

# On Prayer for Others— and Ourselves

I noticed something not long ago that surprised me: Vocal intercessory prayer is experiencing a major revival among liberal unprogrammed meetings! Friends may not recognize it as such. The language varies from meeting to meeting, but often runs something like the following: "Please hold my friend Jane in the Light; she's going through a really hard time with her youngest child." Or, "My father is going into surgery on Thursday morning for his prostate cancer; I ask

you to hold him in your hearts during his surgery."

This language has a bit of a New Age ring to it. In my view, however, the same deep process is at work whether the speaker is asking others to pray for someone explicitly or asking them to hold her/him "up to the Light." After all, what is this "Light" we are holding the person up to if not God?

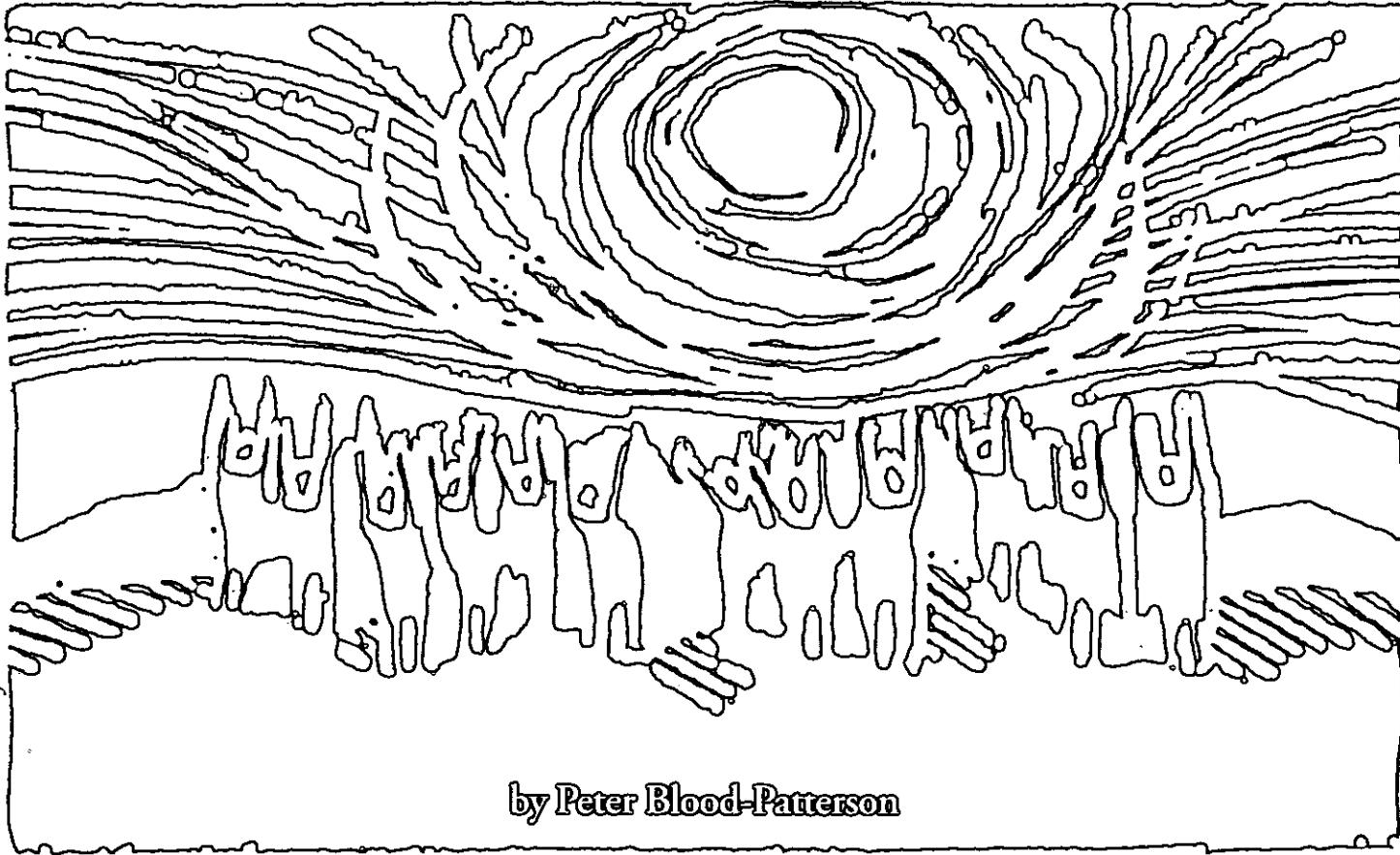
Some meetings provide a special time for this kind of request or information sharing following meeting for worship. It may be called "twilight meeting" or "joys and sorrows." Sometimes such requests are made during meeting for worship itself. They may enter in between introductions and announcements. Other meetings set aside a completely different time for sharing this kind of request, such as a prayer group or healing circle.

All this praying for others started me reflecting on what it actually means to bring up another person's needs to God. If you think about it, mentioning someone's needs to God involves some deep paradoxes. The first paradox of intercessory prayer involves what theologians call "omniscience." If you believe (as I do) that God knows all about us, including all of our needs, even better than we do, why should we need to tell God about our own or someone else's special needs?

The second basic paradox of intercessory prayer involves the equality of God's regard for all of her/his children. Since we assume that God loves all of humanity (perhaps even all of Creation) equally, it seems wrong that God would direct more healing or caring energy towards one person than others just because one—or

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even many—people are praying for that individual.

A great puzzle that many of us struggle with is whether God can, in fact, rescue individual humans from death, despair, illness, or suffering. Because we believe God's concern and love for us are without limit, we presume that God longs for *each* of us to be happy and healthy, to live long and as far as possible free from unnecessary pain. Nonetheless, there may be fundamental reasons why God either might not choose or might not be able to rescue individuals from suffering or death. This is something that both theologians and simple people of faith have been wrestling with for centuries. The reasons why God might not heal someone do not seem likely to include either lack of knowledge of the problem or a shortage of supportive friends and family praying for the person in need!

Some people avoid needing to wrestle with these questions about the nature of God because they focus on another important benefit of prayer. This involves the good that flows towards those being prayed for from sensing the love and caring in the hearts of those who are praying for them. Certainly we know that people heal more easily and flourish emotionally when they know others care about them. There has been significant scientific research that suggests that those who are ill or in pain receive benefit from others praying for them even when they do not know by any direct outward means that others are doing this. My own family has extraordinary stories of hearts knit together across distance that are hard to explain, such as people who knew the moment that a loved one was dying at a great distance. As real and important as such indirect benefits of prayer are, I personally am unwilling to leave God entirely out of the prayer process.

Another important reason why many of us pray is because we have been *asked* to do so: Jesus, Paul, Francis of Assisi, George Fox, and many other great spiritual leaders have enjoined us to pray for one another. But again, this cannot be the entire answer. It is important for most of us to understand the deeper reasons why we are doing something, even if we feel great trust in those who have asked us to do it. And so I am brought back to the original question:

Why *am I* praying to the God who is at the heart of my universe, and what am I hoping will happen as a result?

Perhaps what we are asking for in prayer is not for *God* to do anything different at all. God is already doing God's part in loving the person in need and sending her/him healing energy, reassurance, and hope. Perhaps what we are asking for instead is change in the heart of the person being prayed for, to enable her/him to embrace and receive the love and healing already flowing from God. In some cases this may involve being able to face suffering or death if that turns out to be the ultimate outcome. We are praying for a transformation in the overall situation to enable the prayed-for loved one to open up her/his heart toward God and toward the universe without fear and anxiety.

But when we pray we also are inviting a change to happen in *ourselves*. I learned this final reason for praying for each other from my limited understanding of Al-Anon, the network of support groups for family members of alcoholics. People often discover that they have been trying for years to "rescue" a family member from her/his addiction. They sometimes find ending their codependency with their loved one's addiction a very difficult, though critical, step. This can lead finally to reaching the point where they are ready and able to turn their loved one struggling with addiction over to God. When we pray for someone else we are asking God to work in that person's heart for healing and change rather than trying to take on the responsibility for change ourselves.

So when we pray, we express our longing for God to work change in our own lives and hearts as much as in the life of the person we're praying for. We are asking for the capacity to let go of our own anxiety, fear, or sense that we are responsible for our loved one. We are asking our community of faith to join us in placing the entire situation at God's feet: bringing about a graceful willingness both in ourselves and in the person in need to lean on God and let go of fear or *whatever* may be blocking God's powerful love from touching all who are involved. □

by John M. Haynes

**G**od is immutable, permanent, unchanging, all-loving, all-caring, and all-forgiving. God is simply there and is there at all times.

If this statement is essentially true then we must ponder the problem: if God is always there, unchanging, why do we feel at times closer and at other times farther away from God? Clearly, God does not move closer and farther away from us. We move back and forth in our awareness of, and therefore our relationship with, God. We choose when to be closer and, probably not by conscious choice, we decide when to drift apart.

This raises another question for us regarding our central belief that we gather in silence in a mood of expectant waiting for the Holy Spirit. Are we waiting for the Spirit to come closer to us or for us to move closer to the Holy Spirit? Most Friends believe that centering in meeting is an activity involving emptying the mind of extraneous thoughts, and then waiting for the Holy Spirit to enter the free space. But it seems more likely that the Holy Spirit is there waiting for us to move close enough to experience the Word of God.

If this is so, what activities in the silence move us closer to God? We can argue that simply being inactive about our normal human concerns frees us up to enter into the space in which communion with God occurs. Even when we are empty of daily concerns, an action must happen to make us closer—we must move. The activity that moves us from the silence in which we have emptied our minds into a direct, unmediated relationship with God is prayer. A prayer becomes the bridge we build to cross the barrier we have established between the individual and God in the rush of everyday life. Thus, this act is proactive, a deliberate step we take in the depth of the uncluttered mind, created out of silence.

Each prayer is different, and as Friends we are constantly looking at what holy prayer is. I think there are three basic forms of prayer: prayers for others, prayers of praise and gratitude, and prayers for ourselves. Each of these takes

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# Walking With God

## AS CLOSE AS WE WANT TO BE



us over the bridge and closes the gap between ourselves and God.

A prayer for others involves sharing with God our concerns for and about the other person. They should not be requests for action on God's part since we assume God already knows the needs of the other person. Our conversation with God is about our concern. In holding others in the Light we do so without knowing the answer but as a way of drawing closer to the other person in need through a sharing with the Holy Spirit. We trust that as we hold the other in the Light the Holy Spirit links us with the other person, giving the other our concern and strength to pull through their crisis.

A prayer of praise involves giving thanks for the wonders of the day, for life, for God's loving and caring. Praise takes us out of this world that we believe we control and places us into another world where we accept our lack of control on the one hand and express our thanks to God on the other.

The prayers for self are the most difficult prayers. They are often pleas for help and divine intervention. Sometimes we make a promise in return for an anticipated action, since we too are influenced by those religions that sell interventions on our behalf. They see a God who loves a trade and who responds to people rather than leads them. These prayers reduce

God to a superhuman, motivated by the same desires and fears as us. Rather, God is all-loving, all-caring, and all-forgiving. No deals are required, simply acceptance of Grace.

So, what is the way to pray to God? I think there is one simple prayer that is useful in all situations and all conditions. It is simply, "Dear God, what can I do differently?" The remarkable thing is that when we have crossed the bridge and are in true conversation with God, there is always an answer. There is always a different way to think about the problem distressing us. There is always something different we can do in our interactions with others. There is always another way to think about or to handle a concern. God will not cure my illness. God does not choose some to cure and others to suffer. But God will provide me with a different way to handle it.

When we ask for this help, God places us back in control of our lives and reminds us that there is a more Godly way of responding and that we can make the shift necessary to be closer to God in heart and deed. In this relationship with God we ask for no miracles, no interventions for us or against another. We never ask for things to which we are not entitled, and we never ask God to be ungodly. We ask only what we could do differently to place

us closer to God. We maintain a simple relationship with God. We maintain an obedient relationship with God by making the suggested changes.

Sometimes we ask for a shift—something different that we can do—but do not hear an answer. One possibility is that what we are already doing is God's work, or more likely, we have asked a question to which we do not want an answer since we don't intend to do anything differently, but it makes us feel good that we asked. My experience is that if I ask the question honestly, an honest answer is always returned and a different way opens for me.

This simple prayer, "Dear God, what can I do differently?", can be asked at any time. All it takes is a momentary withdrawal from daily life, an honest appeal, and a receptive heart. It is the most empowering prayer that lifts me up when I am down, turns me around when I am going in the wrong direction, helps me look at the glass as half full rather than half empty. It is a question that reminds me that the answer is always there inside me. God is always there; I determine the proximity. When I accept God's grace, the way opens at any moment for a different approach. God helps reconnect me to my own inner wisdom. And that inner wisdom takes me closer to God, walking with God, which is where I want to be. □

## About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

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### "On Prayer for Others—and Ourselves"

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### "Walking with God"

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