

## Unconscious Prayer and Psychotherapeutic Healing



I have been trying to figure out how psychotherapy works (or doesn't work) for a long time. I have also been very interested in matters of the spirit for a long time. I guess it could be said that my writing this article was only a matter of (long?) time.

I have long been intrigued by the notion of invisible forces. In the physical domain electromagnetic radiation, or even just electrical current flowing through a copper wire, fascinates me. My father was an electrical engineer who gave me my first Lionel train when I was 3, so I had plenty of support for my interest and curiosity about such matters. My mother, on the other hand, has always been an enthusiastic spiritual seeker, so she modeled and supported my interest in unseen psychological and spiritual forces, such as prayer and love. The combined impact of genetic and environmental influences of having these two parents has certainly made for an interesting life.

In graduate school, a quarter of a century ago, my favorite postulate (which I believe was my own creation, as much as anything ever is) was the following: It is impossible to hate anyone whom one knows deeply, and it is probably impossible to refrain from loving such a person.

This postulate came immediately to mind when I read *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* by Barry and Ann Ulanov (1989), and seemed to go hand-in-glove with what they postulate about the nature of prayer:

Everybody prays. People pray whether or not they call it prayer. We pray every time we ask for help, understanding, or strength, in or out of religion. Then, who and what we are speak out of us whether we know it or not. Our movements, our stillness, the expressions on our faces, our tone of voice, our actions, what we dream and daydream, as well as what we actually put into words say who and what we are.

To pray is to listen to and hear the self who is speaking. This speech is primary because it is basic and fundamental, our ground. In prayer we say who in fact we are—not who we should be, nor who we wish we were, but who we are. All prayer begins with this confession.

If my graduate school theory and the Ulanovs' concepts about prayer are added to the recently emerging scientific research pertaining to prayer, it appears that the result may be a new way of understanding how psychotherapy heals.

Recent scientific research pertaining to prayer (summarized in Dossey, 1990) indicates that (1) prayer works (i.e., it influences the health of people and other living organisms), (2) its effect is not a function of the distance between the person doing the praying and the object of the prayer (this finding seems to be predictable from all the previous parapsychology research showing that the inverse square law, which predicts the diminished intensity of radiated physical energy as a function of the distance from the source, does not apply to psychic transmissions), (3) the amount of time spent in prayer directly influences the effectiveness of the prayer, (4) more-experienced persons who pray have a greater impact than less-experienced persons who pray, (5) how well the person praying knows the object of the prayer directly influences the power of the prayer, and (6) nondirective prayer is far more effective than directive prayer.

The last four findings are the ones which seem to have the greatest implications for how psychotherapy heals. I will refer to them by their numbers (3 through 6).

With regard to finding that nondirective prayer is more effective than directive prayer (#6), some clarification is in order. Nondirective prayer is prayer in which one simply holds lovingly (or prayerfully) the object of prayer in one's consciousness without specifically wishing or asking for a particular effect other than its highest good. (Kenneth Wapnick, in a personal communication, points out that the concept of "joining," as presented in *A Course in Miracles*, fits very nicely with the notion of nondirective prayer. According to *A Course in Miracles*, it is through the joining with others that one is able to undo the belief that one is separate from God.) One does not pray that a cancer be cured, a marriage survive, or that financial prosperity be attained. Rather, one attempts to adopt the attitude of "thy will be done," rather than "my will be done," with the only specification being that the highest good be realized for the object of the prayer. (Gerald May, in a personal communication, suggests that the Judeo-Christian evolution of prayer has been from the very directive prayer of the Psalms and prophets to the very nondirective prayer of the mystics, who came to understand prayer as an attempt to tune into God's own prayer.) Hence, nondirective prayer can be seen as essentially an overtly spiritual version of client-centered therapy.

What appears to follow from the aforementioned postulates and research findings is the possibility that psychotherapy at its most fundamental level allows the client to be known better—by himself, by the therapist, by other clients (in group, couple, or family therapy), and perhaps by God. The interpersonal processes of disclosure, confrontation, and affirmation are simply the ways in which this knowing is stimulated. If my graduate school postulate is true, then this knowing will certainly lead to an accepting (i.e., without hate) attitude, and will probably lead to a loving attitude. If this is the case, then in some way a form of spontaneous prayer may be engendered. To the extent that the therapeutic model is a nondirective one, this praying will maximize its impact (#6). If the persons involved are highly experienced (i.e., the clinician has been in practice a long time or the other members have been in the therapy group a long time), all the better (#4). The finding that the amount of time spent in prayer correlates

