

How an Atheist Prays

By

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As a minister, I'm sometimes asked unexpectedly to offer public prayers and invocations, including before large groups of people with diverse religious backgrounds. As an atheist, praying can be hard enough, but doing so in a way that's meaningful and inclusive amidst persons with a variety of beliefs, while also maintaining my own integrity as a nonbeliever, can be tricky. Fortunately, it's happened often enough over the years that I am no longer caught off guard and have come up with a way of praying that seems to work.

Firstly, I make it a point not to address my prayers to anyone's idea of a god. As a humanist, rather, I pray to humans. I don't ask anyone to bow their heads or close their eyes, although they are welcome to do so if that's their habit. Instead, I begin by looking directly at my audience, scanning their faces so they will know I'm addressing them. "No matter what your religion, whether you are a believer or nonbeliever," I say, "there is no need for me to invoke the presence of god here today. For, whatever your beliefs, whatever your values, your religion and morals require that you embody them in all you do. In this way, your religion and values are already incarnated within you and are present with us. So my prayer is to you, that you will continue to work for the wellbeing of others and our world by incarnating your most sacred beliefs in this place and each day hereafter wherever you go and with whomever you are. Amen." Or something like that. So far, it seems to be an acceptable and satisfying form of public prayer for everyone.

But even when I was a devout Christian as a young man I didn't like praying in public or in private. Even then I was smart enough to know that if I get what I ask for, I might unintentionally mess something else up. I was afraid of the unintended consequences of having my prayers answered. Imagine, for example, you find an old oil lamp in an antique store from which a genie appears and offers you three chances to make a satisfactory wish. On your first attempt, being altruistic, you wish for everyone in the world to always be happy. Poof! The Genie grants your wish by putting everyone in a methamphetamine induced stupor for the rest of their lives. They may be out of their minds but they're happy. "That's not what I meant," you say. "I just wish for the world to be at peace." Poof! Everything and everyone in the world disappears, leaving it an entirely peaceful, though empty planet. You find yourself alone with the genie in a void of emptiness. "I wish I'd never met you," you exclaim. Poof! Everything goes back to normal and you don't even remember how close you came to destroying the world. It's said the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and I'm wise enough to know that I'm not smart enough to consider all the unintended consequences of my wishes. Who, then, am I to ask an all-powerful deity to adjust anything about the world to my liking? So, I've never been much of a prayer, as a believer or nonbeliever.

The bigger question is if there is a magical wish granter to begin with, whether we call it a genie or God. Since such a being is believed by most to be invisible, even if it does exist, the only way to determine if prayer works is through rational and scientific inquiry. The most concise discussion of such inquiry I know of is contained in the book, *Healing Words*, by Medical Doctor Larry Dossey. He says the first such study was conducted by Sir Francis Galton, the results of which were published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1872. Galton hypothesized there must be something to prayer or it

wouldn't be universal among people of all religions. Why, he wondered, would so many people pray if it doesn't do any good? As scientists do, he then set out to disprove his hypotheses. If he failed to disprove it, his hypotheses would become a viable scientific theory. Galton began by questioning medical professionals but reported being unable to find a single example, "in which a medical man of any repute has attributed recovery to the influence of prayer."¹ From this he inferred, "Had prayers for the sick any notable effect, it is incredible but that the doctors, who are always on the watch for such things, should have observed it, and added their influence to that of the priests toward obtaining them for every sick man."² He also said, "There is not a single instance, to my knowledge, in which papers read before statistical societies have recognized the agency of prayer either on disease or on anything else."³

With no evidence prayer does any good, Galton worked on creating his own statistics by comparing the average lifespans of clergy to those of doctors and lawyers, and the health and longevity of sovereign leaders, who were often prayed for, to that of ordinary citizens. Dossey says that "when the longevity of eminent clergy was compared to that of eminent doctors and lawyers, the clergy were the shortest lived of the three groups. Neither did prayer protect heads of state: 'Sovereigns are literally the shortest lived of all who have the advantage of affluence.'"⁴ It would appear, according to Galton's data, that neither living a prayerful life nor be well-prayed for benefits one's health and lifespan, and statistically, according to Galton's own reasoning, might even make it worse.

Dossey then cites a more recent study conducted by biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who is best known for coining the term "morphogenic fields" to describe what he believes are the invisible connections in the world that explain acausal and uncanny happenings, like people who know when they're being stared at, or dogs who know when their owners are coming home. Being a scientist, Sheldrake is never disappointed when the evidence disproves his hypotheses, as when he made a study of prayer in India, where most people go to the temples to pray to have sons instead of daughters (which is a terrible thing to pray for). Despite all the praying, however, the ratio of boys and girls born in India is the same as it is in the rest of the world.

Healing Words also discusses a handful of double-blind studies involving outside groups asked to regularly pray for hospital patients, that also found no statistical significance when comparing the healing of those patients to the healing of others. There was, however, a 1988 study that made national headlines, conducted by Cardiologist Randolph Byrd at San Francisco General Hospital. Without going into the details of the experiment, the results showed the prayed-for patients were five times less likely to require antibiotics, three times less likely to experience fluid on the lungs, none required ventilation compared to twelve who did in the un-prayed-for group, and fewer patients died, although their number was statistically insignificant.⁵ Dossey says, "If the technique being studied had been a new drug or a surgical procedure instead of prayer, it would almost certainly have been heralded as some sort of 'breakthrough.'"⁶

But the study has since been criticized for procedural errors that call its legitimacy into question, some of which, in my opinion, themselves seem petty and insignificant. Still, there is one criticism worth mentioning. Those who prayed were instructed to ask for the patients' rapid recovery, not

simply to have them fair slightly better under treatment. Yet there was no difference in how long they stayed in the coronary care unit, nor in how many days passed before leaving the hospital, or how much medication they took home with them. There was also no meaningful difference in the number of patient deaths. Except for a significant number of them not needing a ventilator, Dossey says, “the prayed-for patients achieved only a 5 to 7 percent improvement over the controls,”⁷ which doesn’t seem very impressive considering those praying were all Christians who believed they were appealing to an almighty god.

So far, the evidence is not looking good for the power of prayer, but the research conducted by the Spindrift Organization in Salem, Oregon, has made an impression on what I think about prayer. Spindrift has conducted a variety of experiments on biological organisms over the years, like mold and seeds, indicating prayer does impact their health and growth. I won’t go into their experiments, but only wish to mention one important finding of their research. Prayer appears to work far better if it is nondirected and nonspecific. In other words, prayers that simply send love, or compassion, or thoughts of wellbeing to others, seem to have greater impact on their health and healing than do those that actually ask for or visually their health and healing.

I’ve experimented a few times with rye grass seeds, placed side by side, given the same amount of sunlight and water, and have found that those on the side that I offer thoughts of wellness always sprout sooner and grow faster than the others. Try it yourself if you don’t believe me. “As a result of numerous tests on a variety of biological systems,” Dossey writes, “the Spindrift researchers suggest that healers will be most effective if they strive to be completely free of visualizations, associations, or specific goals.”⁸ This kind of prayer has worked well for me over the years, given my fear of asking the magic genie to grant a wish that might unintentionally lead to disaster. Instead, each day, I simply send out positive thoughts and feelings to the people I love and to the entire world, with no specific desires or requests in mind.

This may sound confusing coming from an atheist, by which I mean I do not believe in a personal god. Yet I do believe in mystery, and that there is infinitely more about the Universe and our existence than I will ever comprehend. Just because I’m now aware of something, or can’t explain something that seems mysterious or unthinkable, does not lead me to deny certain possibilities. I simply admit “I don’t understand it,” and am fine with now knowing and fine with living in a wondrous Universe of infinite possibilities and mysteries, which is why I love stories of ghosts, UFOs, and Bigfoot.

To my mind, there are three stages of metaphysical thinking: miraculous, magical, and mystical. The miraculous is how I describe the thinking of small children who haven’t yet experienced enough of the world to intuit how it can and can’t work. So, they easily believe in things the rest of us know to be impossible, including violations of the laws of nature—which we would define as miracles. This is why a toddler is unimpressed by magic tricks, like making a quarter disappear, because such things seem ordinary to them. But by the first and second grade they have experienced enough of the world to become magical thinkers, which classical psychology refers to as *omnipotence of thought*. At this stage, which many, if not most, of us get stuck at for the rest of our lives, we behave as if we can control the world with our ideas, which we often express with

incantations like, “be well,” “take care,” “drive carefully,” to our friends and loved ones, or by praying for a specific desire, or visualizing a specific outcome, as does the title of Napoleon Hill’s book, *Think and Grow Rich*.

Magical thinking is also highly skeptical. If we can’t wrap our minds around something, if we can’t explain it, we simply dismiss it as untrue, especially if it conflicts with the thoughts we do believe. This is why middle-school kids are the worst audience for magicians, because they know it’s all some kind of trick and prefer to heckle the magician by trying to explain the trick, even if their explanation is wrong. We make the same mistake when, in the name of reason and science, we dismiss what we can’t explain as impossible. On the contrary, as Einstein said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. [One] to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”⁹

Mystical thinking, which, as far as I’m concerned, is the highest state of thinking, pursues knowledge with a passion, but is at ease with not knowing. In the pursuit of understanding, it must often let go of previous beliefs and is perfectly ready to do so. The more it grasps, the less it understands, filling life with awe and wonder. Poet John Keats called this mindset, *Negative Capability*, which he defined as the capability “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”¹⁰

Yet the magical thinker will attempt to contain mystery by explaining it away, filling the void with “god of the gap” explanations, or else dismiss the mysterious as untrue and unimportant. The mystical thinker, by contrast, says, “Something appears to be going on here. I don’t yet understand it, but I’m good with that.” Yet it’s important to know that the mystical thinker does not believe there isn’t, ultimately, a logical and phenomenological explanation, and is eager to discover what it is. Two hundred years ago electricity and magnetism seemed like miraculous invisible forces that must be caused by powerful gods or spirits. Today, because we understand them, we don’t give them a second thought. Perhaps someday we will better understand and harness the power of other invisible forces between us and think little more of doing so than flipping a light switch. As we come to better understand quantum science, including quantum entanglement and nonlocality, that which Einstein called “spooky action at a distance” won’t seem so spooky anymore. But, for now, it should be enough to just let the mystery be.

What psychologist Carl Jung calls synchronicity, the seemingly acausal uncanny connection between things and occurrences, and what physics calls quantum entanglement, or Einstein’s spooky action at a distance, is reason enough for me to believe in the possibility that positive wishes and prayers for the wellbeing of others might make a difference. If so, it would be a very weak force involving a connection that can be easily broken, but I do believe it is possible, which is why every day I express a nondirected nonspecific prayer. I offer it the first time I get into my car each day, saying, “I intend no harmful energy to enter or leave this vehicle.” I then surround all of my family in white light—Peggy and our kids, and their partners, my siblings, Peggy’s family, our congregation, our partner church in Transylvania, our home, and community, our planet, our solar system, the Milky Way, Laniakea (the Supercluster of galaxies ours is in), and the endless of veins

of light filling the vast Universe. This is my way of simply praying for the wellbeing of all that is, even if I'm not praying for anything or to anyone specific.

This daily ritual may, in some ways, be a kind of magical thinking on my part, but I prefer to think of it as my way of contributing a little extra positiveness to existence. Although I tend to side with the materialists when it comes to the mind/body problem—the argument over whether reality is made of mind or matter—I also accept Einstein's explanation that matter and energy are ultimately the same thing, $E=MC^2$. Although our senses have evolved to perceive a very narrow range of information, causing the world to appear solid by filtering out the noise of everything else, the reality before us is really a sea of dancing, swirling, changing particles. And those particles are connected in ways we cannot see, no more than we can see electricity, or magnetism, or the air we breathe for that matter, but we know they are there. The ancients called air and breath, *pneuma*, which is also the word for "spirit." For them, air was the spirit of the gods that animates and gives us life. Today it is just a compound we respire, with little thought or wonder. Maybe someday we will understand how other invisible forces work and they won't seem so strange or unbelievable to us either. But, for now, I let the mystery be, think a few kind thoughts each day, and figure, at the very least it makes me feel good and doesn't hurt.

In my book, *Evolution's Way*, I talk about a couple of interesting scientific experiments that help further make the point. The first was reported in 1995, in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* published René Peoc'h entitled, "Psychokinetic Action of Young Chicks on the Path of An Illuminated Source."¹¹ Without going into great detail here, the short of it is that a group of newly hatched chickens immediately imprinted on a small Roomba like robot, which they followed about like a mother. The robot was equipped with a Random Events Generator, meaning it moved randomly all over the floor. It was also equipped with a plotter, so researchers could record its path. Under normal circumstances, it was shown to move about pretty evenly all over the room, as we would expect, but when the chicks were placed in a cage and unable to follow it about, the robot spent "two and a half times longer on the half of the surface closer to the chicks."¹² which gave them great comfort. There were variations of the experiment, which have since been repeated by others, but always with the same kind of results.

That same year, *Wired* magazine published an article, "Mind Over Matter," accompanied by the caption, "Princeton University scientists believe that the human mind can influence machines. Now, when was the last time you said something nice to your computer?" It was about the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research lab (PEAR), which studies the ability of humans to also influence robots equipped with Random Events Generators. At the time, PEAR had already conducted 212 REG trials over a period of 15 years with nearly a hundred volunteers, showing a "statistically significant result that is not attributable to chance."¹³ For this reason, lab manager Karen Dunne has become careful about how she treats inanimate objects. "The way you treat a machine is going to have a great deal to do with the way it behaves," she says. "If you slam it, if you bang it, if you treat it like a thing, that reflects an attitude."¹⁴ At the same time, she has come to believe that sending out positive vibes can also make a practical difference. "Do we dare theorize that love has a palpable influence on random noise?" She asks. "I don't know. I would be willing to at least raise the question. This emotional bond, the 'being on the same wavelength,' somehow

reduces the entropy in the world a little bit. And random processes seem to reflect this reduction by showing a more organized physical reality.”¹⁵

I can't explain the results of PEAR or Peoc'h's research, but I'm not willing to dismiss it just because I don't understand how it might be possible. I trust the evidence, which is the reason I have a prayer life, even though I don't believe in or pray to a personal god or pray for any specific outcome. If, as in Buddhism, breathing in and out is spiritual practice, then it may be enough to simply concentrate from time to time on breathing in peace and breathing out love, as they do. There is good evidence meditating in this way has health benefits for ourselves, if for no one else. But, in the end, I mostly agree with the Apostle Paul's idea of prayer, as expressed in his letter to the Romans, "we don't know how to pray as we should; but the Spirit speak for us with groanings too deep for words."¹⁶

So that is how at least one atheist prays: with few words, appealing to the good will of other human beings, and hoping for the welfare of all beings and of all that is. Or, as the Christian mystic, St. Julian of Norwich prayed, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Amen.

¹ Dossey, Larry. *Healing Words* (p. 194). HarperOne. Kindle Edition

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 195.

⁵ Ibid., p. 204f.

⁶ Ibid., p. 205.

⁷ Ibid., p. 210.

⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

⁹ Einstein, Albert in *Living Philosophies* Simon and Schuster, New York, 1931.

¹⁰ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237836?page=2>

¹¹ *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 223-229, 1995

¹² Ibid., p. 224.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Roman's 8:26