to go away. . . Nondirected prayer, in contrast, uses none of these strategies. It involves an open-ended approach in which no specific*

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Dorsey, *Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), back cover.

*outcome is held in the imagination. In nondirected prayer, the practitioner does not attempt to tell the universe what to do.*<sup>2</sup>

The findings by researchers were “unequivocal,” says Dorsey. “Although both methods were shown to work, the *nondirected technique appeared quantitatively much more effective, frequently yielding results that were twice as great, or more, when compared with the directed approach*” [Italics mine].<sup>3</sup>

After many years, I finally realized that I don’t always know what’s best for me or my loved ones, much less what is best for someone else. Recently, a woman who practices healing prayer suggested that I pray simply for the “highest possible good” in any situation, realizing that when I’m praying for someone who is ill, the “highest possible good” might be the death of that person. Generally now, I do—even for myself and my loved ones—ask simply that the highest possible good come, accepting that I may not always like what it is. So you might not want me praying for you. This is not a new idea, it turns out—“Not my will, but thy will, be done” is an earlier expression of it.

Another problem with prayer is the unspoken part of it, the fact that many people pray without thinking about what they are asking, *really* asking.

In the summer of 2006, when Hezbollah militants fired missiles at border towns in southern Israel, killing approximately ten Israeli soldiers, Israel responded with massive air strikes and artillery fire that killed over a thousand people, mostly Lebanese civilians. In August while all this was going on, my friend Margaret was in a gathering that included several evangelical Quakers who were conservative and traditional in their beliefs. One woman offered a prayer at the opening of the meeting that included the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

following request: “Lord, help each Israeli missile find its target.” Did that woman think, really think, about what she was praying for?

This is a contemporary example of a double-edged prayer like the one described by Mark Twain in a short story unpublished in his lifetime: “The War Prayer.” The story is set in a church at the beginning of a war—any war. The minister has given “the long prayer” ending with “Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector of our land and flag!” While he is speaking, an old man enters the church, comes up to the pulpit and motions the surprised minister to step aside. “I come from the Throne—” he announces, “bearing a message from Almighty God!” The “aged stranger” continues:

*"You have heard your servant's prayer -- the uttered part of it. I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it -- that part which the pastor -- and also you in your hearts -- fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard these words: 'Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!' That is sufficient. The \*whole\* of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory--\*must\* follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!*

*"O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle -- be Thou near them! With them -- in spirit -- we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their*

wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it -- for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

*(\*After a pause.\*) "Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits!"*

Whenever we pray for our side to win, whether the contest is a war or a football game, we are automatically praying for someone else to lose. It is disturbing to me that so many in our nation today are engaged in praying for specific outcomes—that so-called “prayer warriors” believe they can determine for all of us what is best.

Consider what turmoil humans can create with the best intentions. Unless prayer is humble and non-directive, it may concentrate and focus energy in destructive ways; it may get in the way of better things the Force, Source or Spirit has in mind for us. Faith and trust is the issue. A member of the Meeting told me she is guided by these verses in Jeremiah 29:11-14:

*For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray*

*to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you . . .*

Let us be very careful what we pray for, lest our prayers be answered.