

Chapter 5. Religious Spirituality and the Power of Prayer

The vast majority of humankind believes in a higher power, in one form or another. It is inconceivable to most of us that our vast galaxies, the fine intricacies found in the structure of a snowflake or the veins of a leaf, and the wonder of life itself, could spring from nothingness, without the aid of intelligent design. Many believe that such a blueprint could only be drawn by a force far wiser and more powerful than ourselves. In our predominately Christian culture we call this creator “God,” and our savior, Jesus Christ. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva reflect the Hindu vision of higher power, Allah for the Muslims, Yahweh for the Jewish faith, and on and on. Which of these alternative visions of the deity is the one and only true god is a source of endless dogmatic debate and countless wars. Our beliefs divide us. In a more unifying mood, one might hope that they are all facets of one multifacial god, revealed in different visions for different cultures, with behavior counting more than beliefs in divine accounting. None of us know the answers to these age old questions, but we do each have our beliefs, founded on faith, in the absence of facts or empirical evidence. As scientists collect evidence regarding the evolution of life and the universe, facts accumulate, but far too slowly to eradicate the need for faith. Through faith, we accept at least the rough sketch, if not all of the fine details of our religious beliefs. Within these beliefs we find moral guidelines, spiritual connectedness, meaning and purpose, divine love and forgiveness, and perhaps the promise of the hereafter. And we share our faith with our brethren in our churches, temples and mosques, providing us with all the more connectedness via fellowship. Our religious faith connects us to our higher power, via prayer, which in turn activates the healthiest side of ourselves. While our beliefs are important to each of us, and provide us with a system within which our spirituality and morality can flourish, I would argue that it is our religious practices that are more important than our beliefs. Regardless of variations in our religious beliefs and traditions, nearly all of us value spiritual connectedness and moral behavior, and the moral codes of our faiths have far more similarities than differences. Our common need for spiritual connectedness and moral integrity unites us, while an excessive focus on the accuracy of our beliefs divides us. I would argue that the issue is not who is right, but rather, how do we practice our faith, and what specific practices best activate our moral and spiritual potential.

Religion provides abundant benefits to us. These benefits include a clear moral code, and belief in goodness as a primary feature of the universe. Indeed, goodness versus evil assumes prominence as the central axis for understanding life in most religious systems. Furthermore, a moral code is accepted as objective, handed down by God, literally written in stone in the Christian tradition, and therefore straightforward, requiring only interpretation or judgment when principles collide (e.g., whether one should steal bread for a starving child). In addition, the provider of this moral code, God, is seen as the epitome of goodness, an all powerful force who provides justice and eternal rewards for those who mirror His goodness. We can feel secure and be confident that in the end, justice prevails and goodness trumps all concerns, which is certainly reassuring in our often unjust, selfish, and violence ridden world. Secondly, religion provides spirituality, a belief in someone and something larger than ourselves, specifically God and the power of His love and wisdom. We are not alone. Instead, we are connected to His fountain of love, and can rely upon God’s wisdom, via prayer, in times of the self

doubt. Even if we are socially alienated, reeling from divorce, or otherwise isolated, or for that matter overwhelmed by guilt for a terrible mistake, God's love and forgiveness are both accessible and healing. Such beliefs and practices provide us with meaning and purpose in life as well. Following God's will and moral code, and sharing God's love with our fellow humans, with the reward of eternal bliss in His embrace, becomes a very meaningful purpose in life, which ideally guides our every behavior and decision. We are reassured that death is not the end of our consciousness and existence. Death is perhaps the most distressing fact of life, but with the promise of heaven, we need not fear annihilation, and can rest assured that we will eventually reconnect with lost loved ones, thereby restoring our most cherished relationships. In addition to reassuring us regarding the endgame in life, our faith also provides us with an explanation for the mysterious origins of the universe. But how are we to access these benefits on a daily or hourly basis? It is one thing to believe, but entirely another to practice beliefs. Beliefs are abstract and intellectual, but our religious practices form the path within which we activate our beliefs on a much deeper, emotionally fulfilling level. Prayer is the practice which connects us to the divine, thereby connecting us with the healthiest part of ourselves as well.

Some of you may find yourselves allowing your power of prayer to go unused, perhaps even feeling that God is not answering your prayers. It is difficult to know whether God is hands-on or hands-off, attending to every detail of the universe, or setting it in motion for each of us to use His Wisdom and our own free will to manage our lives ourselves. How can God be hands-on if He does not intervene in the many injustices and catastrophes that befall our planet? In my professional practice, I frequently counsel sexually abused women, whose abuse in the apparent absence of divine protection often challenges religious faith at its core. Perhaps there is a higher reason for this lack of divine intervention, beyond our limited comprehension. Does God answer our prayers directly, or does God help those who help themselves? Or perhaps there is a hybrid explanation, in which God answers some prayers directly, while at other times empowering us to get in touch with the godly part of ourselves in order to guide our own lives wisely, lovingly, and morally. These too are mysteries, which fall well beyond our intellectual pay grade. But one thing is certain. The benefits of prayer are elusive if prayer is not practiced. In Alcoholics Anonymous, one sometimes hears complaints that the program does not work. The typical response is that the program works for those who work it. So it is with religious practices, and the power of prayer. We can focus upon beliefs, and the contradictions of life that challenge those beliefs, or we can focus on the certainty that practicing our faith connects us with the divine, and thereby activates our moral and spiritual core. And make no mistake. Prayer does work! Koenig and his colleagues (2001) summarized a host of studies demonstrating the positive impact of prayer. Subsequent studies have explored placebo issues and the effectiveness of prayer by others on your behalf, with mixed results. But for our present purposes, which is more important, practices or beliefs, the fact that prayer works, or how it works? From my perspective as a psychologist, for our emotional wellbeing, practices trump beliefs. Prayer does indeed work, so if you have solid religious faith, why not use the practice which activates that faith and connects you to God?

When you do take the time to pray, you may hear the voice of God speak clearly to you. Alternatively, you may find Him speaking through you, guiding you into the

divine core of yourself, reconnecting you to the healthiest, wise, loving, and moral part of yourself. This recentering need not be forced; it is allowed, when we remove distractions and resistances. Allow yourself to be guided toward the divinely inspired center of yourself. Whether He speaks to you or through you, listen carefully for His wisdom. Ask your questions, and listen patiently and confidently, within yourself, for the response. If you doubt the connection, you are severing it. The answers you seek may surface quickly, or later on when you least expect it. Remain patient, confident that your connection with God will soon reward you with moral and spiritual inspiration. Remain mindful that prayer is a relationship, not just a communication, and certainly not just a one way communication. You must listen. But beyond listening, there is the issue of cultivating a personal relationship with God. With good communication skills, you can communicate well even with a stranger. But it is much easier to communicate with a friend. God knows you even if you don't know Him. But if you listen to God often, you will come to know Him far more intimately. You will be able to access His love and wisdom far more quickly. In its best form, prayer is a relationship with God. Spirituality is about spirit. Spirit is about consciousness. Spirituality involves shared consciousness. Prayer is a spiritual practice which accesses shared consciousness with God, and His creation.

How should you pray, and how often? Those who walk with God on an hourly basis are the most connected, but as we all know, it is so easy to become distracted from our core values by our daily preoccupations. Our spiritual connection to God can be enriched repeatedly throughout the day, simply by feeling His presence in the world around us. Refresh your connection with Him, and with His creation around us periodically throughout each day, not just when you are troubled. Feel His presence in the voice of the songbird above you, in the sunshine which warms you and the cool breeze which refreshes you. Turn to the stars at night and allow yourself to be consumed with awe as you experience the infinite reach of His creation. Feel His love and share it with those around you as you interact with them throughout your day. In the midst of your busy, goal directed daily routine, steal moments to connect with your brethren, and enjoy your ability to momentarily enrich their day. Connect frequently with God's love and the wonder of His universe, and realize that you are never alone. It may sound trite to talk about walking with God through your daily life, but if you have difficulty doing so, you might ask yourself a few fundamental questions. Do you really believe in God, or is He a comfortable abstraction, a mere trump card to play when your death anxiety pokes its ugly head above the pursuits and distractions of daily life? Do you live your faith, or merely believe it? And if you don't live it, do you really believe it? Imagine that you are a teenager, and the coolest girl (or boy) in your high school becomes interested in you. She/he is stunningly attractive, kind and friendly, bright and wise, with humility not arrogance, funny as can be, and she/he is interested in you! Do you not find yourself wanting to spend nearly every moment, and share every experience with her/him? While God is not your perfect mate in the flesh, He is your perfect spiritual companion. If you truly believe in God, and in His love, wisdom, omnipotence, and ever presence, why would you not spend time with Him on an hourly basis? Living your faith by maintaining your hourly, not just daily connection with God, brings countless rewards. If you find yourself merely believing, without practicing your faith consistently, you may want to revisit your faith, and enrich it. For if you truly believe in God, you will want to partake in His presence, experience His love, and rely on His wisdom for more than just a few

minutes a day. Touch base with Him periodically throughout the day, in many ways, and thereby keep your faith alive, and remain centered in the healthiest part of yourself.

Start and end your day with your spiritual connection, but maintain your connection periodically throughout the day as well. There are many ways of doing so. Most of us have been trained to pray at night, to express gratitude for our gifts, while seeking wellbeing for our loved ones, as well as spiritual connectedness as we prepare to surrender to the night. Similar benefits await us in the morning. Upon awakening, you can pray for the inspiration to remain connected to your central values, or perhaps a specific value that is important to you at the moment. You thereby center yourself, creating a spiritual template for the day to come, committing yourself to remain mindful throughout the day of whatever is most important to you. Alternatively, there are many books available which provide us with spiritual meditations to connect us as we start our day. One such resource is *Say Yes to Life*, by Reverend Leo Booth, who has long been an active and inspiring participant in recovery circles.

Another such resource is Julia Cameron's *Answered Prayers: Love Letters from the Divine*. She helps us imagine the divine perspective on our everyday troubles and most distressing emotions. In our section focusing upon management of our most difficult emotions, we provided a variety of psychological perspectives and techniques for dealing with such negative feelings. But there is also a spiritual approach to the management of each such emotion. For example, if you are lonely, allow God to comfort you. Converse with Him. Remember that He is with you with every step and breath that you take, if you allow yourself to feel His presence. You are never alone, unless you ignore Him. If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, feel his or her this presence, not just your separation. You may mourn the passing of the flesh, but do not close off their spirit. You can continue to experience your shared consciousness with them. Attend to their love and return it fully. Listen to their wise counsel. Yes, allow yourself to grieve what you have lost, but maintain what remains, your spiritual connection with them. You may feel lonely in the flesh, but you are rich in spirit, if you allow it. Turn your worries over to God, especially those issues where you have no control. Ask Him for inspiration and courage to act in areas where you do have control. As we have seen in chapters focusing upon both worry and frustration, the Serenity Prayer is a significant resource for managing each of these distressing conditions. Meet with God at bedtime. Tell Him about your day, and your fears for tomorrow. Ask for His soothing, and ask Him to hold your worries until morning, as you fall off into sleep. As for your shame, trust your secrets to God. Share them with Him, even if you have no one else close enough to safely hold these embarrassing secrets. Secrets sicken us, and besides, He already knows every secret that you shamefully hide from others. He loves you despite your secrets and mistakes, and values you even when you cannot value yourself. Allow His love to wash over you, cleansing you of shame, forgiving you for your errors. Have the humility to accept that He knows better than you. Would you dare to tell Him directly that you know better than Him, that He is wrong regarding your worthiness? This would be preposterous, unthinkable. Yes, work on your behavior, as this work is never ending for imperfect beings like ourselves. But allow His love to fill you, despite your many imperfections. He accepts you as you are, even as He urges you to improve your behavior. Your past is already forgiven; let Him carry the burden of your guilt for the past, while accepting His guidance and help in the present and future. Allow yourself to feel God's forgiveness, and

to share it with those who have harmed you. Practice your connection with God, and He will keep you in touch with the healthiest part of yourself. There is a spiritual angle on every emotion. Spiritual practices sprout at the intersection of our psychological and spiritual resources.

Joyce Meyers plumbs this junction well. In her best selling *Battlefield of the Mind*, she exposes the negative thought patterns that set us up to behave outside of our Christian values. She further explores how we can use our faith in order to counteract negative thought patterns such as worry, doubt, and judgmental criticism, thereby reducing the feelings which plague us, including anxiety, confusion, and anger. Her writings are preceded by two thousand years of Christian literature, beginning with the Bible, followed by countless other offerings regarding faith, ethics, and spiritual connectedness. Explore them actively. If you are willing to take a more personal approach to your faith, your pastor or priest may also be an excellent resource for enlightenment regarding spiritual perspectives and practices for psychological recovery and growth. In addition, some counselors practice psychotherapy from a primarily religious perspective, and identify themselves as Christian or pastoral counselors. Practice your fellowship by volunteering through your church or other organizations. You reap what you sow. Giving your time and compassion to others who are in need will enrich your humanity, connecting you to humankind, and the divine values we share with each other.

Additionally, there are many spiritual practices to be found in other religious traditions, many of which are not directly tied to religious beliefs contrary to your own. For example, if you can bypass discussions of atheistic challenges to religious faith in the following chapter, you will find a review of practices such as meditation and mindfulness. Our brethren in other cultures have developed their own spiritual creativity down through the ages, and hold many gems for us to discover and utilize. We need not dismiss these spiritual resources just because their face of God is different from our own. For example, if we move from our cultural heritage in Europe to our geographic heritage in North America, the spirituality of our American Indian brethren harbors perhaps the best developed environmental spirituality that humans have developed. More a way of life (a practice) than a set of religious beliefs, American Indian spirituality focuses on maintaining harmony and balance with the world around us, and within ourselves. One connects with the Great Spirit, who pervades all living and nonliving things. We connect with the spirit of the songbird, or even the bison before we fell it to nourish ourselves. The animism of this spiritual tradition, finding kindred spirits in all living things, may feel a bit alien in our more anthropocentric Christian tradition, wherein we hold a more dualistic view of man versus nature. But if we want to feel connected, allowing ourselves to feel with, rather than over nature can allow us to feel more connected to the world around us, thereby expressing rather than sacrificing our connection to God.

Likewise, Buddhism has a rich history in its development of spiritual practices. If spirituality involves shared consciousness, then it makes sense to explore consciousness itself. Yes, practice your shared consciousness externally with the divine, with living and lost loved ones, with nature itself. But also look within. Explore and experience consciousness itself, via meditation and mindfulness. The more connected you are, both externally and internally, with the divine spirit, nature, and your own personal spirit or consciousness, the more you will reap the rewards of spirituality. There are many

paths to explore. Regardless of which spiritual practices you gravitate toward, nurture your faith on a daily if not hourly basis. Practice living it rather than merely believing it. You will feel far more connected spiritually, to God, yourself, and the world around you.