
On a Wish and a Prayer: Healing Through Distant Intentionality

Paul Ka'ikena Pearsall, PhD

President and CEO, Ho'ala Hou; Clinical Professor, University of Hawaii at Manoa



"Pythagora said that the most divine art was that of healing. And if the healing art is most divine, it must occupy itself with the soul as well as with the body; for no creature can be sound so long as the higher part in it is sickly."

Apollonius of Tynana

Be careful what you wish for. Recent research is indicating that these words go beyond superstition. While no scientist knows why, evidence from their carefully controlled studies indicates that the mind of one person can engage in "action at a distance" to bring about healthful changes in someone else.¹ Physician Daniel Benor has written a four-volume work titled *Healing Research* which cites nearly 150 studies related to prayer and intentionality, many of which meet the highest scientific standards.² Over half of these studies show statistically significant results of the power of prayer. Modern science is learning what ancient healers knew all along; prayer works.

The positive effects of prayer yielded in experiments cannot be explained by known physiological processes and they go beyond the laws of old Newtonian physics.³ The idea that some form of energy is "sent" and "received" does not hold up to careful scrutiny. In the studies on distant healing, whatever is happening seems independent of time, the "energy" does not fade away with increasing distance, and it cannot be shielded by any known substance. All of the conventional forms of energy we do know about are limited by these conditions, but not the unique "energy" or process of prayerful intent.

While most spiritual healing traditions employ some form of a prayerful, meditative state of awareness and most scientists confess that they pray, scientists still struggle to deal with their own findings and some religious persons are uncomfortable with the idea of studying such a sacred process. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Targ has conducted some of the most comprehensive and carefully designed studies on the power of distant healing intent and the results of her studies consistently show a small but significant positive effect. Other scientists such as biologist Dr. Keith Stewart Thomas question whether researchers have been careful enough in their definition of prayer and if there may be a danger for the sickest of patients in creating a false hope for prayer over active attention and personal responsibility for one's health and healing.⁴

A careful analysis of the data shows conclusively that a patient's mental well being has a measurable and positive effect on the course of disease. It shows that prayer helps and that people of faith who feel like they are in supportive communion with their God or a

Higher Power tend to be contented people. Contented people tend to do better when their health is threatened. But is that all there is to it? Is there something much more magnificent going on when our intentions and prayers result in changes in living systems? Is the power of prayer due only to psychological support and a positive state of mind? Is there divine intervention "upon request" that is involved in the positive findings about prayer? What about the ethics involved for "control" groups who are not prayed for in a prayer study? What about "bad wishes" or harmful prayers? There are many important issues involved when science and spirituality meet.

Most researchers consider two kinds of prayer. First is the meditative or worshipful kind of prayer similar to that of ancient healers, kahuna, and shaman. This is the kind of prayer in which the healer enters into some form of loving, compassionate attitude. It is "non-interventional" in intent. So-called "supplicative" prayer is a more direct request for divine intervention for one's self or for someone else to recover from an illness. Prayer researchers call this "interventional" prayer. Perhaps this traditional division for research purposes is not helpful and there is a more constructive approach to studying and understanding the mysteries of the apparent effects of prayer. Is it possible that we could learn more about the power of prayerful intervention if we viewed our research on this process not as a test of faith or the power of a religious belief or practice but as an exploration of the nature of human consciousness and its relationship to the higher power or powers, the "something more" that even the most skeptical persons often sense as influencing their personal destiny and health, their daily life, and the meaning of our death?⁵

A key question in learning more about the power of our wishes and prayers is whether monothetic science characterized by inviolable laws is able to deal fully with the issue of consciousness. It is difficult when what is being sought is doing the seeking. What is consciousness? Is it more than just something we "have" or is it perhaps something we collectively "are?" Instead of asking where consciousness comes from or where it is, perhaps we should ask how we evolved from consciousness? Are we ourselves the "thoughts" of a Higher Power? Is the perplexing connection indicated by the effects of studies on prayer evidence that we are manifestations of a common, timeless, and universal consciousness? Is our consciousness merely reactive or can it inject order into systems across time and space? In our study of prayer and distant intentionality, we are wading into very deep and sacred waters. Ancient healers have experience in these waters, but the less oceanic mind often fears their depths.

The essence of the power of prayer is faith. The research evidence shows that faith plays a key role in all healing processes. Even if it was proved tomorrow that prayer does not "work," the mental, physical, and emotional state that accompanies loving prayerfulness has been shown to be good for our health. As philosopher Soren Kierkegaard pointed out, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays." A Hawaiian `olelo no`eau (proverb) says, "O ke aloha ka ma I ho`ole `ai." It is translated, as "compassion is the healer." In the absence of the final proof of the power of prayer, feeling and giving compassion may be one of the best things we can do for our own and everyone's health.

As with all decisions about health and healing, we are assisted in our decisions about the many issues regarding the healing power of our prayers, wishes, and intentions when we go beyond blind faith. However, the essence of science is the struggle "to know for sure," but the essence of God or the Absolute is unknowability. Perhaps this will always be true of prayer. Perhaps we come to understand prayer when we try as hard as we can to learn all we can about it while having faith enough to accept that we will never be able to know all we want to know. It is our rational mind that makes us strong enough

to master our physical world, but it is our spiritual willingness to remain comfortable with the unknowns that brings us comfort in our world.⁶

Einstein warned that religion without science is blind, but science without religion is lame. Perhaps, as philosophers have suggested, if the existence of God were scientifically proven tomorrow, God would—like so many of the miracles of the world—begin to be taken for granted. The struggle between proof and faith may ultimately be unnecessary. As the founder of modern medicine wrote, "Prayer indeed is good, but while calling on the gods, a man should himself lend a hand."

References

1. Benor DJ. Believe It and You'll Be It: Visualization in Psychic Healing, *Psi Research*. 1985;42-43.
2. Benor DJ. *Healing Research. Volumes 1-4*. Munich, Germany: Helix Verlag; 1993.
3. Dossey L. *Healing Words*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins; 1993.
4. For a comparison of points of view on the study of prayer and distant intentionality, see: Tage E, Thomson KS. Can Prayer and Intentionality Be Researched? Should They Be?. *Alternative Therapies*. 1997;3(6):92-96.
5. For a review of the research from this perspective, see: Tage E. Evaluation of Distant Healing, *Alternative Therapies*. 1997;3(6):74-77.
6. For a review of the research and issues related to wishing and the power of intentionality, see: Pearsall P. *Wishing Well: Making Your Every Wish Come True*. New York, NY: Hyperion; 2000.

Schering/Key Pharmaceutical

Claritin-D 12 Hour
(5 mg loratadine/120 mg pseudoephedrine sulfate, USP)
Extended Release Tablets

Claritin-D 24 Hour
(10 mg loratadine/240 mg pseudoephedrine sulfate, USP)
Extended Release Tablets

Claritin RediTabs[®]
10 mg (loratadine rapidly-disintegrating tablets)

Claritin Syrup
(loratadine) 10 mg per 10 mL

Once-a-day
nasonex
(mometasone furoate monohydrate)
Nasal Spray, 50 mcg

Claritin[®]
10 mg (loratadine)

Tequin
gatifloxacin 400 mg tablet

Schering Velvet Agena-Chee
Senior Sales Representative
Voice Mail (800) 782-2347
Box 3858

Schering Donn keoki Arizumi
Pharmaceutical Representative
Voice Mail (800) 544-5420
Box 8058

KEY Shawn Brady
Sales Representative
Telephone (808) 387-1409
Voice Mail (800) 554-5420
Box 1342
FAX (808) 373-1772
E-Mail shawn.brady@spcorp.com

Schering Mark Buquoi
Sales Representative
Telephone (808) 384-3862
Voice Mail (800) 544-5420
Box 9795
FAX (808) 841-6105

Schering Dennis M. Hamamura
Senior Pharmaceutical Rep.
Telephone (808) 671-0225
Voice Mail (800) 544-5420
Box 8774
FAX (808) 671-0817

KEY Carol K. Honda
Sales Representative
Voice Mail (800) 554-5420
Box 8322
FAX (808) 593-1776

Schering Rachelle Hyde
Sales Representative
District Trainer
Voice Mail (800) 782-2347
Box 3861

KEY Caroline Perry
Sales Representative
Voice Mail (800) 554-5420
Box 1274
E-Mail Caroline.perry@spcorp.com

Schering Brian Souza
District Account Representative
Telephone (808) 394-9475
Voice Mail (800) 554-5420
Box 6811
FAX (808) 394-9475
E-Mail brian.souza@spcorp.com