

Prayer

After a lifetime of spiritual experience St. Paul wrote these words: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

My wife Louise and I pulled up in a parking lot in the Redwood Forest Park near Oakland. We were there to perform a native wedding. It was a misty rain as we walked along the path beside the tall redwoods. We didn't know quite what to expect as the bride was Mormon and the groom a Native American.

A wonderful smell of scented wood smoke greeted our nostrils as we neared the place where we were to celebrate the wedding. The smoke called to us- it was the smell of cedar bows placed on the large central fire. There were three fires; one for the bride and one for the groom and the home fire. The groom appeared naked to the waist with a deerskin on his head and around his waist, his face with black ceremonial marks upon it. The bride was all in white her blonde hair a sharp contrast to the shock of black hair of her groom.

And then it happened. The groom went away from the home fire and sat down on a log. A most heartfelt call came out of him, almost a wailing sound as he called up the Spirit of the Mountain to bless him and his new bride. I wondered as I listened to it just how long it had been since the spirit of that mountain had been called upon? This heart wrenching cry came out of the groom from the depths of his soul. I have never heard anything like it. It was a prayer.

It was not long before the Forest Rangers came along and told the groom that he had to put the fires out. They were only allowed in the fire pits provided. I thought to myself “This does not look good. He is going to lose this one on his wedding day.”

The groom drew them aside and I saw him get down on one knee and plead with them saying that these woods had once belonged to

his forgotten people. Could they make an exception just this once on his wedding day to look the other way?

Perhaps the Spirit of the Mountain helped him for soon the Rangers were on their way telling the groom that they would pick up the straw that the groom had brought for a ceremonial bed for the forest floor if the groom would rake it all up into one place afterwards. The groom got his wedding in all its ceremonial beauty. The power of prayer...

C.S. Lewis writes about a woman diagnosed with cancer.

He said: "I have stood by the bedside of a woman whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer and who had thriving colonies of the disease in many other bones, as well. It took three people to move her in bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life; the nurses (who often know better), a few weeks.

A good man laid his hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking (uphill, too, through rough woodland) and the man who took the last X-ray photos was saying, "These bones are as solid as rock. It's miraculous."

Lewis, a devout Christian apologist, did not however conclude that this proves that prayer works. In fact, he argues that prayer is not testable like a scientific experiment and reminds us that prayer is always *a request* (as St. Paul said: "Make your **requests** known unto the Lord). Prayer is not some kind of magic. If it is a request then sometimes the answer will be no, or not yet, or yes, but there will be nothing automatic about it.

True story: a transport collided with a BMW. The transport driver went right off the bridge and plunged 100 feet to his death in a fiery wreck. The mangled BMW dangled off the bridge with a mother and two children in the wreck. By an incredible coincidence, stuck in traffic close to them was a navy seals lift truck – the only available vehicle to save the car from going over the bridge due to its immense lifting capacity. And so it was

deployed and the woman and her children were eventually cut free from the wreckage and taken with major injuries to the hospital.

Immediately in the paper and on the blogs the coincidence of the Navy Seals being there was seen as an act of God and just as immediately scorn was put upon that theory because the truck driver died a horrible death in his truck. For religious people the question became: Why did God save the woman and her children and let the trucker die? Was it because the woman prayed for help and perhaps the trucker did not? But what kind of a God would operate like that?

Lewis argues; *“The question then arises, “What sort of evidence would prove the efficacy of prayer?” The thing we pray for may happen, but how can you ever know it was not going to happen anyway? Even if the thing were indisputably miraculous it would not follow that the miracle had occurred because of your prayers. The answer surely is that a compulsive empirical Proof such as we have in the sciences can never be attained.”*

This is very wise advice by Lewis and would save a lot of controversy if it was followed.

But does that mean that we should not pray for any kind of outcome? When someone we love is dying, are we to not pray for them because the person in the bed beside them died yesterday? When a friend is in trouble with his marriage, do we not pray for them because a lot of people get divorced?

Lewis argues that Blaise Pascal thought that we were given by God, two kinds of dignity. One, we could **work** to make things happen ourselves and/ or two, we could pray and ask for divine help. Prayer was a **higher causality** and unlike our work **the outcome was not under our control.**

This twofold mission of work and prayer Pascal called **the dignity of causality-** But Lewis argued that the higher causality of prayer is ‘request only’ and Lewis says, *“And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course*

He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them. Invariably “success” in prayer would... prove something much more like magic—a power in certain human beings to control, or compel, the course of nature.”

Jesus in the Christian New Testament says of this higher causality: *“Whatsoever things you ask for in prayer, believe that you have them already and they shall be yours.”* Jesus is asking us to envision an outcome to engage spiritual power on our behalf in the present moment. Its like putting the clutch in in a gearshift car...It is all we can do. The power is not ours to command. We have no idea whether the car will move or not.

Also, in the New Testament Jesus asks three times in prayer before his death, to have his cup of suffering removed. But three times the request is denied and he goes to his cross. On the cross he cries out *“Why hast Thou forsaken me?”*

If God exists, as people of faith believe, **then some requests are denied even to someone of the stature of Jesus.**

This has been my experience as a pastor these many years. I have prayed for people in hospital when there was literally no hope and seen them discharged the following day. I have prayed for a man who was brain dead on a respirator and saw him restored to his family. I have prayed for a man who had a stroke and seen the stroke lift and the swallow reflex restored so that he could eat again.

I have also received many no's.

For me, when to pray for physical healing and when not, is important. To guide us, we have been given intuition, what we call our 'gut' feelings and it is always wise to consult our inner wisdom as to how we should pray. This inner wisdom is not infallible but over the years I have found it to be a good guide.

When we are praying for others, what does our 'gut' say to us about outcome?

In prayer there is a lot going on. Positive thinking changes outcomes, it also boosts the immune system. Will to live does as well. Love is healing as well. The power of intention changes outcomes. These are mysterious forces that are often in play beside the beds of the sick. Often there is a soul sickness behind the body sickness and a healing of the soul or psyche may lead to a healing of the body.

Prayer for me is sacred, personal and there are no barriers. I feel totally accepted by God when I pray. I have experienced a deep comfort in times of tragedy. I have experienced physical healing from prayer and I have known an amazing recovery several times in my life. I believe that all of us who are open to God can respectfully **request** God's protection and guidance. I often feel direction from God, and sense that I am exactly where I should be in my life at this time. That is a wonderful heartening feeling.

Also, in times of trouble I have felt a great Someone that I could turn to. In life, in death, in pleasure, in pain, in joy or in sorrow, I believe that God has been there for me. I know this in my gut and I am thankful! As someone said to me recently "Whatever would we do if we could not pray?"

However, there are some questions that I cannot answer. How can a loving God permit the holocaust in Nazi Germany? There is a Jewish play which puts God on trial for what happened in the holocaust and God is found guilty.

How do we explain the tragedy of 9/11? How do we explain what happened with Covid? How do we explain the death and destruction in Ukraine or in Gaza? What do we do when person after person that we know passes away? That is so hard!

Sure, we can know that the inhumanity of human beings towards one another explains the Nazi Death camps and the Twin Towers, the war in Ukraine and the destruction of Gaza and the Hamas

actions in Israel, but what about trying to answer **why** all this stuff happens? So many innocents have died...

My tentative answers are that we as human beings have an awesome freedom and that freedom has consequences including our own death and that of others. We can be loving to one another or cruel beyond thought. We are that free and we get the consequences of our ability to cause things to happen here on earth.

We all die. Some live to old age. Some live and survive tragedies. The woman and her children on the bridge dangling in her car over the edge survived. The trucker did not.

But one thing I know from hundreds of stories from people who have been resuscitated in Intensive Care units: **They lose all fear of death. They are met by those who have gone before. They know that we do not die alone. That trucker would have been met. It was his time and for all of us there is the provision that Life goes on after death...**

It comforts me that our great faith teaches us that once we pass from this side to the other side after death, we are absent from the body and present with God. I believe that with all my heart. I do not think that anyone dies alone, God is always there...

David Whyte tells an amazing true story about prayer that took place in the Galapagos islands. He writes:

“The backdrop to the story was dramatic: an amphitheater of rock and sea on a wild, lonely, wave-drenched hunk of rock... Imagine the air filled with the cries of seabirds and sea lions, and imagine you hear, every so often, a huge roaring sound from below the cliff, where the waves tear up through a deep crack in the living rock.

It was in this place, ...that I came to lead Matt Downing, a fellow

naturalist guide, into a near-death experience. Matt and I were on top of the cliff staring at the vast sway of sea that stretches southward for several thousand miles to the Antarctic ice shelf.

At one point beneath that cliff lay a large platform of lava rock. A ramp in the cliff led down onto the platform and to the source of the roaring sound. A huge, curving crack snaked in from the edge of the cliff for 20 feet; beneath this, the full fury of the ocean would concentrate before spraying up through the opening to a height of about 30 or 40 feet above the platform. The whole effect was like witnessing Yellowstone's famous geyser, Old Faithful. As a guide, I would stand near the edge of the crack and take a salt-water shower under the falling plume while the [tour]group clicked merrily away, capturing the moment for their slide shows. I had done this for months, and I was sure it had helped increase the generosity of the group when, at journey's end, they held a collection for the guide's deserving tip.

In this spirit, I persuaded Matt to join me at the edge of the blowhole. He was a little hesitant but soon joined in the exhilaration of being showered by tons of water falling on us from a great height. I remember seeing the photographs many weeks later, taken by our watching group one moment before disaster struck. There we are, having all the fun in the world. But beneath us, off camera, the water suddenly disappeared. We waited for it to surge back again. It did not. *Something was wrong.* I looked down to the sea below. The ocean was curling into the most frightful, pent-up tsunami. I grabbed Matt's arm and shouted, "God Almighty!" We barely had time to turn away when the mighty surge barreling back up the crack was overtaken by the huge wave rolling over the top of the cliff. I remember trying to keep my feet in front of me because there was a 12-foot rock step in the platform, against which we were being flung. I didn't want to hit it headfirst. My arm had been loosed from Matt's, and he disappeared into the surging nothingness. I hit the lava wall feet first, and then I

was dragged back by the force of the ebbing water over the platform to the edge of the cliff. The next image offered to the eyes of our group was me gripping the edge of the blowhole, my feet hanging into its mouth. Beyond me, Matt hung off the edge of the cliff, his feet swinging wildly for purchase. The next wave hit us like a hammer blow. This time there was no keeping my feet in any direction. I was somersaulted toward the step, over and over. The second wave was so huge that it took me right over the top of the lava step. I surged forward, banging against the rocks, until I reached the awestruck group and was left at their feet, lacerated and shocked.

I remember looking up into the horrified faces and thinking in an abstract way that this performance should merit a very large tip. The thought crumpled immediately in the shock and realization of my banged-up state. I was also desperate for the sight of Matt. There he lay, about 30 feet away, blood running down his back and arms. Matt was evacuated to the boat, deliriously asking if anyone got the number of the truck that hit him, while I recovered lying flat out on the beach, amazed that I wasn't dead.

The blessing was also in sheer survival. A few feet here, a few feet there, and I would have been over that cliff, from whence there was no return. A boat could not have even approached to pick up my body. I had been given the sight of my own end and had returned to carry the revelation into the rest of my existence. I was not a discrete sports star in the firmament of my own adulation. I belonged to a very powerful world, and everything had its own life equal to my own. Still, in an ironic way, I felt sure that I had come to all this myself, under my own luck and power.

As the waves recede in my memory, I come, three years later, to the armchair in Yorkshire and my mother sipping whiskey. I was home for only a short stay, and we were talking about my travels and the amount of time I spent away from her. In inimitable Irish fashion, my mother was telling me how much she missed me and

how she said a prayer for my safety every night. I nodded in good son-like fashion but was ready to move on to other more adult things, appropriate to a grown man talking to his mother. But before I could encourage the conversation onto other ground, she began to tell me about a vivid dream that had woken her up during my time in the Galápagos.

Apparently, in the dream I had been standing on a black cliff with one other person, next to a fountain of water. A huge, frightening wave bore down on us in the dream. The blowhole on Hood Island, [I immediately thought.]

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as she spoke, describing in clear detail from her dream the exact circumstance of my near drowning. I had never so much as breathed a word of the incident, knowing how much she worried about me, nor had I told my father or either of my sisters.

[She said:] "You were standing on the cliff edge next to the strange fountain when a big wave came over the top and swept you away. You came floating back in all the turmoil but then another, bigger wave came and you were being taken out to sea. I felt the blackness of the water waiting for you. In the dream, I leaned down from above and took hold of you by the back of the neck. I lifted you out and put you safely back on the cliff. When I woke, I felt so happy that I had been able to save you."

David looked at his mother with absolute amazement. He said: "I was shocked into silence to hear such a precise description of something so private to me, a clear description of the frightening trauma I had been trying, I realized, to forget. The sound of the waves seemed to surround me as she spoke, the sea spray thundering amidst the bird cries. I looked at her as if I had seen a ghost, which I had. It was my self-image vanishing. I told my mother the other side of the story. We stared into our glasses; we looked at each other.

Then I found myself amidst other waves, waves of laughter at the absurdity of it all. They began to ripple to the surface, and my mother began to laugh, too. "Bloody marvelous, isn't it?" I said. "Here I am adventuring around the world like some invulnerable version of Indiana Jones, lord of all I survey, and all the time it is my mother coming in like the cavalry at the end and saving me from the jaws of destruction." We raised the glasses together, hooting at the image. But as the laughter subsided, I told myself in no uncertain terms, **David, whatever it is you think you are, give it up. There are powers at play in the world about which you know very little. Like, for instance, this little woman sitting in front of you who sponsored your exclusive membership in this hard-to-obtain world and for all you know still pays a hefty part of your annual dues.**

There was a feeling in the room of time stopping dead still. I'm not interested in the psychic glamour of it all, nor the intuitive reach of my mother, which I had experienced many times before. **Yes, I was perfectly prepared to believe that the intercession was real.** That without her watchful, loving presence I would have been swept away.

Whatever powers we have in the world, in our work, in our leadership, in our imaginations, they are in the gift of a much larger world than one we have made for ourselves. We are dependent in all our lives on a deeper, wider creation which we must join, a creation waiting to transform us in that joining by the merest touch."

There is more to this universe than we know. Miracles do happen. Strange things occur. They are not under our control. They may or may not make sense- like those Navy seals who were in the right place at the right time with exactly the right equipment. Should we not celebrate their competence and abilities because the truck driver died? Should we not give thanks to God for the deliverance

for that woman and her children? Should we not honor an Irish mother's prayer for a son in the Galapagos Islands?

Because we don't know everything, I have come to think that **humility** is an appropriate response, as well as gratitude every time someone survives miraculously.

A Shakespeare said in his play Hamlet:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Amen.