

What Are We Doing When We Pray?

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Prayer is nearly ubiquitous, almost a synonym for being human. Wherever people are found, there you will find someone reaching out to the oneness, the cosmos, the divine, the mystery. Through words, meditation, movement, offerings, renunciations, charity, good deeds, protest, dance, incense, and a host of other ways, human beings from remote antiquity have stretched to create connections beyond themselves to something larger, someone more fundamental.

Often the act of prayer surges from a deeper source than any ideology can express. Despite our belief or lack of it, despite our skepticism and our desperation (or because of it) we cry out, we plead, we negotiate. Sometimes we are moved to tears by a joy so deep it almost hurts, and we blurt out thanks whether or not we think there is someone to listen. There are moments of sitting still, when listening to the quiet beyond words roots us and allows us to gain reservoirs of trust and hope we had not previously been able to access. We encounter seasons of sorrow so enervating that we can only curl up in the dark and enter the depths. *From the depths I call you, God!* Help, in such moments, is more embrace than action; simply feeling held in times of trauma is an answer.

We Pray Better Than We Theologize

Of course, after the moment has passed, after the cry was released, the thanks expressed, we are left to wonder: what was I doing? Was that prayer simply giving in to magical superstition? Indulging a nonsensical childish dream? Distilling overwhelming emotion into words so I could release it? Perhaps. But I can't help suspecting that our *acts* of praying outstrip our *understanding* of prayer, that our moments of sincere outpouring are more real than the ideas we filter those acts through. Our philosophies complicate our praying and often make real prayer elusive. Why is that?

Most people pray with the hope/expectation that their prayers make a difference: that God wants our reaching out, that our focus contributes to a different (and better) outcome. Often our prayers are formulated as requests, as though God needs a reminder, or persuasion to do the right thing. Or we grovel words of mollification, as though we can forestall a punishment or entice a reward if we only get the words right, feel bad enough, or crawl low enough to remain under the radar of God's notice.

Despite the real motives we bring to prayer, most people have been taught to think of God as unchanging (eternal), all knowing (omniscient), and in complete control (omnipotent). If God is unchanging, that means God must remain unaffected by our prayers. If God is all knowing, then God knows what we're going to say before we say it, knows the situation we feel impelled to pray about, and knows the future before it becomes real in the present. And if God is in complete control, then whatever will be will be, whether or not we pray.

If the situation is already known and the outcome is already determined, then perhaps the only role left for prayer is to stroke God's insatiable ego. We repeat "You are great! You are great!" to try to appease Divine narcissism. After all, our dominant theologies already precluded the possibility of God needing our prayers, changing because of prayer, or modifying the foreknown outcome because of us. The only remaining function of prayer seems to be abject fawning. Frankly, don't you often feel that sentiment is what most of the prayers in the Prayerbook express?

There is something undignified about the whole enterprise. And yet ...

As I said, people pray as though God does care about us and our sentiments, as if our words have an impact, as if the dialogue is real and the relationship transformative and desired. Our hearts already intuit what our ideology obscures. Perhaps the problem, then, is not with our practice, but with our ideas. Perhaps *our* challenge in prayer is to articulate the conceptual frame that honors the urgings of our hearts and the yearnings of our souls.

Process Theology offers a different filter through which the reality of prayer seems much more straightforward. Recall that the Process understanding is that God is the one who makes all relationship possible, the one who generates all the options the future offers and empowers each and every one of us, as we are, where we are, to take the optimal next step if we so choose. Process Theology understands God as being so personal that God meets each of us in our immediate, concrete particularity: who we are at this moment, what we need now to take that best next step forward. That means that at every instant, God knows us (and every event in creation) not theoretically, not in a timeless theoretical mode, but as we actually are. Each of us. All of us.

God not only knows us as we are, but empowers us and all creation to reach for the optimal next step available to us from where we are. Each of us is offered our own optimal next step, and each of us retains

the freedom to embrace that lure or to reject it. No abstraction, that lure is tailored to our reality - our current context and our distinctive individuality. As theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki says, "God works with the world as it is in order to bring it to where it can be." Because God works with the world as it is, when we transform ourselves, we transform the world by precisely that amount, giving God that much opening to work with us/through us/for us.

What are we doing when we pray? At the simplest level, with spontaneous prayer or wordless prayer, we re-center ourselves with God at the core. When I was a child, I used to run my magnet through the soil in an abandoned field near my home. The magnet would attract the iron filings in the earth, and those filings would align themselves with the magnet as it passed by. With God as our magnet, prayer allows us to orient ourselves around optimal love, justice, experience, compassion. We elevate our own sense of what is possible, the significance of our choices and our capacity to make a difference. Since God works with the world as it is, that new/renewed energy and determination is now available for God's wondrous work.

We don't turn to God as magician and rule breaker. God works with/in/and through creation as it is. But God is persistently, tirelessly luring creation toward its optimal expression - greater love, greater justice, greater engagement. Rather than breaking the rules, our praying opens us to renewed expression of that lure, and fresh zeal for its advance.

Prayer as reminder, Prayer as Script

For many people, the only prayer they encounter is a communal activity that consists of liturgical reading from a book. Please rise. Please be seated. Please rise. Please be seated. Often the book is very old (the *Siddur*, Jewish Prayerbook contains prayers that range in age from thousands to hundreds of years old). How does reading someone else's words open us to a more attentive responsiveness to God's lure? Wouldn't we commune better if we prayed spontaneously and from the heart?

Of course, there is much to be said for the spontaneous outpouring of the heart. And it is noteworthy that in Jewish tradition two of the earliest biblical examples of prayer are exactly that: the distraught mother, Hagar, seeing her infant Ishmael about to die in the desert, calls out her sorrow to God, and God answers her not with a supernatural intervention, but by opening her eyes to see a well of water that was there all along. In good Process form, the lure is the capacity to take Hagar from where she is to where she is capable of going. No rule breaking of natural law, God offers a life-affirming embrace made possible

through self-determination and resilient hope. The next great unscripted outpouring of the heart takes place centuries later in the Sanctuary at Shilo, when the priest, Eli, is napping and overhears Hannah imploring God for a son. Again, no supernatural rule-breaking intervention is necessary - the young wife succeeds in bearing a son, whom she dedicates to the service of God. That young man, Samuel, becomes the greatest of Israel's judges and one of its earliest prophets. In both cases, spontaneous prayer is honored, and in both cases the Bible portrays it not in the mouths of the powerful and the privileged, but in the earnest entreaties of powerless, righteous women.

But the choice isn't limited to the dichotomy of one or the other, either spontaneous outpouring or scripted liturgy. Indeed, the weight of Jewish precedent affirms the symbiotic relationship between the two. We will be best prepared for the unscripted exclamation if we devote the discipline to regular scheduled prayer. And the resonance of that scripted communal recitation will be that much richer because of the trails blazed by unscripted moments of crying out, in anguish, need, or gratitude.

Liturgical prayer, then, is like reading a script. A great actor will allow the script to provide the content and context for their own personality as a character. The actor becomes the character portrayed in the script, feels the character's feelings, the motivations anxieties and aspirations that shape the character's personality. So too, the person at prayer becomes the righteous questing soul portrayed in the Prayerbook. We make ourselves into vessels to be sculpted by the values, aspirations, and memories provided by the *Siddur*. And in emptying ourselves to be so filled, we express ourselves not as discontinuous and solitary moderns, but as instantiations of *klal Yisrael*, children of Israel at one with our Maker. For the duration of our praying, those words become our words, those sentiments become our yearning. We expand beyond the confines of our own limited lives, the constrictions of our own age and place, and enter into a flowing stream of an ancient and timely tradition. Such praying can make us more than we are alone. We grow to include our people around the world and across the ages. And through that expansive sense of Yisrael, we take on concern for all humanity and serve as stewards for all creation.

Prayer of the Possible

When we pray for someone else, a form of intercessory prayer, a prayer for healing or for the diminution of pain, what are we doing? Particularly since we've abandoned the notion of God as magician and prayer as insurance policy, what does it mean for us to pray for someone's recovery?

We live in interdependent relationship to each other and the world around us. Process Thinking highlights the reality that we are not solid, solitary substances, but rather relating patterns of energy that weave our interactions with each other into the very fabric of our becoming. The foods we eat and the music we dance weaves our neurons uniquely, and constitute our muscle and bone, as do the people we love and the faces we learn to recognize. Each of us are dynamic composites of everyone we've known, every place we've been, in expanding circles of family, community, species, and planet.

One thing prayer cannot do is vanquish mortality. All things come into being, flourish, decline, and expire. All becomings end. To pray for health and intend that a person should not die, should never die, is vain prayer. It is not the way of the world. Indeed, prayer cannot eliminate illness. Woven into the fabric of life are the viruses and bacteria that share our bodies and form the communities that we are. They sustain us, and they feed on us, and the rhythm of life and dying includes copious expanses of sickness. To pray for the removal of all illness is to pray for delusion. That too is vain prayer.

Yet we persist.

Knowing that illness and death are part and parcel of the human condition, we feel the need to *do* something, to *speak* hope and determination in the face of our own and each other's suffering, to strengthen our connections and to affirm our shared becoming. God works in/with/through us. As we lift up another in our prayer, we focus our attention and energy on them, offering God and the world this new level of focus as a tool for renewed connection and integration. The Hebrew word "davar" means both deed and word, and the *davar* of prayer is a worded action and a doing speech. We put those words out into the world, hone our energies as tools for wellbeing and affirmed belonging. We elevate and focus our kavanah, our intention. Prayer gives God the gifts of our intention, our energy, our hope to use to create deeper human belonging, greater engagement, richer connection.

In such a world, prayer for healing is meeting in a depth more resonant and aware than our normal consciousness. Affirming that God knows each of us as we are, and that God eternally internalizes each instant as it becomes the present, the act of prayer is the word/deed of meeting each other in God, in strengthening the link that connects us to our loved ones, to those far away, to communities in trouble or danger. We focus the vibrations of our minds and hearts and direct that intention to God and, through God, toward the resilient, vibrating patterns of energy that are our loved ones, the objects of our concern.

We strengthen the us-ness of them. We raise to explicit consciousness the vague concern for the other and we sharpen that concern into praise, petition and empathy.

Perhaps such prayer can nudge the trajectory of a disease; the scientific studies of such matters are ambivalent in their findings. Prayer can speak to the depths of the sick, the struggling, the sad, affirming that they are not alone, not abandoned, and making it possible for us to meet them in God and mobilize untapped resources on their behalf, their own, ours, and God's.

In such praying word/deeds, we not only offer our prayers as words and deeds, we become our prayers. *V'ani tefillati*, I am my prayer (Psalm 69:14).