

Be Careful What You Pray For... You Just Might Get It. What We Can Do About the Unintentional Effects of Our Thoughts, Prayers, and Wishes by Larry Dossey, M.D. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997. 256 pages. Hardcover \$22.00. ISBN 0-06-251433-4.

It takes a certain courage to openly address topics that we'd rather not think about, and the negative potential of prayer described in this book is clearly one of those topics. My first response upon seeing the working pre-publication title, "Toxic Prayer," was probably representative. Isn't it better to leave the dark side left in the darkness? But reading the book answers that question with information and an empathetic understanding of issues that are pertinent to a richer perspective on prayer as a general name for a variety of important interactions of human consciousness with the world. Far from being a simple examination of the darker impulses we may embody in intentionally disruptive and destructive invocations, the book looks at a broad spectrum of rather normal and ordinary thoughts and activities that may touch upon or activate conscious and unconscious influences in the world. The publication title says, "Be careful what you pray for. You may get it." We are provided with a splendid collection of insights and perspectives that can educate a more conscious and deliberate application of the possibility that our thoughts and wishes may actually make a difference.

As in his other books dealing with prayer in medicine, Dossey takes a quasi-scientific approach, basing much of his discussion on research in various fields including medicine, biology, anthropology, parapsychology, *etc.* The references and bibliography are detailed and almost certainly are the most complete available on this general theme or topical area. Scholars and other researchers will find both breadth and depth here; the book is an important resource in this regard even for those with no specific interest in the negative aspects of prayer. Beyond the value of the book as a scholarly work, it is interesting and well written, and between the technical discussions and beyond the analytical overlay, Dossey also tells stories that illuminate the points he feels we should consider. Taken from his own experience as a doctor and from his wide network of contacts with healers in various cultural traditions, these stories form a background that is at once both interesting and useful as another form of evidence that the questions he addresses can be and are deeply important. The doctors and healers, on the one hand, and the patients and their loved ones on the other, tell us that it is worthwhile to think about and study the implications of a nearly universal tendency to wish for a particular future, or to pray for some sort of intervention that will affect our lives and well being.

The book has five major sections, and within these, chapters dealing with specific topics including "death wishes," inadvertant toxic prayer, and the possibility that some form of "protection" from negative or destructive wishes may be invoked. Dossey begins with the question why anyone might want to delve into a topic that is widely regarded as forbidden territory, saying, based

on extant research, "If we accept that human thought has distant effects, it is irrational to think that individuals throughout history would not have tried using this power for harm. This is the domain of curses, hexing, and the casting of spells, and the use of prayer to harm others. The goal of this book is to explore how these practices manifest in everyday life." He deals with topics such as voodoo and the "evil eye," and with self-inflicted negative prayers. Some of the examples are exotic, but Dossey also includes quite prosaic but widespread practices that might be thought of as medical hexing, where physicians occasionally confront patients who fully believe they have been cursed or "spelled" and may actually require the equivalent of a reassuring, ceremonial de-hexing. More problematic is an all too typical modern form of negative prayer in the form of prognostications by physicians who authoritatively intone that the patient has only a few months to live. He provides evidence and experience that cumulatively make a strong case for avoiding such negatives and instead inculcating positive expectations in patients' minds.

Experiments addressing the effects of negative prayer on humans are understandably rare, but Dossey reviews relevant studies with plants, animals and cell preparations. These show the efficacy of negative prayer and wishing, but they also reveal the complexity of the situation. Healers do not wish to invoke harmful intentions, even for, say, cancer cells, and they often prefer an approach that essentially requests that, "Thy will be done." Dossey's survey suggests that experience leads healers and physicians who include prayer in their work to avoid a fix-it attitude and instead to focus on a return to normality and balance, tailoring their prayers to the temperament and personal needs of the people involved.

The book has so many examples both anecdotal and scientific to persuade us that prayer can be an effective mechanism for harm as well as benefit that we might come away with a feeling of dismay. The final section in the book deals specifically with "protection" against the negative intentions of others. Although Dossey again documents specific recipes that we might employ, he also asserts that in this area as in the strictly physical realm, we come equipped with natural defenses, a sort of "psycho-spiritual immune system." He quotes an expert, a native healer from New Mexico who reminds us that in one of the most common Christian prayers a central plea is to "Deliver us from evil." Of course amulets and images and ceremonies with explicit and implicit protective functions are an important part of everyday life for many people, and even the simple get-well card, Dossey suggests, may be a form of protection against hopelessness and fear which otherwise may become an internal negative and destructive force. Many people look for a "magic bullet" in the form of exotic devices and practices to protect themselves against hexing and curses. But in the end, Dossey says, the most reliable protection against others' negative intentions lies in psychological maturity, "... honoring the presence of the Absolute in our life; and cultivating our capacity for love."

Though it is a difficult topic both because it involves anomalous connec-

tions and influences that do not appear compatible with scientific models and because it touches upon the dark or shadow side of human nature, Dossey succeeds in this book. It has sufficient scholarly depth of historical and scientific research to satisfy or at least competently address the intellectual resistance against acknowledging that there is a legitimate question here. In addition, and with both facility and humility, he reveals and treats the emotional reactions (“I was simultaneously deeply moved and horrified.”) that keep the topic of toxic prayer and negative intentions buried away from inspection.

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Prayer is part of our mental and emotional landscapes. “Say one for me, Rabbi;” “I’ll keep you in my prayers;” “I’ll remember you at Mass”—these are just a few familiar ways that believers (and sometimes, bet-hedging non-believers) bridge the gap between the material and spiritual realms. But can thoughts, feelings, intentions, and desires — in short, our subjective states — actually have an effect on God? And when other people are the focus of our invocations, where is the dividing line between intercession and imprecation?

This book’s catchy-yet-elaborate title and subtitle tip the author’s hand as to his philosophical position. Physician Larry Dossey believes that there is a connection between the “spiritual” and “material” worlds, existing within the human person and extending beyond to society and to God. Quite naturally, this leads to the question: What to do about it?

Dossey is also the author of *Healing Words* (1993). In the Introduction to *Be Careful...* he explains that this book is a response to some vehement condemnatory letters he received in response to *Healing Words*. Apparently, some readers charged that the experiments Dossey had done on the efficacy of prayer were heretical, blasphemous, and sinful. Given the contemporary cultural ambivalence toward organized religion, big science, and the corporate-culture of health care, this is a book that was begging to be written.

For the most part, Dossey succeeds in untangling some popular culture, ancient rituals, arcane theological data, scientific research, and old wives’ tales concerning these matters. He writes clearly and with common sense. The possibility of “negative” prayer, and its implications for the pray-er and effect on the pray-ee, also fall within the scope of this book. The lines between prayers and wishful thinking, positive thoughts and blessings, certain psalms and hexes can sometimes be blurry. What really complicates matters is when