

Some Thoughts about Faith Healing

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The notion that prayer, divine intervention or the ministrations of an individual healer can cure illness has been popular throughout history. Miraculous recoveries have been attributed to a myriad of techniques commonly lumped together as "faith healing. During the past forty years, several investigators have studied this subject closely and written about their findings.

Louis Rose, a British psychiatrist, investigated hundreds of alleged faith-healing cures. As his interest became well known, he received communications from healers and patients throughout the world. He sent each correspondent a questionnaire and sought corroborating information from physicians. In *Faith Healing* [Penguin Books 1971], he concluded, "I have been unsuccessful. After nearly twenty years of work I have yet to find one 'miracle cure'; and without that (or, alternatively, massive statistics which others must provide) I cannot be convinced of the efficacy of what is commonly termed faith healing." [1]

Evangelistic "Healers"

During the early 1970s, Minnesota surgeon William Nolen, M.D., attended a service conducted by Katherine Kuhlman, the leading evangelical healer of that period. After noting the names of 25 people who had been "miraculously healed," he was able to perform follow-up interviews and examinations. Among other things, he discovered that one woman who had been announced as cured of "lung cancer" actually had Hodgkin's disease—which was unaffected by the experience. Another woman with cancer of the spine had discarded her brace and followed Ms. Kuhlman's enthusiastic command to run across the stage. The following day her backbone collapsed, and four months later she died. Overall, not one person with organic disease had been helped. Dr. Nolen reported his findings, which included observations of several other healers, in *Healing: A Doctor in Search of a Miracle*, a book that I heartily recommend [2].

C. Eugene Emery, Jr., a science writer for the *Providence Journal*, has looked closely at the work of Reverend Ralph DiOrio, a Roman Catholic priest whose healing services attract people by the thousands. In 1987 Emery attended one of DiOrio's services and recorded the names of nine people who had been blessed during the service and nine others who had been proclaimed cured. DiOrio's organization provided ten more cases that supposedly provided irrefutable proof of the priest's ability to cure. During a six-month investigation, Emery found no evidence that any of these 28 individuals had been helped [3].

The most comprehensive examination of contemporary "healers" is James Randi's *The Faith Healers* [4]. The book describes how many of the leading evangelistic healers have enriched themselves with the help of deception and fraud. Some of Randi's evidence came from former associates of the evangelists who got disgusted with what they had observed.

Randi's most noteworthy experience was the unmasking of Peter Popoff, an evangelist who would call out the names of people in the audience and describe their ailments. Popoff said he received this information from God, but it was actually obtained by confederates who mingled with the audience before each performance. Pertinent data would be given to Popoff's wife, who would broadcast it from backstage to a tiny receiver in Popoff's ear. After recording one of Mrs. Popoff's radio transmissions, Randi exposed the deception on the Johnny Carson Show. First he played a videotape showing Popoff interacting with someone in the audience. Then he replayed the tape with Mrs. Popoff's voice audible to illustrate how Popoff used the information.

Randi also exposed the techniques used by evangelist W.V. Grant, who calls out people in the audience by name and describes their ailments. Grant obtains this information from letters people send him and by

mingling with the audience before his show. To help his memory, he uses crib sheets and gets hand signals from associates who also use crib sheets. After one performance, Randi was able to retrieve a complete set from the trash Grant left behind! Following another performance, Randi found that some members of the audience had given false information about themselves, their ailments, and their medical care. For example, after "Dr. Jesus" had "put a new heart" into a man supposedly awaiting open-heart surgery, Randi found that the details (including the doctor and hospital named by Grant) could not be corroborated.

Grant's subjects typically are "slain in the spirit" and fall backward into the arms of his assistants. In 1986 I observed from a few feet away what happened when he encountered an elderly woman who did not wish to fall backward when he touched her forehead. Grant pushed his fingers into her neck so hard that she could not remain standing. I also watched him "lengthen" the leg of a man who limped up to the stage, supposedly because one of his legs was shorter than the other. The audience may have been impressed with this feat, but I was not. Before the show began, I noted that the man was one of Grant's assistants and walked normally.

Intercessory Prayer

In 1988, two investigators reported that their thorough search of the scientific literature had located only three controlled examinations of the effects of prayer by third parties on people who were unaware of the prayers [5]. Of these, one (the Byrd study described below) claimed benefit but was poorly designed, whereas the others found no benefit and were well designed [6,7]. Surprised by the small number of published studies, Witmer and Zimmerman asked 38 journal editors whether they had ever received but rejected a manuscript on the subject of intercessory prayer. They also asked the editors to ask their readers whether they knew of any such study, published or unpublished. No editor or reader responded affirmatively. Since that time four more studies have been published, two showing no benefit and two claiming a positive result.

The Byrd study, involving patients in the coronary care unit at San Francisco General Hospital, compared 192 patients who were prayed for by Christians located outside the hospital with 201 patients who served as controls [8]. The published report stated that the prayed-for group had fewer complications. However, the author's tabulation was not valid because he scored interrelated complications separately and therefore gave them too much weight. The average length of hospital stay, which was not subject to this type of scoring error, was identical for the treatment and control groups [5,9].

Another study examined what happened to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem in 406 patients who received intercessory prayer or no prayer. The prayer was offered for 15 minutes daily for 12 weeks. The researcher reported improvement in all of the subjects but found no differences between the prayer and no-prayer groups [10]. A study of the effects of intercessory prayer on 40 recovering alcoholics also found no benefit [11]. A 6-month study of 40 advanced AIDS patients exposed to 10 weeks of "distant healing" reported fewer new illnesses, physician visits, and hospitalizations in the "distant healing" group [12].

In 1999, the American Medical Association's *Archives of Internal Medicine* published a better-designed study of nearly a thousand consecutive patients who were newly admitted to the coronary care unit of a hospital in Kansas City. The researchers created a 35-item score sheet that was used to measure what happened to the patients during a 28-day period in which 15 groups of 5 persons ("intercessors") prayed individually for about half the patients. The intercessors were given the patients' first names and were asked to pray daily for "a speedy recovery with no complications." The prayed-for group had a 10-11% reduction in total scores even though their average length of hospital stay was similar to that of the "usual-care" group. The researchers also noted that: (a) some patients had asked hospital clergy to pray for them; (b) many, if not most patients in both groups were probably receiving intercessory and/or direct prayer from family, friends and/or clergy, so that the study was most likely measuring the effects of "supplementary intercessory prayer"; (c) although the difference would be expected to occur by chance alone only 1 in 25 times such an experiment were conducted, chance still remains a possible explanation of the results; and (d) using the scoring method of the San Francisco study yielded no significant difference between the two groups [13].

The researchers concluded that "the result suggests that prayer may be an effective adjunct to standard medical care" and that further studies should be done [13]. I disagree. The "10-11% reduction in the score sheet" may be statistically significant but is not clinically significant and probably occurred by chance.

In 2001, Mayo Clinic researchers have found no significant effect of intercessory prayer (prayer by one or more persons on behalf of another) on the medical outcomes of more than 750 patients who were followed for 6 months after discharge from in hospital coronary care unit. The patients were randomized within 24 hours of discharge into a prayed-for group and a control group. The prayer involved at least one session per week for 26 weeks by five randomly assigned individual or group intercessors [14].

Intercessory prayer studies accomplish nothing. "Believers" won't change their view if further studies are negative, and nonbelievers won't change theirs if additional studies appear positive. Prayer may help some people feel reassured when they are worried, but to me it makes more sense to spend one's time and energy on more constructive health-promoting activities. Although luck is still a significant factor, I think it is more sensible to believe that health is more likely to be influenced by prudent living than by magical thinking. Also, if praying for people worked, would strangers praying against them cause them to become sicker? Or, as one of my religious friends put it, "Is God is so stupid that he or she would respond to popularity contests?"

Fraudulent "Spiritual" Advice

Many "psychics" and "healers" offer to help with life's problems through the mail or by telephone. Some call themselves Sister, Madame, Reverend, Doctor, Father, Prophet, Madame Queen, Reverent Mother, or Reverend Sister. The purported benefits may include better luck, better health, and/or a financial benefit. Some of these individuals attempt to persuade respondents to send money repeatedly for their services. During the 1970s, for example, a "spiritual reader" who operating as "Mother McGown," "Mother Luther," and "Mother Alma" guaranteed help within three days for illnesses, loneliness, and other problems. All respondents to her ads received identical mimeographed letters stating: "I have received your letter and found out that I could help you. I have found that you have hoodoo [bad luck] in your home along with sickness and love life problems. As soon as you read this letter, call me immediately." Those who telephoned were told that their problems would be solved if they sent a specific sum of money, usually \$50 (but no personal checks). Follow-up letters would then ask for more money because the problem was worse than it was initially believed to be. The Postal Service took action in response to complaints from victims who had spent money but received no results. It turned out that the perpetrator belonged to a gypsy clan whose female members operated under various names in many states. The scheme was ended when one of them was prosecuted by the Postal Service and sentenced to three years' probation by a federal judge in Austin, Texas.

Is Anyone Helped?

Is there any evidence that faith healing works? The first step in approaching this question is to specify what should be considered proof that an ailment has been healed by a supernatural method. In my opinion, three criteria must be met: (1) the ailment must be one that normally doesn't recover without treatment; (2) there must not have been any medical treatment that would be expected to influence the ailment; and (3) both diagnosis and recovery must be demonstrable by detailed medical evidence.

If I wanted to demonstrate that I had an effective new treatment method, I would take pains to document the basis for my belief. For example, if I thought I could cure cancer with prayer, I would begin by making certain that patients I worked on actually had cancer. I would obtain their records, talk with their doctors, and have independent physicians examine them to determine their current status. After administering my treatment, I would conduct careful, long-range follow-up studies and report the outcome in detail.

Has any "faith healer" ever sent for the medical records of a client? Or had a client examined by a doctor before and after healing is administered? Or inquired about a client's health months or years after the healing? Or even kept statistics to indicate what percentage of people with various ailments appear to have been helped? Or compiled data that an independent investigator could verify? As far as I know, no healer

has ever done any of these things. On the other hand, many cases have been documented in which people with serious disease have died as a result of abandoning effective medical care after being "healed."

Thus, as far as I am concerned, there is no reason to believe that faith healing has ever cured anyone of an organic disease. What about functional ailments—in which the symptoms are bodily reactions to tension? Some people who visit "healers" may feel better because the experience causes them to relax or because of a placebo effect. But any benefit of this type should be weighed against the fact that people who are not relieved may conclude that they are "unworthy" and become depressed as a result. Money spent for a fruitless experience with a healer is another negative factor.

Christian Science

A number of religious sects favor prayer over medical care. Christian Science is probably the best known of these groups and is the only form of faith healing that is deductible as a medical expense for federal income tax purposes. Christian Science contends that illness is an illusion caused by faulty beliefs, and that prayer heals by replacing bad thoughts with good ones. Christian Science practitioners work by trying to argue the sick thoughts out of the person's mind. Consultations can take place in person, by telephone, or even by mail. Individuals may also be able to attain correct beliefs by themselves through prayer or mental concentration. "You can Heal," a pamphlet of the Christian Science Publishing Society, states that "every student of Christian Science has the God-given ability to heal the sick." Two weeks of class instruction are required to become a practitioner.

The weekly magazine *Christian Science Sentinel* publishes several "testimonies" in each issue. To be considered for publication, an account must be "verified" by three individuals who "can vouch for the integrity of the testifier or know of the healing." During the past few years, believers have claimed that prayer has brought about recovery from anemia, arthritis, blood poisoning, corns, deafness, defective speech, multiple sclerosis, skin rashes, total body paralysis, visual difficulties, and various injuries. Most of these accounts contain little detail, and many of the diagnoses were made without medical consultation.

As far as I know, no systematic, medically supervised study of the outcome of Christian Science healing has ever been performed. However, a recent study suggests that devout Christian Scientists, who rarely consult doctors, pay a high price for avoiding medical care. The study was performed by William F. Simpson, Ph.D., an assistant professor of mathematics and computer science at Emporia State University. Dr. Simpson compared alumni records from Principia College, a Christian Science school in Elsah, Illinois, with records from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, and published his findings in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Even though Christian Science tenets forbid the use of alcohol and tobacco, the death rates among those who had graduated from Principia between 1934 and 1948 were higher than those of their University of Kansas counterparts—26.2% vs. 20.9% in men, and 11.3% vs. 9.9% in women [15]. A subsequent study comparing the mortality of Christian Scientists and Seventh-day Adventists (who also are admonished to abstain from cigarettes and alcohol) found even greater differences [16].

Rita and Douglas Swan, whose 16-month-old son Matthew died of meningitis under the care of two Christian Science practitioners in 1977, are not surprised by these statistics. Angered by their experience, she founded [CHILD, Inc.](#), to work for legal reforms that can protect children from inappropriate treatment by faith healers. She and a colleague collected and reviewed the cases of 172 children who died between 1975 and 1995 when parents withheld medical care because of reliance on religious rituals. They concluded

- 140 of the deaths were from medical conditions for which survival rates with medical care would have exceeded 90%. These included 22 cases of pneumonia in infants under two years of age, 15 cases of meningitis, and 12 cases of insulin-dependent diabetes.
- 18 more had expected survival rates greater than 50%
- All but three of the remainder would probably have had some benefit from clinical help. [17]

Participation and membership in the Christian Science Church have been declining steadily for many years. Between 1971 and 2009 the number of U.S. practitioners and teachers listed in the Christian Science

Journal fell from about 5,000 to about 1,160

and the number of churches fell from about 1,800 to about 900. Subscriptions to the Christian Science Sentinel fell from about 175,000 in 1988 to 24,130 in 2009. The church does not disclose how many members it has, but the current subscription figure suggests there are fewer than 50,000 members worldwide [18]. The steady membership decline is not surprising because the church's doctrines have little appeal to modern youth.

Is Spirituality Helpful?

A 1996 poll of 1,000 adults found that 79% believed that spiritual faith can help people recover from disease [19]. This idea is also popular among physicians. Although many studies have found associations between various measures of religiosity and health, no well-designed study has demonstrated that religious beliefs or prayer actually benefit health [2-]. In fact, one well-designed study found just the opposite. The study involved patients whose progress was followed for nine months after discharge from a British hospital. They evaluated the outpatient records and the responses of 189 patients to questionnaires. The researchers concluded that the health status of patients with stronger spiritual beliefs were more than twice as likely to be unimproved or worse [21]. Although some studies have found that churchgoers tend to be healthier and to live longer than nonchurchgoers, church attendance itself is unlikely to be responsible for the difference [22].

Recommendations

Can anything be done about faith healing? Believers don't see it as a problem, while most nonbelievers don't see it as a priority issue and have little sympathy for its victims. But a few things might help lower faith healing's toll on our society:

- Laws to protect children from medical neglect in the name of healing should be passed and enforced. In states that allow religious exemptions from medical neglect, these exemptions should be revoked. Maybe the practice of faith healing on minors should be illegal.
- Faith healing should no longer be deductible as a medical expense.
- Reporters should be encouraged to do follow-up studies of people acclaimed to have been "healed."
- "Healers" who use trickery to raise large sums of money should be prosecuted for grand larceny.

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