

Healing Power

Sermon by Toni Maddi

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In January, after my last sermon, as I was stepping down from the pulpit after the second service, my brain said to me: Give a sermon on prayer. This sudden announcement from out of the blue surprised me because I had hardly finished the other sermon. I would have liked a break in between. Not to mention the idea of giving a sermon on prayer to a UU congregation was daunting if not downright scary. But when something hits me that forcefully, I typically listen. That was in January. In March, a UU friend asked me to pray for his mother. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to say, "Pray? I don't *pray*.", so instead I said I would. Which meant I had to come up with something. Since I don't have a traditional belief in God, preferring to unite with All That Is or the Divine when I meditate, I would visualize my friend's mother as healthy, whole and happy while I was in a meditative state. In May, I read the book, *Meetings with the Archangel*. The passage Warren read from it today refined my morning spiritual practice, or *prayers*, when I first read it.

But I decided to call my sermon topic "healing power" rather than "prayer" so that I wasn't in here alone this morning, feeling others in the congregation might have the same reaction to the word "prayer" that I had.

And calling it "Healing Power" opened the door for me to look at three aspects of healing: spiritual healers, mind-body medicine, or healing oneself, and nonlocal healing, which is also called intercessory prayer.

In the beginning, there were mediators who communicated with the whimsical gods and interceded for the people of their tribes on serious matters: the weather, the success of the hunt, conflicts with other tribes and, of course, illnesses of all sorts.

These priests, shamans, witch doctors and medicine men had a two-fold job: negotiation with the supernatural and healing. The separation of those two roles is new. Until quite recently in Western culture, the spiritual priest and the medical healer were one.

The split was final around the mid-nineteenth century. Before that time, roughly in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Newtonian physics ruled. We saw ourselves as solid objects and the Universe was made up of building blocks called atoms. These Newtonian atoms were seen as composed of solid objects—electrons revolving around a nucleus, just as the planets revolve around the sun. Physicists then believed the entire universe was a huge mechanical system running according to the Newtonian laws of motion¹.

Medicine at this time was not pretty. In fact, exposing yourself to medical care either meant undergoing an ineffective procedure or one that was harmful, such as leeching, purging or blood-letting. In the mid-nineteenth century, physicians got a bad case of physics-envy². They wanted to have the precision and predictability that exemplified Newtonian physics. This physics-envy opened the door to mechanical medicine. The body was seen as a complex mechanism

that was best treated with mechanical interventions: medications, surgery, irradiation and so on.

Then, *new* physical phenomena were discovered that Newtonian physics couldn't explain. The discovery and investigation of electromagnetic phenomena led to the concept of a *field* and the concept of a universe filled with fields that create forces that interact. This framework begins to explain our ability to pick up the phone and know who it is before any words are spoken and reports of people who knew when a loved one was in trouble, no matter where they were. In the last 15-20 years, most of us have started using these concepts to describe our interactions with others. We're still a century or so behind the physicists³.

In 1905, Albert Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity shattered all the main concepts of the Newtonian view. Very simplistically, the theory states that space is not three-dimensional and time is not a separate entity. That's not all: there is no flow of time—time is not linear nor absolute— it is relative. But time and space are so integral to our descriptions of events and ourselves, that changing the way we describe things means modifying the entire framework that we use to think about nature and ourselves. Most of us haven't yet integrated this into our personal lives.

Although the mechanical model still dominates the practice of Western medicine, the 1950s brought the advent of psychosomatic medicine, which is now called mind-body medicine. Emotions and thoughts can influence the body, sometimes in dramatic ways. Our programming sets up our beliefs and the chain begins.

1. Programming creates beliefs
2. Beliefs create attitudes.
3. Attitudes create feelings.
4. Feelings determine actions.
5. Actions create results.

That's how the brain works⁴.

I'd like you to try something with me along the lines of mind-body medicine. Bring a joyful thought to mind right now. Close your eyes, take a few letting-go breaths, and recall something that made you happy, such as a baby's first smile, a beautiful sunset or full moon, or a delightful joke... Allow yourself to imagine and enter into the scene with all your senses. What do you see or sense around you? Above and below you? Are there any sounds? Any special fragrances? Are you moving? touching? sitting? standing? What is the emotional, deep-felt sense of the memory in your body? Now..., pause for another moment and really notice how your body responded to joy. Feel it in your cells. Hold onto it. Now open your eyes⁵.

Perhaps you feel different now than you did a few minutes ago. Brief meditations on joy have been scientifically proven to have healing effects by causing the cells in your limbic system to release neuropeptides that... Wait. All this science is making me lose that feeling of joy.

History and science are not my strong points. I went to school for linguistics. Here's what I find interesting: the word "healing" and the word "holy" both have the same etymology. They have the same root, the Old English "hal",

which means sound, whole or happy. So you can see that even in language holy and healing were not just linked, they *were* the same.

Do spiritual healers really heal? Did a witch doctor or a shaman actually make people well? Molidoma Some, who teaches rituals from an African perspective, says, "Healers don't heal, they simply assist in the healing process by serving as conduits." Christiane Northrup, the author of *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*, says, "No, healers don't really heal, but they do help facilitate the process by holding the energy of possibility... ." Lawrence LeShan, a researcher in psychic healing and mind-body medicine says, "...You try to arrange a climate in which the patient's self-healing abilities work to the fullest."⁶

How do we arrange a climate in which our "self-healing abilities work to the fullest"? Dr. Dean Ornish says, "...that although changing your diet can clearly improve you health, you must first change your mind before you can change your diet. Changing your approach to life, to love and to relationships can change your health, but first you have to open your mind and heart to having such changes occur. Finding a spiritual path that is right for you will change your life and perhaps your health, but first you may need to cultivate the receptiveness needed by opening and quieting the mind.

"Meditative and yogic practices that are thousands of years old teach us to quiet the mind and body through methods that are highly effective yet gentle and that use attention and imagination more than will to create changes we desire."

Dr. Ornish, who was one of the official doctors to President Clinton, is recommending meditation and visualization once you're in a meditative state. I'm sure most of you are aware of what visualization is. In a relaxed state, you actually communicate your conscious intentions through images to your unconscious mind. For example, if you had a painfully inflamed wrist, you might imagine your wrist as having sharp jagged edges. Then, in your healing imagery, you could imagine cushions and supports being placed between the bones, which would reduce the pain as your wrist healed. Research has shown that the images do not have to be anatomically correct to be effective.

Louise Hay, who has written a book on the mental causes for physical illnesses and the way to overcome them, suggests affirmations to change the negative patterns that cause illness. For example, if you have cancer, she believes the probable cause is a deep hurt or long-standing resentment. There may be a deep grief eating away at you or may be carrying hatreds. She recommends this new thought pattern, "I lovingly forgive and release all of the past. I choose to fill my world with joy. I love and approve of myself."⁷

Louise Hay herself was diagnosed with cancer. She felt that with her background of having been raped and having been a battered child, it was no wonder she had manifested cancer in the vaginal area. She believed that if she had the operation to cut out the cancer, but did not clear up the mental pattern that created it, the doctors would have to keep cutting until there was no more of her left to cut. She worked with her own teacher to clear old patterns of resentment and detoxified her body by working with a nutritionist and in six months she was free of cancer.

These are ways we can heal ourselves. What is really fascinating, what is

truly powerful is nonlocal healing. Unlike mind-body healing where an individual uses their consciousness on their own behalf, this is influencing the healing of other, distant persons. It can be done through imagery and visualization, through love and compassion or through intercessory prayer.

Doctors and hospitals are taking prayer into experimental laboratories and medical journals are increasingly willing to publish studies on the healing effects of prayer. Cover stories on prayer have appeared on national news magazines and even the Wall Street Journal devoted a major article in its "Marketplace" section to scientific studies of prayer⁸.

Believing in action at a distance has always been hard for scientists. When Kepler proposed in the 1600s that the tides were caused by the tug of gravity from the moon, Galileo exclaimed, "These are the ravings of a madman! Kepler believes in action at a distance!" When Marconi, the inventor of the radio, proposed that invisible waves could carry information at great distances, he was temporarily committed to an insane asylum by "friends."

But the research being done on nonlocal healing produces statistically significant results. Most are conducted with fanatical precision. They employ controlled, double-blind standards and the results cannot be attributed to suggestion, positive thinking, or the so-called placebo effect. Many of these studies aren't done with humans at all, but with bacteria, fungus, seeds and plants.

In what is probably the most famous case, done by cardiologist Randolph Byrd⁹ twenty years ago, Dr. Byrd gave the names of 393 patients in the coronary care unit at San Francisco General Hospital to his secretary. The names were divided into two groups. One of the groups was assigned to prayer groups in various parts of the United States. They were asked to pray for the individuals in the treatment group and no one prayed for those in the control group. Except for prayer, all the patients received the same, high-level therapy. Remember, it was double-blind. No patients, no physicians and no nurses even knew the study was taking place. The prayer groups had only the patient's first name, general condition and a request to pray for a speedy recovery with freedom from complications. After their operations, those patients who received intercessory prayer had less congestive heart failure (8 vs 20), needed less antibiotic therapy (2 vs 17), had fewer episodes of pneumonia (3 vs 13), and had fewer cardiac arrests (3 vs 14).

Dr. Byrd's study was criticized on many levels. He didn't know which patients prayed for themselves or had family and friends praying for them and he was a born-again Christian and was labeled biased in favor of religion, among other factors. But it was ground-breaking nonetheless and opened the door to hundreds of other studies.

Another study, done without the patients' or the doctor's knowledge had forty-four participants. The participants were told that they were taking part in a test of a new medical device that measured the bioelectrical conductivity of wounds. A doctor took a skin biopsy from the arm of each patient, creating identical full-skin thickness surgical wounds. Then each day they returned and put their arm through a hole in the wall where the wounds were supposedly

measured by the new device.

But there was no such device. Instead, for 23 of the participants, when they put their arm through the hole, a spiritual-healing practitioner prayerfully, mentally communicated healing to the patient. When the other 21 patients put their arm through the hole, there was no one there in the room on the other side. None of the patients knew about this and the doctors didn't know which patients were receiving spiritual healing. Over the next three weeks, at specific intervals, a doctor traced the outline of the wound and technicians, also unaware of who was being treated, digitized the tracing for computer comparisons.

On the eighth day, the wounds of those treated with spiritual healing were significantly smaller than the control group. By the sixteenth day, all of the treated patients were completely healed and none of the untreated patients were.

Dr. Larry Dossey, a leading authority on prayer and the author of *Healing Words*, a book on prayer that is used as a textbook in many medical schools, says that the biggest problem with studying the impact of prayer on people is that people are so human. We tend to be an unpredictable bunch and we like to think for ourselves. And the sicker we get, the more likely it is that we will pray for ourselves or that family and friends will pray for us. That can invalidate a study if a person is part of a control group that is not supposed to be receiving prayer. This means the most intriguing and conclusive studies are done not on people, but on animals, seedlings, and fungus. It's easier to control the variables with lower life forms and you can be relatively sure that they're not praying for themselves or each other. You can also be relatively sure that they're not interested in the results of the experiment.

In one of the studies, ten people tried to retard the growth of fungus cultures that were one and a half yards away by concentrating on them with that intent in mind. Of 194 cultures, 78% experienced inhibited growth. The study was replicated with the people one to fifteen miles from the cultures with similar results.

In another, 60 people, people who were not known healers, were able to both stimulate and inhibit the rate of growth of bacteria cultures through focused intent.

In a third example, this one with barley seeds, half were watered with saltwater, which is known to retard their growth. Then a spiritual healer held the saltwater for fifteen minutes and the other half was watered with the "blessed" saltwater. Those seeds germinated significantly more quickly.

Larry Dossey points out in *Prayer is Good Medicine*, "It is not the Absolute who is threatened by scientific evidence favoring prayer, only our own arrogance and pride and the special status that some religions have claimed for themselves." Our "What do UUs believe" card, says, "We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality."

Scientists cannot yet explain how prayer works at a distance, but there are developments in other areas that may shed some light on it. Quantum physics, which concerns itself with the smallest bits of the physical world, has revealed

the existence of what are termed “nonlocal” events. Very briefly: If two subatomic particles that have been in contact are separated, a change in one is correlated to a change in the other, instantly and to the same degree, no matter how far apart they may be.

Nonlocal events share three characteristics. Distant changes do not depend on the transmission of energy; the strength of the changes does not become weaker with increasing distance; the changes take place simultaneously.

How can one of the distant particles be instantly aware of changes in its faraway partner? How do they stay in synchrony? If they change simultaneously, no matter how far apart they are, are they really separate? Or are they in some sense a single particle?¹⁰

Could distant intercessory prayer be explained by underlying quantum phenomenon on a human level? Since no specific form of energy has been identified in the “transmission” of prayer, and since the effects are equally positive at global distances as they are at the bedside, intercessory prayer bears a strong resemblance to nonlocal events studied by physicists. And a strong resemblance to the interdependent web of existence we believe in.

We probably won’t know exactly how distant prayer works until we know how the consciousness works because love, compassion, deep caring and empathy appear to be catalysts to prayer’s effects.

About 5 years ago, doctors found some tissue in my breast that they didn’t like the looks of. They didn’t feel they had time for a biopsy, they just wanted to open me up and get that tissue out of there. And they wanted to do it within the week. I called my friend, Colleen, told her what was happening and asked her if she would drive me home from the clinic after the surgery. She said yes and that she would have her 4 daughters pray for me every night until the tissue was declared benign. Colleen is a devout Catholic and I didn’t feel like having a philosophical discussion with her just then, so I simply said, “Thank you.” Two weeks later, when the lab report came in, I found out that not only was the tissue cancer-free, but the pathologists were unable to find *anything* wrong with it. At the time it made me very angry - I had major surgery for nothing! But after researching prayer for this sermon, I wonder. Was it Colleen’s and her daughters’ prayers?

Now, Colleen is, as I say, a devout Catholic. Can agnostics pray? This raises the question of whether prayer requires a traditional belief in god. Buddhists, who pray avidly, belong to a nontheistic religion. They address their prayers to the universe. Some agnostics and those of us who do not believe in God in a traditional sense can be deeply spiritual. We can have a sense of universal order, beauty and majesty that does not coalesce into an image of a personal God. When we pray, we can feel at one with All That Is, an experience that can reach tremendous depths.

This conviction of underlying unity is at the heart of all the mystical traditions of all major religions. The love and compassion that we bring to prayer is key. Scientific studies indicate that if love and compassion are not present, prayers have little or no effect. That means science has shown prayer does not belong to any particular religion, but to the unity of all religions, classes and

creeds. Science universalizes and democratizes prayer¹¹.

People in many parts of the world speak English. There is a marvelous variety of accents and dialects. Let's regard prayer, in its many forms, its many inflections, meditation, joys and concerns, more traditional prayers, as a common universal tongue. Let's delight in our differences and celebrate our diversity¹². Let's not be afraid during joys and concerns to say, "Please pray for my friend." or "My uncle needs your prayers.", knowing that each of us will pray, with love, in our own way.

If we wish to understand how healing happens, we will have to bring our imaginations back to life. We will have to honor that aspect of ourselves that is unbounded in space and time, that part that is immortal and that unites us with all others. We will have to think like poets and mystics, gods and goddesses. Because in a nonlocal world, that is who we are.

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¹ Brennan, Barbara, *Healing Hands of Light*

² The phrase "physics envy" was coined by Dr. Larry Dossey

³ Brennan, Barbara, *Healing Hands of Light*

⁴ Dossey, Larry, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*

⁵ Borysenko, Joan, *The Power of the Mind to Heal*

⁶ Quotes from Unte Reader's article "Do Healers Really Heal?", September 1999

⁷ Hay, Louise, *You Can Heal Your Life*

⁸ For the *Wall Street Journal* discussion of scientific studies of prayer, see Joseph Pereira, "The Healing Power of Prayer Is Tested by Science," *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 1995

⁹ Bryd, Randolph: "Positive Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population," *Southern Medical Journal* 81, No. 7 (July 1988)

¹⁰ Brennan, Barbara, *Healing Hands of Light*

¹¹ Dossey, Larry, *Prayer Is Good Medicine*

¹² Dossey, Larry, *Prayer Is Good Medicine*