

How Does Prayer Work: A Response  
Prairie Group 2013  
Bill Neely

*We are lived by powers we pretend to understand.*

W. H. Auden<sup>1</sup>

I'm grateful to Nicole for writing an engaging paper on a topic for which she claims neither expertise nor interest. Such an assignment can make the joy of scholarship more of a trudge than a gallop. My sympathy has limits, though. I'm not far enough away from seminary to have forgotten the many midnights crested while writing professor-assigned papers and responses on topics of neither expertise nor interest to me. Perhaps the esteemed professor of Unitarian Universalist history received a small taste of her own medicine with this assignment. May its staleness be remembered as she assesses the scholarship of our future colleagues.

Her task was to consider how prayer works in three fields: neuroscience, psychology, and sociology. Nicole helpfully distills two sources that offer digestible descriptions of what happens to the brain in prayer and meditation.<sup>2</sup> We learn that the two disciplines have similar but ultimately different effects. Both disciplines light up the "focus" area of the brain, and both can create a sense of "oneness" with the universe. However, prayer also lights up the part of the brain that indicates that one is having a conversation with a being (emphasizing relationship), while meditation lights up the part that signals visualization.<sup>3</sup>

The *Your Brain on Prayer* resource differentiates between the God of Jewish and Christian prayer and the more abstract sense of the divine in Buddhist meditation, but perhaps not enough. Buddhism is typically nontheistic. Judaism and Christianity, obviously not, and the point of prayer in these faiths is to communicate with God. It makes sense then, that the relational portion of the brain might not engage in a Buddhist meditation practice. A relationship with God isn't an expected outcome of the discipline. However, if one prays seeking relationship with God, the brain seems to respond. Nicole aptly attributes this to neuroplasticity, or the brain adapting to suit how it is frequently used.

Nicole wonders about atheists, and her concerns about how their brains were measured are valid. I also wonder about how atheists were assessed. The *Your Brain on Prayer* story indicated that the people of faith who were measured were devoted to their disciplines over time, including Buddhists, who can easily identify as atheistic or nontheistic, and whose brains did show effects of their practices. I wonder if the atheists who were measured had existing meditation practices. If they did and their brains didn't change, then perhaps the brains of atheists who are unaffiliated with a religious tradition or spiritual practice are different than the brains of atheists affiliated with either, but I doubt it. I imagine that

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<sup>1</sup> from "In Memory of Ernst Toller" (1940).

<sup>2</sup> National Public Radio, All Things Considered, "Prayer May Reshape Your Brain ... And Your Reality," <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104310443>, and Science.Discovery.com, "Your Brain on Prayer," <http://science.discover.com/tv-shows/through-the-wormhole/videos/your-brain-on-prayer.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Giordan makes a very similar distinction from a sociological position: "Meditation has a different emphasis from prayer, although in practice the two overlap to some extent. While prayer usually has a conversational or discursive aspect in which thoughts and feelings are directed out of us toward someone nor something, meditation involves non-discursive procedures aimed at altering attention, clearing the mind of normal thought patterns, and establishing a more receptive mode of consciousness." Giuseppe Giordan, "Toward a Sociology of Prayer," in Giordan and William Swatos, eds., *Religion, Spirituality, and Everyday Practice* (New York: Springer, 2011) 77-88.

practice and repetition over time matters, and that if one measured atheists who do meditate regularly, like many Buddhists, we'd see that the brain does change as a result of the discipline.<sup>4</sup>

The relational aim and effects of prayer are important. Luhrmann's work was about people who prayed centrally to know God better. They imagined relationships with God that they deepened through "date nights" with the holy One. This God went so far as to sometimes care about their hair styles and served as the imaginary friend for adults that Winnicott said was a part of healthy childhood.<sup>5</sup> The point of prayer was to have a relationship with God, and the classes, small groups, and emphasis on prayer among the evangelicals she studied all served this end. One can't separate their practice of prayer from the reason why they prayed: to communicate with God.

Barth reflected a similar foundation, arguing that a presence; a "One" is to be encountered in prayer. Prayer is not about opening up to a concept or embracing a principle. It's about listening to this "One" that speaks through that being's works, its Church, and its world.<sup>6</sup> Barth imagined God as the wholly Other to whom one prays. Tillich imagined God as the subject and object; writing the delightful line: "It is God himself who prays through us, when we pray to him"<sup>7</sup> or the even more delicious: "We can only pray to the God who prays to himself through us."<sup>8</sup> We can save the distinctions between the two for next year's sure bet Prairie Group topic of *Barth vs. Tillich: Death Match between Dogma and Being*. The point here is just to affirm that Luhrmann's evangelicals, in their desire to know God more fully, are oriented toward a basic, highly relational understanding of prayer.<sup>9</sup>

As a faith, we're not. Our general prayer tone doesn't universally name, imagine, or expect this closer relationship with God. The word "relational" always excites us, but in these studies that show prayer invigorating a sense of relationship in the brain, and in Luhrmann's work, and in the minds of at least a few important theologians, the only relationship of importance in prayer is with God. As a faith, we don't share that foundation. We sometimes acknowledge God as an option, but never a necessity. Our objectless, or object-vague, principle-laden and confession-free prayers would be indiscernible as prayers to those studied by Luhrmann and Newberg. This fundamental difference makes any application of their findings to how we generally pray in our modern faith suspect.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology* (England: Ashgate, 2010) 199-200. Newberg acknowledges that proper study of participants involves consistent measurement over time and that results can shift as more time is allowed, which would also mean that the practices deepen. Collegial note: this book has an attractive title, but is very dense. Unless you're really into neuroscience, testing, and sampling, stick with the NPR and the *Brain on Prayer* sources.

<sup>5</sup> T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Knopf, 2012) 77-88.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1963) 163-165.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1955) 137.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. III* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963) 120.

<sup>9</sup> Even prayers that aren't answered emphasize relationship. Tillich, *Systematic III*, 191 : "This newness, created by the prayer of supplication, is the Spiritual act of elevating the content of one's wishes and hopes into the Spiritual Presence. A prayer in which that happens is "heard," even if the subsequent events contradict the manifest content of the prayer." And Nehrbass makes sense of praying imprecatory Psalms by claiming that God's refusal to viciously destroy everyone we'd like to be off'd deepens our relationship with God because we are reminded that God is better than we are. He also identifies a sort of psychological wellness and honesty in lifting up our desires for our enemies to be utterly destroyed. It makes us feel better, will never happen as the result of God's will, connects us to those enemies (who wish the same thing for us), and reminds us that God is too great to do this. See Daniel Michael Nehrbass, *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

Nicole ends with a series of largely unanswered and provocative questions, some of which will likely be commented on by Kathleen and Luke in the final paper and response. But as for ecclesiology, my response would be that if the church belongs to God and exists to collect and empower people to do holy work, as I believe it does, then our prayer life should mirror that ecclesiology by approaching that Source for guidance, forgiveness, resilience, vision. If the church belongs to us, we should feel comfortable continuing to hold our current ambiguity and ambivalence toward the discipline.

Nicole mentions the information on her assigned areas being vast and indeed it is. I'll lift up one aspect of prayer and psychology; one that explores despair and hope. Keeping with Barth, he identified the phrase, "Thy kingdom come," in the Lord's Prayer as the ultimate expression of hope in today's world. He writes:

One cannot say, "Thy kingdom come!" without hope for our time, for today, for tomorrow. The great Future, with a capital F, is also a future with a small f. That is enough to make us understand, at least in a small way, the total insufficiency of all our works in the present, the pettiness of all the conflicts in which we struggle, especially in our personal, psychological conflicts, which basically cannot be justified. But in order to understand this, we must see the kingdom which is to come. The psychologists cannot help us. Someday the sun will rise, knowledge will be given us. We are waiting only until Easter becomes for the world a general event. We shall then no longer have need of psychologists, because there will be health.<sup>10</sup>

Somebody clearly had issues with psychology. He should've seen someone about that. But his point is important: "Thy kingdom come" is a prayer of hope in a world that can seem hopeless. It envisions "that ecstatic eschatological instant when spacetime will collapse into eternity and bliss conquers all."<sup>11</sup> These prayers envision heaven; the arrival of the kingdom and Barth associates a vision of this end with psychological wellness.

I heard refrains of this in the interviews of the evangelicals in Luhrmann's work. They gathered from broken lives to pray for wholeness. Together, they shared their sins, wounds, and struggles and envisioned a world where those were all overcome. The kingdom has not come, but gathering, confessing, and praying in the scope of the kingdom's coming seemed beneficial for them. It gave them hope, even when they had plenty of reasons to despair.

Zaleski and Zaleski write about *de profundis* prayer<sup>12</sup>. These are pained acknowledgements that one is trapped in a horrible place and there is no way out. It's not simply the prayer of one in despair; it's the prayer of one aware that they are hopelessly caught in despair, but when uttered it leads to a sense of peace. One breathes deeply, now trusting God, even as the chaos continues. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."<sup>13</sup> Merton writes of an empty place from which connection grows: "Sometimes prayer, meditation, and contemplation are "death" – a kind of descent into our own nothingness, a recognition of helplessness, frustration, infidelity, confusion, ignorance."<sup>14</sup> In these spaces, "thy kingdom come," wordlessly sighed or cried aloud, orients us toward hope.

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, Prayer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949) 60-61.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Zaleski and Philip Zaleski, Prayer: A History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) 290. The authors are commenting on T.S. Eliot's brilliant and beautiful, "Little Gidding" (1942).

<sup>12</sup> Zaleski and Zaleski, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 8:26, RSV.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Merton, Contemplative Prayer (New York: Image Books, 1969) 11.

In any number of settings, in any number of ways, we've prayed these prayers with people in despair. We've voiced their pain and named their struggle. We've sighed with them. We've held their sins with compassion and their mistakes with softness. And we've pointed toward something hopeful to come; something peaceful and whole that may not even be imaginable in the moment, but is voiced anyway so that its essence is in the room; a love that will continue, a heart that can still open, a legacy that will bless well after one's days are over. There is hope for the hopeless and love within all, and no sin is greater than God's love. That's not the kingdom that Barth imagined, but it's the slice of heaven with which we can accompany people, prayerfully, through anguish, toward peace.

## **In Prayer**

*Tombstones crumble, words come and go, words are forgotten,  
The lips that uttered them turned to dust,  
Tongues die like people, other tongues come to life,  
Gods in the sky change, gods come and go,  
Prayers remain forever.*

Yehuda Amichai<sup>15</sup>

I pray often, personally and professionally, to God. I prefer a setting of silence and stillness. In form, I often pray the Lord's Prayer. In freeform, I suppose they're the inarticulate ramblings of someone unsure of why he's really praying, but I don't pay much attention anymore. I just settle in, imagine the ocean in its great depths and surging tides; in its beauty and terror, and pray the surface, and try to at least pray a little deeper.<sup>16</sup> It's often unremarkable; no mystical experiences or moments of great presence, but even when I'm really distracted or selfish or small in my prayers, I can taste a little salt afterward.

I'm more moved these days by almost-nightly prayers with one, two, or all three of my kids. Most nights I put one or more of them to bed and after jammies and stories, we pray words that my father prayed with me when I was a child, and his father prayed with him when he was a child. His father died when my father was a boy; I never met him. I'm named after him, but other than that and some pocket bibles that he carried in World War II that my father very recently gave me, this prayer is all I have from him. The words hold little literal theological meaning for me anymore ("Here I lie upon my bed, guardian angels around my head. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, guard the bed I lie upon. God bless [a whole bunch of people])." But the prayer is a tie to a loving, blessing God, and two people I love dearly, even though I never met one of them. The words bring me comfort, and I hope they do the same for my little ones. As their days unfold, they may abandon these words and I'll be fine with that, but I hope, and pray, that a sense of them being loved forever and ever, abides.

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<sup>15</sup> from "Gods Come and Go, Prayers Remain Forever" (1994).

<sup>16</sup> I think this image came from Huston Smith writing about Sufism.