

A remarkable experiment shows the power of prayer

Tom Harpur



Prayer, like gravity, is an unseen force. Yet it's prodigiously powerful and reaches unto the ends of the Earth. It's far more potent than anything you will read about in the rest of this newspaper today. The skeptics can scoff and the "fundamentalist agnostics" can argue that it's merely a soliloquy to oneself. But they are dead wrong.

There's a reason why prayer is a universal phenomenon both ancient and modern. There's a reason why it's as instinctual as the urge to survival itself. A human being is by nature a praying hominid — *Homo orans* as well as *sapiens*. We pray because we need to and because it works! I say this not because I read it somewhere or because others believed it. I know it to be so. This knowing is based on personal experience as well as upon years of observing it working in the lives of many others.

This is not a claim to any total understanding of prayer. In that respect I feel like a child playing on the shore of some vast, unknown continent. So do those whom I respect and who are far more advanced in prayer than I. But, I have come to believe more strongly than ever before that Alfred Lord Tennyson was right when he penned the familiar line: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

Prayer is not magic, where you say this or that formula to God and out pops the answer you want. We have all prayed, sometimes agonizingly, for certain things, results, or conditions — for ourselves or for others — and the answer has either been a resounding "No" or, worse still, a deafening silence.

Though we would very much like it to be so (we think) prayer is not just one more automated control switch or piece of software in our plethora of technological gimmickry. Like all other facets of the cosmos, it operates according to its own invisible laws, according to the will of God. It is always answered, but the answer comes according to a higher law of love than our earthbound eyes can always see. This is why one of the highest forms of

prayer is simply "Thy will be done" in any particular situation. Often this is offered in a negative spirit of resignation or fatalism.

But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about a positive affirmation, an acknowledgment that the whole of life is ultimately in God's hands and that the Higher Intelligence knows what is best for us. In the end, as T.S. Eliot puts it, "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

What interests me is that while the great majority of ordinary people believe in the reality and power of prayer, the secular scientific, medical and other establishments carry on for the most part ignoring it completely. For example, the huge pharmaceutical companies in North America will spend \$15 billion dollars (U.S.) this year alone to try to come up with a new antibiotic to combat the "super-bugs" evolving in response to previous antibiotics. Of course, any fresh antibiotic will have more side effects and will eventually be rendered obsolete by fresh bacterial mutations. They will spend absolutely nothing, naturally, on research into the effects of prayer upon health and healing. You can't put that into a pill and mass-market it.

Yet from some recent research, I've discovered that proper protocols can be put in place to make a beginning at least on documenting the effects of prayer scientifically.

Some of you may already have read of the experiments done by cardiologist Dr. Randolph Byrd, formerly a professor at the University of California. Using tight controls and a group of about 400 coronary-care patients at

San Francisco General Hospital, Byrd randomly divided them into two.

One group (192 patients) were prayed for regularly by home prayer-groups and the others (201) were not. In every other way they were treated normally by the hospital staff. Bestselling author Dr. Larry Dossey, in *Recovering the Soul: A Scientific and Spiritual Search*, described Byrd's methods as the most rigid that can be used in clinical studies in medicine — "a randomized, double-blind experiment in which neither the patients, nurses, nor doctors knew which group the patients were in."

Byrd recruited Protestants and Catholics across the U.S. to pray for the first group. They were given their names with a little information about their condition and were asked to pray daily. Each patient in the prayed-for group was on the list of from five to seven of the volunteers.

The results of the 10-month study were remarkable. Those prayed for differed from the others in several striking ways: they were five times less likely to need antibiotics; they were three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema (fluid on the lungs from heart failure); none of them needed intubation (12 in the non-prayed-for group had to have ventilatory support), and fewer of them died during the study.

Dossey comments: "If the technique had been a new drug or procedure ... it would ... have been heralded as some kind of break-through." One otherwise skeptical doctor, impressed by Byrd's methods and the results, has commented: "Maybe we doctors should be writing on our order sheets, 'Pray three times a day.' If it works, it works."

Byrd's study does not stand alone. Yet much more research could and should be done. There are no side effects and the cost, as in the case of the energy called love, is nil.

Tom Harpur is a Toronto author and broadcaster.