

## PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL HEALING

*If thou shouldst never see my face again,  
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of.*

Alfred Tennyson

Our previous examples of modern experiential spirituality have put forward its importance for the advancement of personal or social healing. It is within this context that spiritual healing finds its place. Even though this may surprise us at first, the reader will find here much of what has emerged earlier. In addition we will find a link to what we have explored in the earlier chapters of the book that concern spirituality proper.

Prayer has been defined in countless ways throughout the centuries, according to a variety of types and methods. Nevertheless, a constant element of prayer is the belief that when we ask something of God, a Higher Power, or the spiritual world, we can receive an answer that will manifest in the physical world. Agnes Sanford, a pioneer in the field of whom more will be said later, believed that we should proceed into the realm of prayer as we do in the realm of science. What can appear as a miracle—and therefore as something that we cannot find an explanation for—is the result of higher laws that operate beyond the physical realm but ultimately manifest in our world. Amazingly, she indicates that the healing of the body is one of the simplest and most direct ways to test what prayer is.<sup>1</sup>

### **Prayer and Healing: Scientific Evidence**

Placing prayer and healing side-by-side may raise some eyebrows, especially in scientific quarters; but to those who pray, the association of these concepts is familiar. Let us have a look, from a scientific perspective, at a growing host of phenomena that have already caused many scientists to enlarge their worldviews. We will need to turn to churches and hospitals, doctors, healers, and priests to start formulating an answer.

In England, the US, Canada, and many Eastern European countries, there is a movement of cooperation between traditional medicine and spiritual or energy healing. In 1994, at least three general-practice surgeries in England had spiritual healers paid by the government under the National Health Plan. It was estimated that about 1,500 healers worked at one point or another in British hospitals.<sup>2</sup> In Canada and the US there have been about 30,000 nurses using therapeutic touch in hospitals and clinics. The founder of this therapeutic technique is Dolores Krieger, who taught nursing at New York University. A close equivalent, bio-energy therapy, was officially accepted by Polish authorities in 1982. The same can be said about Qigong, based upon the healing effects of certain hand motions: waving, pushing, pulling, and circling, which are done at a short distance from the patient's body.

Since right after World War II, churches—particularly Anglican and Roman Catholic churches—have revived an ancient form of healing, the one that tradition knows of as the “laying on of hands.” All of this is done without any sensationalism, and is also practiced more and more throughout England, Canada, and the US. The trend, however, is not limited to Christian denominations. In the US particularly, a word of caution is

necessary regarding television healers. We do not place them on the same level, even if some of them may have genuine healing powers. Many hoaxes have been discovered that cast a serious shadow of doubt over most of the movement; spiritual gifts do not mix well with media sensationalism and the temptation for quick profit.

It is a well-kept secret that scientific research in the field of energy healing has a respectable past and a sizeable accumulation of data and observations. Dr. Larry Dossey has retrieved about one hundred scientifically sound experiments on the topic. Half of them show evidence of prayer's influence in human life. If we look at the total of experiments with humans and other living beings, there have been more than three hundred such studies since the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> We will look at them more closely, but first let us consider some phenomena and scientific observations.

Scientists have a host of terminologies that conceal evidence rather than elucidate it; one of these consists of the cases of spontaneous regressions—unexplained instances of healing. The fact that their occurrence is limited makes many in the field see the dismissal of these cases justifiable in light of the dictum, “The exception justifies the rule,” in itself a very questionable scientific tenet. Another term that covers up more than it possibly explains reality is the *placebo effect*—instances of health improvement when patients are given a neutral substance under the claim that it is an effective medication. It could be argued that the placebo effect proves that mind or spirit has an effect that often goes beyond what matter alone can achieve. In this sense, a placebo is a repository term not dissimilar from spontaneous regression. None of the above dismissals are possible from a phenomenological approach. Disease is what informs us about that indefinable thing that we call health. Aberrations tell us about “normality.” No phenomenon enters the statistical perspective in this view of things. Spontaneous regression or placebo effects are not unexplainable anomalies; rather they are phenomena in which higher laws are at work in matters of health.

Yujiro Ikemi, at the Kyushu University School of Medicine in Fukuoka, Japan, conducted rigorous studies on five cases of spontaneous regressions from cancer, including confirmation by biopsy of the illness.<sup>4</sup> In these cases, regression does not necessarily mean complete disappearance, but rather, at whatever stage the disease may be present, it has ceased to have an effect on the patient's health.

The first individual was a practitioner of Shinto. At the age of twenty-one, he was appointed a teacher. At age sixty-four, he was diagnosed with cancer of the right upper jaw. He was totally accepting of God's will and showed no tendency towards depression. He did not fight against the cancer other than with the moral support given him by leaders in his church. He lived for the next thirteen years without any form of medical treatment and died at age seventy-eight from a trauma to his back.

A second patient was diagnosed with adenocarcinoma at age seventy-seven. He declined surgery and accepted the will of God. Four years later the cancer had regressed. A Japanese housewife married a difficult husband at age twenty-four. In 1966, at age thirty-one, she was diagnosed with adenocarcinoma with numerous metastases. Two-thirds of her stomach was removed and she was given three months to live. She was strong in her religious faith, and nine years later x-rays showed no sign of the previous metastases.

The other two stories are essentially the same as the ones described here. A certain pattern emerges from all of the patients: They all accepted responsibility for their

illnesses and life crises, and no anxiety or depression followed their diagnoses. All of them had deep faith and gave themselves to the will of God.

The above examples—although eloquent in themselves—cannot be qualified as true experiments in the most classical use of the term. Let us move further, to more laboratory-defined experiments on the power of prayer, spiritual healing, and ultimately the power of the mind over matter—or over deterministically defined events. These next experiments involve human beings. Unfortunately, and quite understandably, these are the most difficult ones to achieve in an experimental setting. Experiments conducted by Dr. Randolph Byrd, a practicing Christian, have been highly publicized.<sup>5</sup> He conducted the double-blind experiments at San Francisco General Hospital with a group of 192 patients who were prayed for by prayer groups, and a control group of 201 who were left to medical cures alone. The people in the prayer groups were told the first names of the patients with a short description of their diagnosis. The results indicated that the prayed-for patients:

- Were five times less likely to require antibiotics
- Were three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema
- Did not require endotracheal intubation, whereas twelve in the other group did.

Overall, this seems to amount to a strengthening of the immune system. There was, however, no significant difference in mortality. Part of this conclusion—quite understandably—comes from the fact that doctors could not give equal treatment to the patients; thus, for example, those patients whose immune systems were most affected probably received more antibiotics and treatments to help speed up the recovery. The studies had many problems built into them that render them inconclusive.

Dr. Seán O’Laoire, a Roman Catholic priest, headed a research project on intercessory prayer through the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California.<sup>6</sup> It was a controlled, randomized, double-blind experiment to test mood, self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and other indicators of psychological health, through tests such as the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and the Beck Depression Inventory. There were 147 subjects in a control group, and 259 subjects who were prayed for. Ninety individuals who did the praying received photos and names of the participants, and were to pray for them fifteen minutes each day for twelve weeks. They recorded in detail their prayer in a diary. All of the participants were tested before the beginning of the experiment and at the end of it. The tests showed marked improvements, possibly attributable to prayer in all domains examined.

Let us quote an experiment that refers more specifically to spiritual healing. Dr. Daniel Worth, of Healing Sciences International, Orinda, California, conducted double-blind experiments on the ability of a healer to cauterize a standard inflicted wound. The individuals to be healed were kept unaware of the presence of a healer. The participants were given 8 mm-wide, skin-deep wounds on the forearm. Unknown to them, some of them were treated by a healer, Laurie Eden, whom they could not see; the other participants were left untreated. After sixteen days, the wounds of thirteen treated people were entirely healed. None of the control group had healed yet.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Dossey and various researchers have been interested in comparing directed versus nondirected prayer. It is easy to understand the meaning of directed prayer—what we may call an outcome-oriented form of request. Nondirected prayer might ask for something like “what is in the best interest of” a person or object prayed for. This is a vast topic. Nevertheless, we will be able to draw some conclusions from the data. Let us place different sets of experiments side by side.

The Spindrift Organization of Salem, Oregon, has performed a variety of experiments with prayer.<sup>8</sup> One of their studies indicates that nondirected techniques appear quantitatively more effective, often resulting in twice as effective results. Their experiments were conducted on mold cultivated on agar plates. Part of the mold was stressed with alcohol rinse. Directed prayer had little result on it, whereas undirected prayer allowed the mold to resume its growth and multiply again. The same was confirmed in a test in which batches of seeds were either under-soaked or over-soaked. Participants did not know which ones they were praying for.

Drs. Jeanne Achterberg and Mark S. Rider studied the ability of their subjects to affect two types of white cells that play an important role in the immune system: neutrophils and lymphocytes.<sup>9</sup> Thirty subjects were randomly assigned to study and visualize one and only one type of cell, including images of the shape, location, and patterns of movement, for six weeks. Each group was able to affect specifically its own kind of cell and not the other.

This general trend is further confirmed by experiments done at the University of Arkansas College of Medicine, which showed that a woman age thirty-nine was able to change her skin test for chicken pox from positive to negative and vice versa at will, by using highly specific and precise visualization.<sup>10</sup> This may indicate that directed prayer has to work hand in hand with specific visual imagery, and depends on the vividness and strength of such imagery. In more than one way, this approach allies faith with scientific insight. What science seems to indicate in the experimental setting is also the conclusion of spiritual healer Spyros Sathi. He distinguishes between psychic healers, in which the healer transfers his own vitality in an undistinguished fashion—and without deeper knowledge and spiritual perception—into the body of the patient, and spiritual healers, who work with full knowledge and perception of the physical and energetic levels of reality. The spiritual healer can therefore help in more specific ways—and in more numerous instances—than the psychic healer.<sup>11</sup>

Without doubt, the most convincing experiments on healing were performed on animals or lower forms of life. Bernard Grad of McGill University has worked for at least three decades on experiments with healing.<sup>12</sup> He is a convinced experimentalist, led into this work by a number of experiences he had in his youth and a key encounter with healer Oskar Estebany. The Hungarian practitioner could detect disease in the body because of the changes in perception in his hands, such as a prickling sensation in his fingers, burning or cold, or vibrations moving down from the arms to the hands. Grad had to work as a pioneer in the field and first of all establish experimental protocols, such as experimental settings and the optimal length and rhythm of exposure to healing. In all the experiments, Estebany did not touch the animals or plants. There was no chance of physical and/or chemical interaction, and the animals and plants were of a homogeneous age and similar genetic strain.

Let us look at the experiments with animals first. Two groups of mice were wounded in a standard way, by removing a piece of skin from their backs under anesthesia. The group whose cages Estebany held for fifteen minutes, twice a day, healed significantly faster. The same was true in the case of mice that had been given an iodine-deprived diet. In these conditions their thyroid glands tended to swell. Those under Estebany's influence showed much less swelling. Dr. Grad's experiments on wounded mice were replicated by Remi J. Cadoret and G. I. Paul of Manitoba University, and by Estebany himself, in strictly double-blind conditions, yielding consistent results. Dr. Grad went on to study the ability of Estebany to heal barley seeds that had been stressed by a 1% saline solution. Estebany could achieve this by holding the container of the saline solution for fifteen minutes.

For experimental purposes, lower forms of life offer the most precise and controlled settings. Sixty university volunteers, not chosen on the basis of their healing abilities, were asked to induce the bacteria strains of *E. coli*, which are normally unable to assimilate lactose sugar, to do so by mutating. The students were asked to induce decreased or increased mutations. The results showed the desired effects when compared with the control batches.<sup>13</sup>

Experiments on blood were performed by Dr. Braud of the Mind Science Foundation of San Antonio, Texas. Thirty-two subjects were asked to keep red blood cells from dissolving when diluted and placed in test tubes in a distant room. Half of them were given their own blood, half blood from the others, but none of them knew which one they were assigned. They worked in two sessions of fifteen minutes. The technicians analyzing the results were also blinded to the conditions of the experiment. The subjects were able to protect the red cells from dissolving and bursting to a degree that cannot be explained by sheer chance. The source of the blood had no influence on the results, although the individual skills varied to a meaningful extent. There was a significant degree of use of visualization in the experiments, although it was not a definite and exclusive criterion.<sup>14</sup>

No form of life is beyond reach of the power of mind. In fact its power seems to reach even into the realm of technology. Research was conducted at Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) on a machine generating random physical events (a random event generator, or REG).<sup>15</sup> Experiments determined that individuals could influence the output toward particular patterns. The most successful were deeply

bonded couples. Experimenters asked individuals to influence the output of the REG before and after it was run. Readings were taken after the generation of events or after the prayer was performed (in case of delayed influences). It was surprising to realize that in both cases the effects were identical to those occurring simultaneously.

Similar results were obtained by physicist Helmut Schmidt. In the latter's experiment, psychologist Hans Eysenk and researcher Carl Sargent estimated the chance of results being due to coincidence at one out of several million. Roger D. Nelson analyzed the results of more than eight hundred studies with REGs and published them in *Foundations of Physics*, confirming all the previous conclusions.

Let us look at some other aspects of this new kind of energy at work in the realm of healing and prayer before we turn once again to characterize it. We have offered the example of how the mind can influence the metabolism of common strains of bacteria and is able to induce reverse mutations whose natural occurrences are infinitely low. If consciousness can provoke changes in the genetic map of *E. coli* bacteria, then genes do not have the absolute power that conventional science and popular belief confer upon them. Reverse mutations have now been studied over time; these are mutations that go from abnormal to normal—that is to say, mutations that take a route of reversed entropy and statistically defy all odds. Such mutations have also been known to occur in patients with myotonic dystrophy, a common form of muscular dystrophy in which muscle wasting affects the face, neck, hands, forearms, and feet.

Let us look at another unusual feature of this bio-energy. In the earlier quoted experiments on mice by Dr. Grad and Oskar Estebany, a “linger effect” was noticed; the side of the table where mice were given energy healing had a residual healing effect on other mice that were later placed there—and not the other side of the table.

Researcher William G. Braud has tried to envision scenarios that would explain the nature of this energy that does not decrease with distance.<sup>16</sup> Only ELF (extremely low frequency) magnetic radiation would act similarly and cause little attenuation with distance, but these waves do not display time-displaced effects, since they carry only a limited amount of information. “In order to encompass the observed effects, a substantially more fundamental level of theoretical model will need to be displayed...” says Dr. Candace Pert of Rutgers University, a leading authority on brain biochemistry, who believes we are dealing with a kind of energy that is as yet unknown, something that somehow belongs to the realm of spirit and soul.

From whichever angle we look at the phenomena, we are returning to what we have defined as etheric energy, an energy that follows laws that are different and yet complementary to the physical. *Etheric energy* is the term coined by Rudolf Steiner to refer to an energy that acts contrary to all the laws of gravity, the energy that works against entropy, the law of dissipation of energy. It is therefore the energy that sustains all living organisms. One way to characterize it—among many—is to call it *levity*. In the plant that is bound to gravity by physics, chemistry, and physiology, levity is the force that pushes the plant upward against all physical laws. In effect, as Dr. Pert intuited, we have to do with the first rung of the world of soul and spirit; therefore, the laws that we are acquainted with do not belong to the physical world anymore. We can even say that our normal way of thinking cannot apprehend this realm of existence.

If this is a new kind of energy not encompassed by any of the concepts we actually hold in the realm of matter and physical energy, the next obvious question is:



“What kind of scientific protocols can allow us to investigate this new field?” This is a field in which the subject and object of inquiry mutually influence each other, thereby breaking one of the basic tenets of modern science—the criteria of objectivity and reproducibility of every given experiment.

Much published evidence suggests that a physician’s beliefs influence the results of the experiments. The double blind allows us to limit the effects of consciousness over matter—not eliminate them. J. Solfvin concludes, “As a general rule, the double-blind cannot any longer be assumed to guarantee the exclusion of the non-specific effects of the treatment, especially when the actual treatment has a weak or variable effect.” However, double-blind experiments are not useless. “The greatest value of double-blinds may lie, however, in their limitations, which reveal something marvelous about us—that there is some aspect of the human psyche capable of shaping events in our world.”<sup>17</sup>

Consciousness is another imponderable element in all and any of the most elaborate experiments. The same healer can succeed in many experiments and then fail in a following one. Obviously, even the best of healers can have a bad day. Finally, it is next to impossible to replicate experiments given the enormous amount of variables when we deal with human consciousness. Dossey concludes: “Although science has much to say about prayer, it raises more questions than it answers. The mysteries of prayer not only remain, they deepen.” There is, however, a new kind of science that resorts to what we call image-based techniques that give a global evaluation of the results sought.

Let us look at another modern-day scientist employing such an image-based technique to study the overall effects of prayer. For years, Masaru Emoto has been studying water quality by looking at the way water forms crystals when frozen. Photos of water crystals have to be taken at a very high speed, requiring specific freezer temperatures, microscopic observation magnifications, lighting, and lens irises. The crystals are never the same from one day to another. No single crystal organization ever returns. The only element that distinguishes water crystals is the overall hexagonal form that most of us have seen in pictures. The crystals differ in their specific form, definition, proportion, kind of branching, and prominence of the center in a way that gives us an overall indication of the quality of the water. Pristine water from nonpolluted sources crystallizes in clear, recognizable patterns. Polluted water crystallizes very poorly (only partially), or cannot crystallize at all. Treated water may have all the officially required chemical properties and still not be able to crystallize. This indicates that there is more to quality than chemistry.

Emoto has conducted an experiment with water quality before and after prayer.<sup>18</sup> To that purpose he has analyzed the water at the Fujiwara Dam in Minakami-cho. The water in its natural condition does not show the least ability to form a crystal structure. The Reverend Kato, chief priest of the Jyuhouin Temple of Omiya City, was asked to pray for the water for an hour next to the dam. To the surprise of the scientists, the water crystals that resulted were as complete and beautiful as any of the more remarkable pictures obtained in ideal conditions.

The experiment was repeated in a more polluted body of water, Lake Biwa.<sup>19</sup> On the morning of July 25, 1999, there were 350 people offering their prayers, facing Lake Biwa. Here, too, pictures of water crystals before and after prayer show striking contrasts similar to the ones in the previous example. The algae that covers the lake yearly was drastically reduced that year, as the press reported. The effect of this experiment was

protracted in time. However, by August 2000 the bad odor indicating pollution had returned.

We can conclude the exploration of prayer and healing with Dossey's apt words:

The recognition of a soul-like quality of consciousness—by science on the one hand and by religion on the other—will constitute a bridge between these two domains. This point of contact will help heal the bitter divisions between these two camps. No longer will people feel compelled to choose between them in ordering their lives. At long last science and religion will stand side by side in a complementary way, neither attempting to usurp the other.

Let us now look at how prayer and the capacity for healing have developed in a particularly gifted individual who was a pioneer in this field.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) *The Healing Light*, Agnes Sanford, 1947, Ballantine Books, New York. p. 9.
- 2) *The Uncommon Touch: An Investigation of Spiritual Healing*, Tom Harpur, 1994, McClelland and Stewart Inc., Toronto, Canada, p. 119.
- 3) *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, Larry Dossey, 1993, Harper San Francisco, pp. xv and 201.
- 4) *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31 and Appendix 1, pp. 237-41.
- 5) *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.
- 6) *Ibid.*, pp. 191-2.
- 7) *The Uncommon Touch: An Investigation of Spiritual Healing*, opus quoted, Appendix 2.
- 8) *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, opus quoted, pp. 97-99.



9) Ibid., pp. 105-6.

10) Ibid., p. 106.

11) *The Magus of Strovolos, The Extraordinary World of a Spiritual Healer*, Kiriacos C. Markides, 1985, Penguin Arkana, Penguin Co., p. 213. Spiros Sathi indicates that the spiritual healer also takes the karma of the patient upon himself and suffers – at least partly – from the symptoms of the patient’s disease. Healing someone else can be done only when the person’s karma has been mostly “paid off” and the healer is willing to bear the rest. Christ can relieve the healer of the full obligation.

12) *The Uncommon Touch: An Investigation of Spiritual Healing*, opus quoted, pp. 108-112, and *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, opus quoted, pp.192-194.

13) *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, opus quoted, p. 190.

14) Ibid., p. 179.

15) Ibid., pp. 113-121.

16) Ibid., p. 198-199.

17) Ibid., pp. 136-7.

18) *Messages from Water*, Vol. 1, Masaru Emoto, 1999, Hado Kyoikusha Co, Ltd, Japan, pp. 135-137.

19) *Messages from Water*, Vol. 2, Masaru Emoto, 2002, Hado Kyoikusha Co, Ltd, Japan,  
pp. 119-125.