

HEALING PRAYER

By James R. Yates, *Reader's Digest*, March 1996.

Does prayer heal? Scientists are discovering what believers have always known. It was during residency training at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas, when I had my first patient with terminal cancer in both lungs. I advised him on what therapy was available and what little I thought it would do. Rightly enough he opted for no treatment.

Yet whenever I stopped by his hospital bedside, he was surrounded by visitors from his church, singing and praying.

Good thing, I thought, because soon they'll be singing and praying at his funeral.

A year later when I was working elsewhere, a colleague at Parkland called to ask if I wanted to see my old patient. See him? I couldn't believe he was still alive. I studied his chest X-rays and was stunned. The man's lungs were completely clear—there was no sign of cancer.

"His therapy has been remarkable," the radiologist said, looking over my shoulder.

Therapy? I thought. There wasn't any—unless you consider prayer.

I told two of my medical-school professors what had happened. Neither was willing to acknowledge that the man's healing was miraculous. "That was the natural course of the disease," one said. The other professor shrugged, "We see this," he said.

I had long given up the faith of my childhood. Now I believed in the power of modern medicine. Prayer seemed an arbitrary frill. So I put the incident out of my mind.

The years passed and I became chief of staff at a large urban hospital. I was aware that many of my patients used prayer, but I put little trust in it. Then in the late '80s I began to come across studies—many conducted under stringent laboratory conditions—which showed that prayer brings about significant changes in a variety of physical conditions.

Perhaps the most convincing study, published in 1988, was by cardiologist Dr. Randolph Byrd. A computer assigned 393 patients at the coronary care unit of San Francisco General Hospital either to a group that was prayed for by prayer groups or to a group that was not remembered in prayer. No one knew which group the patients were in. The prayer groups were simply given the patients' first names, along with brief descriptions of their medical problems. They were asked to pray each day until the patients were discharged from the hospital—but were given no instructions on how to do it or what to say.

When the study was completed ten months later, the prayed-for patients benefited in several significant areas:

- * They were five times less likely than the "un-remembered" group to require antibiotics.
- * They were 2½ times less likely to suffer congestive heart failure.
- * They were less likely to suffer cardiac arrest.

If the medical technique being studied had been a new drug or surgical procedure instead of prayer, it would probably have been heralded as a breakthrough. Even hard-boiled skeptics like Dr. William Nolen, who had written a book questioning the validity of faith healing, acknowledged, "If this is a valid study, we doctors ought to be writing on our order sheets, 'Pray three times a day.' If it works it works."

There's
always
hope if
there's
love and
prayer.

Prayer is powerful! When we pray, things will happen and things will be different. God will answer prayer.—David Brandt Berg

Scientists, including physicians, can have blind spots, however. The power of prayer seems to be one of them.

I have since given up practicing medicine to devote myself to researching and writing about prayer and how it affects our health. There are studies which suggest that prayer can have a beneficial effect on high blood pressure, wounds, headaches and anxiety. Here are some of the things I've found:

Prayer can take many forms.

In the studies I've seen, results occurred not only when people prayed for explicit outcomes but also when they prayed for nothing specific. Some studies, in fact, showed that a simple "Thy will be done" was quantitatively more powerful than specific results held in the mind. In many experiments a simple attitude of prayerfulness—an all-pervading sense of holiness and a feeling of empathy, caring and compassion—seemed to set the stage for healing.

Love increases the power of prayer.

The power of love is legendary. It's built into folklore, common sense and everyday experience. Love moves the flesh—as the blushing and palpitations experienced by lovers attest. And throughout history, tender, loving care has uniformly been recognized as a valuable element in healing. In fact, a survey of 10,000 men with heart disease published in *The American Journal of Medicine* found close to a 50% reduction of angina in those who perceived their wives as supportive and loving.

Virtually all healers who use faith and prayer agree: Love is the power that makes it possible for them to reach out to heal, even at a distance. The feeling of care and warmth is so pronounced that they typically describe "becoming one" with the person being prayed for. In healer Agnes Sanford's words, "Only love can light the healing fire."

Prayer is healthful.

Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School was one of the first medical researchers to study the health benefits of prayer and meditation. Benson discovered a connection between exercise and prayer. He taught runners to meditate as they ran and found that their bodies became more efficient.

His research showed not only that prayer is good for the body, but that also our methods of prayer vary widely. Prescribing one specific way to pray can disenfranchise people from the prayer process and result in prayer dropouts.

Prayer can be open-ended.

Most people who pray are convinced that it can be used in a purposeful, goal-specific manner. But research shows that open-ended entreaties seem to work too. Invocations such as "Thy will be done," "Let it be" or "May the best thing happen" do not involve "using" prayer for specific outcomes, nor do they involve sending complicated messages.

Prayer means you are not alone.

A patient of mine was dying. The day before his death, I sat at his bedside with his wife and children. He knew he had little time left, and he chose his words carefully, speaking in a hoarse whisper. Although he was not a religious person, he revealed to us that recently he had begun to pray.

"What do you pray for?" I asked him.

"It isn't 'for' anything," he said thoughtfully. "It simply reminds me that I am not alone."

Your
life is
fragile!—
Handle
with
prayer!