

The power of prayer

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS sitting in a restaurant the other day when I noticed the little boy at the table in front of me. He was only about eight years old, but already showed signs of being ravaged by illness. His head was bald, he had bandages on his arms and he was abnormally skinny for his age.

He was also abnormally quiet. He seemed withdrawn and had the air of someone who had learned too much of life to indulge in fantasy.

His parents, sitting either side of him, had the same heavy visage. They were pale, drawn and seemed very tired. They looked like people who had been keeping an all-night vigil. Probably for most nights of this poor child's life. But they were trying to be cheerful, smiling through taut mouths, joking with the boy, who was clearly beyond being humoured.

As one does, I inadvertently began projecting into the lives of this small group of people. In a flash I imagined the gruesome scene at the doctor's surgery when the prognosis was made -- probably cancer. The bitter task of explaining the truth to the boy, as he was driven to hospital.

Being the mother of a small child, I felt the pain as if it were me in that horrible situation. In that split second between noticing the family and my sandwich arriving, an eternity went by in which my mind was falling over itself in pity, panic, empathy and grief, but most of all fear.

By the time my sandwich arrived I felt like I was going to throw up. I was about to ask that my sandwich be put in a bag so I could move away from the sad situation when I noticed the people around me were doing the same thing.

With faces marred by fear -- as if they could somehow "catch" the tragedy in front of them -- other patrons started shuffling away from tables, changing their minds about having anything to eat, deciding to get takeaway.

It dawned on me that part of the reason people walk away from grief is that they feel impotent and sad. It's too much reality for most people who can't think of ways to alleviate the suffering.

And suddenly I found myself doing something very out of character. Knowing that it was not possible to physically impose on this family to alleviate my own sense of powerlessness, I shut my eyes and began to pray.

Not conventional prayer. Not a plea to God. But rather I began doing what I had been taught to do in my 10 months of Buddhist practice. I began "sending" positive thoughts and positive energy.

I imagined circles of golden, healing light to be surrounding the family and that inside this loving, warm vortex of energy they were feeling safe and healed and protected.

This form of prayer is becoming increasingly popular with those who follow New Age spiritualism. It is based on a belief system inherent in paganism, Buddhism,

and various Yogic practices -- that there is a universal energy surrounding us all that Judeo-Christian culture refers to as God.

It is believed that this energy can be accessed by humans for healing, through mind-power and ritual. Shamans, wiccans and native cultures access it through dance and going into trance-like states while communing with nature. Buddhists access it by going into a deep, meditative state.

Practitioners of New Age medicine such as reiki healers access it via sacred symbols that are channelled through the hands. Those without a religious foundation call it positive visualisation or positive affirmation and seem to be able to tap into an abundant, enriching energy field by simply imagining positive outcomes and then using concentration or language to create it.

Whether there is, in fact, a loving, universal energy surrounding us called God, or whether the practices that use healing energy are relying on belief alone, the outcomes can be very positive. As renowned healer and guru Deepak Chopra has pointed out in his ground-breaking best-seller *Quantum Healing*, the mind is so strong that to believe in one's recovery can aid it. And it seems that by passionately believing in someone else's recovery, it is possible to help heal them too. A recent survey in the US found that a group of sick people who were being prayed for showed a better recovery rate in clinical trials than those who were not.

While mind over matter is the basic premise of faith healing, interestingly, members of the trial group didn't know they were being prayed for.

The Australian's religious affairs editor, Father James Murray, says he believes praying -- in all its forms -- is back in vogue.

He says that while people still do pray for God's help and healing, many, including Christians, are moving away from traditional forms of prayer towards their own language, away from churches towards their own sacred spaces, their own timing and their own form of worship.

"There has been an enormous questioning of all institutions, including religious. A large number of people find religious spaces off-putting for prayer," he says. "But the majority, according to a recent survey, admitted to praying regularly -- even though they didn't go to church. For some this included meditation."

He says that people do pray for others, not just themselves. "There's a big fund of compassion in humanity and people will use any means they think of to tap into it."

Meanwhile, Sandra Fayers, who runs the *Mysteries Bookshop* in Sydney, says there is an increasing number of people coming to her New Age centre to buy books on the healing powers of prayer, and on affirmation and visualisation. "More and more people are becoming aware the power is within themselves."

As I open my eyes I see the mother, father and boy at the table in front of me smiling genuinely. They seem lighter and more at ease. The boy is laughing openly.

Did I do some good or were they just experiencing a blood-sugar hit following lunch? Was I really able to send a beam of hope? Can compassion travel through air? Did God or the universal energy source hear my modest plea that these

people feel some peace?

I'll never know the answer. But at a practical level, looking across at me and seeing a relaxed, smiling face could only have been a welcome change.

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