OUR THOUGHTS AND OUR PRAYERS  
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Little grates on me as much as the clichés hurled again and again on television. Families in mourning have to hear about this closure business, whatever it means. Or those ubiquitous questions, When you heard that your parents had died, what was going through your mind? When the flood destroyed your community, what was that like?

Another one that has always rankled me is the predictable statement following the announcement of a death: “Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families.” One would think that intelligent people could come up with something more thoughtful, sensitive, caring. But then the words were addressed to me.

I felt obliged to tell a patient of mine that I would have to call him regarding our next appointment as I was about to undergo surgery and didn’t know how long a recuperation period I was facing. Seemingly without thinking, he looked at me and said softly, “I’ll pray for you, Doc.” His words had no sooner filled the air that I felt the tears. Apparently, the prayers of this man were exactly what I wanted. A devout Catholic tells me, a Jew, he will pray for me, and at once I am filled with some peculiar spirit of security, or is it a release from something? A release, perhaps, from a lifetime void of the spiritual? Normally I will think, pray what you wish, my friend, but just don’t mention the name of your Lord. But this time that thought never emerged, and it was not because he was my patient; I had no desire to censure a single word, a single holy name. I felt filled up, somehow, with the mere statement that he would pray for me. And I have no idea what praying actually means, much less whether there really is something called a power that emanates from this activity.

In the hospital, on the morning following surgery, I obeyed orders and walked the floor. Around and around the nurse’s station, pitiful laps in corridors that remind one of anything but a walking track. But it is here that one meets the other lap walkers, the other post-surgery folks. And the talk goes right to the heart of the medical matter, names rarely exchanged. This one has cells dying in his prostate, each cellular death causing exquisite pain. I ask about his PSA readings and hear a number that astonishes me; it is in the high fifties. I have a macabre urge to tell him if it gets to sixty he might want to sell. And this one, a strong looking man pushing an IV stand in front of him, was doing so well, even with a blood thinner issue from a previous cardiac condition threatening his surgery and recovery, that the doctors sent him home. Three hours later he couldn’t eliminate fluids and here he was back on the same floor, walking the track.

Then I met Sammy, a man in his early sixties who told me he had survived prostate cancer, colon cancer, and was living with diabetes. He had just been operated yet again for another problem. Sammy is an educator, a father of six, a truly good man, and a man of God. “God is good,” he said, seemingly a hundred times during our laps together. “He looks out for us; He has shaped the whole thing.” Prostate cancer, colon cancer, diabetes, another operation, God is good. God was still good when later that first post-operative day Sammy suddenly couldn’t eliminate fluids
and had to be catheterized. Of course God was still good. The words are intended merely as a pronouncement of healing.

My assurance to Sammy that he was going to be fine paled next to his spiritually founded assurances. “God doesn’t want me yet. Nor you. He wants you,” Sammy said, “to keep educating people.” And do you know, when he said those words, I believed him. I believed him not in the spirit of well, you have to have faith in something and I don’t see any rabbi with an enlarged prostate walking the corridor. I believed him as if a scientist had recited unalloyed scientific facts to me. Fact One: God doesn’t want you. Fact Two: Water is two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen.

Sammy grew tired and I walked him to his room where slowly, laboriously, he climbed on to his bed. He knew I was there watching him. “I will come to you later,” he whispered. “We’ll pray together.” Once again, I felt comforted. I wanted that praying together moment more than I wanted a sumptuous meal. I hoped he would remember his promise.

Americans, I have learned recently, pray a great deal. 77% of people pray outside of any religious service. Even people who don’t believe in God pray. They may even pray all the time. Inexact, the numbers coming from a national poll, it is strange to think that so many people call themselves spiritual, not necessarily religious.

Two thirds of the people in the poll said they pray because it makes them feel secure, comforted, hopeful. Whereas twenty one percent reported that they pray they might possess material things, seventy two percent pray for the well being of others. Fewer people, actually, are attending religious services now that they are caught up in a strangling recession, but still they pray. “Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families.”

The little I have read offers mixed reviews on the subject of whether praying for another actually makes a difference. Some research alleges that prayer is so powerful it even affects those who have no knowledge anyone is praying for them. Other research suggests that if you think it works then it works. And still other research cannot find a shred of evidence that prayer does anything other than gratify the person praying. I don’t know what to think. No, that’s not true; I do know one thing. I know my patient and Sammy prayed for me, believed in their prayers, and believed, moreover, that their prayers would help me, not just them. “I’ll pray for you, Doc,” and “I will come to your room and we will pray together,” I choose to believe, were proffered as gifts, pure, simple gifts, one human to another. There wasn’t a single shard of selfishness, I choose to believe, in either of these utterances.

Prayer, evidently, is about contemplation, philosophical, theological, personal. It is not about conversation. In some corners of the theological world, as for example, in the mysticism of the Kabbalah, reality itself is meant to be altered, restructured by prayer. And if the universe, the very fabric of creation, is to be repaired by prayer, then why not the single self.

It is written by philosophers and psychologists that identity, whatever is meant by that term, is the sine qua non of human nature. Our subjective experiencing of the world, our so-called experiential knowledge, our ability to genuinely understand our own selves, much less have
empathy for the selves of others, all are part of this identity business. Can we recognize our selves, psychologists ask, and is there some sub-set of experiences that makes us feel as though we are acting genuinely, or authentically?

Many people actually, are able to describe that event or moment when they truly felt they had become the person they were meant to be. As Karl Jaspers wrote, these must be moments when they have a stake in what is happening. It is not too different from the great drama that inevitably finds characters with huge stakes in the outcome of the plot. Perhaps it is in periods of illness, or recovery, when we beg—or is it pray?—to transform situations, transform reality when we are most likely to turn to prayer. Perhaps we feel we are losing something, something appears to be slipping away from us, and all that is left is to redefine reality or turn to some activity that convinces us that we still maintain ownership of the situation. Needless to say, our self, or more accurately our sense of self, always remains center stage.

In a sense, the self is little more than a theory, or a narrative, that we constantly construct out of our thoughts and feelings, if in fact we can even separate the these two activities. Ceaselessly, we look outside ourselves, often using people as mirrors as Jacques Lacan wrote, and inside ourselves to formulate this mutable theory that appears to come to us replete with all sorts of assessments and testable hypotheses. Seemingly, we cannot inhibit our urge to make sense of our worlds, and our selves. Rollo May postulated that the notion of repression refers to an inability or unwillingness to become aware of our self, containing as it does our authentic potentials. In a word, if the self represents a mediator between a person and the situation in which he is embedded, like an illness, then perhaps prayer is the method of communication for this mediation.

But prayer seems to require another soul. It evokes in us that sense of needing to speak to someone, or at least know that someone might hear our entreaties. We wonder, perhaps, whether we are even entitled to have our thoughts and feelings if someone is no longer present to hear them. It is often through prayer that we imagine that we can shape some small piece of our reality and thereby regain a sense of worth, competence, or agency. In some instances, and I believe I experienced this, the prayer reminds me that I am still alive; there is still hope upon which to draw life. Dear Someone: Please let my narrative continue. Please let me know that even in illness, I may remain somewhat recognizable. Dare I ask to be perceived as distinctive? Is anyone there?

We change, and the landscape changes, and rarely do we experience these changes more vividly than when we enter hospitals. Both our illness and the hospital setting encompass us. Here we are, precisely as Jaspers described, rooted in the world of illness and the treatment, a world that feels simultaneously surreal and infinitely practical. We reflect on it, we pray on it; we cannot deny the utterly real constituents of it. We are defined, in part, by our illness, by our healers, by technology, and by our abilities to draw from what Martha Nussbaum has called our narrative imaginations. Our personal stories, one might say, have taken unpredictable, albeit not wholly unfamiliar turns. We know these stories from others, and we perhaps have always dreaded the moment when these narratives would be about us.
Then suddenly, we are members of a new club, a new totality, a new historic unity dominated ironically, not by fellow members, but by ideas. If Jaspers remains a reasonable guide, we have entered the spiritual mode of encompassing; we have entered the realm of the transcendent wherein we exist as beings beyond all objectivity. As I say, it is not unfamiliar territory to us; through art, morality, religion, fantasy, we have been here before. What makes this moment unique is that it has been launched by illness and surgical invasion.

In turning my body over to the surgeon, an act occurring, moreover, during a protracted period of unconsciousness that I shall not remember, I am acknowledging what is labeled the boundary experience. I cannot affect this experience; I cannot influence it. I am left only to suffer, struggle, and pray. I can only make it lucid to myself. No matter the fright, no matter the dread, I feel required to keep my eyes wide open. Sometimes I may achieve transcendence through knowledge, sometimes, as the existentialists write, I can only hope to grasp it through my being, for it forever lies outside my sphere of influence. The meanings are something other than myself, more than mere expressions of myself, more than mere projections of myself. They push me toward meanings outside of myself, like the meaning of death.

But to give life meaning, I must transcend the limits of my physical life, which means my illness and its attendant treatment. I cannot allow myself to once again become the adolescent wondering whether he might live forever. I cannot let myself grapple with that question of whether I will still be, somehow, after life? Or can I? I must recognize, however, that in transcendence, arrived at in part through prayer, I may just have urged my self to reach the core of authentic resilience. I convince myself that I am back creating a trajectory for my life. I am back at work on the narrative that was interrupted by illness, and my fright. Choice and will have been part of my activity, and hence through prayer I feel a certain sense that the power of agency has returned. Or is it that I experience agency as never before?

Thrown into the realm of the spiritual, I pray. One way or another, as Robert Kegan has written, I must make meaning of my illness and treatment, or at least find some context where I imagine, or pray, that a meaning may emerge. When the shallow life doesn’t work, Abraham Maslow taught, there occurs a call to fundamentals. But these fundamentals refer to the experience of being. Said simply, fundamentals make us aware of our very being, if we dare to cease our need to constantly evaluate or criticize, and instead remain vulnerable to the world around us, and within us. Prayer, somehow, aids in this effort.

So now I wonder, do I require these experiences, must I grow ill, must I face death, or the dread of it, merely to encounter the transcendent, and hence my real self? William James was right: These sorts of prayerful contemplations demand supreme mental effort. It isn’t at all easy to insist that one’s mind attend and hold fast to the boundary situation. It isn’t easy to keep one’s eyes wide open. How ironic that in some mysterious manner, I feel obliged to close my eyes in prayer in order to achieve a state of mind that will allow me to reopen them. It has become evident that my praying is also a way of offering consent to a particular reality. It is the best I can do, apparently, in wishing to become heroic. Through prayer I imagine that I have launched myself in to what Carl Rogers called the stream of life. I have chosen not to surrender, but to become. Which in part means that I am not shaped even by seemingly implacable reality. Prayer,
I have convinced myself, is not merely a coping mechanism; it is a mode of being that protects me. It ignites resilience.

The self, Robert Nozick wrote, is in part constituted by its process of change. It is not simply influenced by the world; it changes and ignites changes and then appears to run itself according to these changes. In a word, it dwells in its own capacity to change. Nozick believed that we aim our selves at developing themselves. We long to have our deepest parts connect with, or at least resonate to what we imagine to be the highest things there are, thereby rendering us the highest things that we can be. This may very well be what we seek through prayer, realizing it is only the medium of prayer that will yield this prize. In fact, we may well be performing at the highest level, and hence feel in touch with our most authentic self precisely when we experience the resiliency of transcendence offered up by prayer. For it is in this act of prayer that we imagine we have reached the highest order of our narratives, and hence confronted the outline of the divine. How precious, therefore, the opportunity provided by adversity.

Sammy did remember. I stopped by his room, the light dim, the ambience antiseptic. He struggled to get out of bed disregarding my protestation. Near the door, he put his arm over my shoulder, held me close, and closed his eyes. I put my arm around his big back, feeling his skin through the opening in his hospital gown. I can’t remember, precisely, what he asked of his Lord, but clearly he was urging a power he so trusts to look out for a man he had met, what, three hours before. He was petitioning God, entreating God in my behalf. As he spoke, I wondered how I would react when, ineluctably, he would speak the name of his God. And then I stopped wondering and let his words, how I dread this phrase, flow into me. “I ask this for Tom in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We just stood there, the door to the corridor wide open, holding one another. I think I probably was praying, pitiful as it sounds, that his prayers, his acts of interceding, would make a difference. Probably I was praying that I needed his words to heal me as badly as I needed the skills and demonstration of care from the surgeon, residents, and nurses. Count me among the two thirds of the people in the poll who said they pray because it makes them feel secure, comforted, hopeful. Perhaps I should worship the God Sammy.

But now, as I end, I fear that it can be said that my words here contain clichés as jaded and empty as “Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families.” Still, I choose to believe, once again, that both Sammy and my patient clearly considered their prayers to be the most powerful acts they could perform in my behalf. Not because they were founded in religion, nor in ritualistic behavior that has been emulated for centuries, but because, in the same way that blood carries oxygen to the cells, prayers carry love to and from the soul. In fact, merely to open myself to my patient and Sammy was to give permission to entreat my own soul to be acknowledged, then nourished. And yes, I did notice that I commenced a sentence that prayer opens the soul with the words, “In fact.”

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