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# The Power of Prayer

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# **THE POWER OF PRAYER**

Victoria Dawn Thompson

PIM 73

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this paper to all my parents who have made it possible for me to be able to pursue a Master's Degree education. I thank my mother Tonya Thompson and father Tyrone Thompson, and honor the blood within me of millions of grandmothers and grandfathers who endured the tortures of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and an entire lifetime in America as a slave... thank you for being strong and not giving up on life. I thank my professors Nikoi Kote-Nikoi, Tatsushi Arai, Teresa Healy, Ken Williams, John Ungerleider, Paula Green and Capstone Advisor Karen Blanchard for imparting on me the wisdom which they have gained through years of study and professional practice. I thank my siblings Sterling, Nicole, Porsha, and Crystal for their continued support and encouragement. Finally, I thank the Christ spirit who taught me to love unconditionally and be fearless through his example.

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## **ABSTRACT**

“If words are arbitrary, *how does prayer have power?*” is the question of inquiry in this paper. An unobtrusive Content Analysis inquiry methodology was used to answer this question. The answer lies in the finding that words and thoughts are not the same thing, and our thoughts expand beyond the audible and visible. The implication for professional practice these findings present is that a deeper awareness of “Self” is needed to understand people’s miraculous way of resolving conflict via prayer.

## Introduction: Contextual Information and Research Question

It can be historically seen that most humans do not repetitively do something that doesn't yield the results they are looking for; one would consider this insanity. The fact that prayer is something people of various cultures and spiritual or religious backgrounds have been doing repetitively (daily) over thousands of years is empirical evidence that prayer works. People of various cultures and spiritual or religious backgrounds use prayer as a method of conflict resolution, believing that prayer alone has the power to resolve a conflict (change or manifest a reality). Prayer exists in many forms – free-verse, prose, chants, mantras, songs (e.g. The Bible's Psalms or the Song of Solomon), etc., and is done in many ways such as with body movements (e.g. yoga) or with objects (e.g. beaded Holy Rosary necklaces). Yet both a word's spelling and its attributed meaning are arbitrary. The concept of "father" could have easily been given the name "son." Languages are always evolving, their older forms becoming extinct (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). The same phonetic utterance can have different meanings across different languages or different meanings within one language. It is my epistemological position that God could have said "Let there be light" in any language and there would have been light. Thus, if words are arbitrary, *how does prayer have power?* This is the paradox I will search to find an answer to and deliver with this paper. To do so, I will investigate:

Does prayer have to be done in a language that the user understands to work?

Does prayer work without words or without sound?  
Is there a universal formula for prayer to work?

I define “prayer” as thought created with the intention of manifesting a particular reality. I define “power” as authority over a living entity (e.g. spiritual being) or non-living matter, with the ability to change it in whatever way one wishes. It is my personal experiences with the mystical nature of prayer and power that has led me to do this study. My experiences with abnormal involuntary movements particularly with my tongue has led me to verbally speak in many languages (e.g. ancient Sanskrit) when praying. I have come to identify the languages I speak through listeners identifying it because they speak the language, and through my recognition of it from overhearing speakers of the language (e.g. Sanskrit-speaking swamis at the Hollywood Vedanta Society Temple). In my experiences, I came to realize that every word of my thoughts was also in the foreign language that I was verbally speaking in that moment. In all the occurrences, English was still a language I could speak, but it felt like a second language that I simply learned. The feeling of English suddenly becoming my secondary language is indescribable. The language that was coming from the movement of my tongue in each occurrence was only a product of the sudden primary language of my mind (perhaps my spiritual mind). If soon after the experience I were to speak to someone, the first words to come out my mouth would automatically be in the foreign language, and then I would have to stop my speech to intentionally speak in English. After speaking in English for a long period ranging from hours to over a week after the



onset of each experience, I would find that my mind had come back to thinking in English. Ever since the first occurrence of these experiences, I have wondered what transforms my prayer from a simple creation of well-intentioned thoughts to an out-of-body experience where I become a spiritual being living in a human world instead of a human being living in a spiritual world. Seeking to understand prayer more deeply is one step on this quest of knowing.

In my experience of working in a corporate environment, prayer was one thing that united the employees of different ethnic and religious backgrounds at Unified Protective Services, Inc. (Unified). Unified is a company that offers armed and unarmed security guard services in multiple US States to various institutions including banks, schools, residencies and to individuals such as the Egyptian Pope Tawadros during his visit to Los Angeles and while I was completing my practicum. A key issue in the cultural environment of this organization is the lack of linguistic understanding across cultures that leads to violence. The purpose of Unified is to resolve these conflicts with as little physical combat as possible, while complying with the laws surrounding the power to arrest (to prevent lawsuits). Unified Security Guards often are the mediators of disputes at their post-locations. I enjoyed praying together over meals with my Arab-speaking Egyptian and Spanish-speaking Mexican co-workers during my 6-month practicum at Unified Protective Services, Inc. We were unified in prayer, and not just “unified” nominally.

In my linguistics research, I found that it was not until c1300 that the written English language added the word "language" into its lexicon, deriving it from Anglo-Norman and the Old French languages (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). Shortly after this written reflection of language began, John Wycliffe published the first English translation of the Christian Bible in 1382. This is the very first found written occurrence of the word "prayer" in the English language (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). It appears the English people did not write of prayer nor language until approximately 800 years after the formation of their language (Old English) and the widespread adoption of the Christian faith which occurred within the same century. Old English began c. 500 AD and Christianity went from being a minority faith in England during the 4th Century AD to having grown its presence with the mission of Augustine in 597 AD ("Christianity in Britain," 2017). Methodological limitations prevent drawing causal inferences for why it appears "prayer" or written introspection on language was not written about by the lay person in England for 800 years, or why they were suddenly written around in the same time period. Perhaps during that time, these two concepts ("prayer" and "language") were only written about in French by the nobility. Perhaps it was the written introspection of language in c1300 that inspired Wycliffe to translate the Christian Bible into English in 1382. Now moving towards a more current thinking,

"According to a 2013 Pew Research Poll, over half of Americans pray every day. A 2012 poll found that over 75 percent of Americans believe that prayer is an

important part of daily life. Other polls indicate that even some atheists and religiously unaffiliated individuals admit that they sometimes pray” (Routledge, 2014).

Research will give us insight into some of the texts that convinced millions of people across the world (just as it did the people of England) to believe in the power of prayer.

## **Literature Review**

The use of spirituality in the practice of peacebuilding and conflict resolution is very powerful (Arai, 2014b). Songs are used as a form of prayer in many religions and spiritualities – the words often being a monologue (dialogue) to a higher power which can cause it to sometimes feel informal. Matthews-Giba (1999) takes an in-depth look at the religious roots of mediation, particularly emphasizing the influence of spiritual song during a Franciscan mediation. He starts with an event occurring in the 13th century where “reframing the context” is used as a mediation technique. The event takes place in Italy and involves St. Francis of Assisi mediating a dispute between the Mayor and Bishop of Assisi with a spiritual song (Matthews-Giba, 1999, p. 1695). The song, being about God giving humans the radiant Sun and all of creation, was not centered on being a good Christian, but instead on the harmonious order of creation (Matthews-Giba, 1999, p. 1965). The song changed the context of the parties’ dispute from a contentious battle to the ordered creation that surrounded the disputants (Matthews-Giba, 1999, p. 1695-6). In effect, the disputants realized how their dispute caused disorder in the

community. “By pointing to characteristics found in nature, such as gentleness, simplicity, and endurance, St. Francis presented to the Bishop and Mayor of Assisi a model of generosity, virtue, and peace that the disputants relied upon to settle their dispute” (Matthews-Giba, 1999, p. 1696). While the spiritual song St. Francis played may not have been a prayer, it certainly reveals the power of spirituality in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

In Tatsushi Arai’s (2014a) Post-War Development and Peacebuilding course at SIT Graduate Institute (SIT), he teaches students different approaches to reconciliation (and to peacebuilding in general) in the aftermath of violence. One approach that he labels as a healing approach is the Theological/Penitence approach: “Contextualize the guilt in the relationship between Self and God. Internalize conflict through prayer, fasting, and celibacy. The Self-Other dimension (revenge) and the Self-Self dimension (trauma) unresolved” are important factors to consider with this approach (Arai, 2014a, p. 68). Larry Dossey, MD shares his perspective on prayer in the introduction of Thich Nhất Hanh’s (2006) book *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen your Spiritual Practice*:

“The urge to Pray is universal. We know of no culture, past or present, in which prayer does not occur. People pray when they are happy and sad, during celebrations and tragedies, at births, and deaths, during peace and war, in cathedrals and cars, in poverty and plenty... prayer is a continual presence on earth, a constant global hum. And like the [cosmic] background hum of the universe, prayer reminds us of our origins. For what is prayer but communication with the Absolute, from whence we arose, with whom we are connected, and to whom we shall return?” (p. i).

Here, Dossey introduces “communication with the Absolute” as an essential component of prayer. I find this useful for my analysis of whether a formula (certain components) is required for prayer to work. Arai (2014b) discusses in his *Theory and Practice of Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation Study Guide* how “joint prayers” are a “mediative process” (p. 72). He writes “in many cases, these mediative processes constitute an integral part of the kinds of social activities that many people do not recognize as peacebuilding activities” and they are “a category of diverse yet purposive activities aimed at what their proponents view as meaningful contributions to conflict transformation and peacebuilding, broadly defined” (Aria, 2014b, p. 72-73). Perhaps prayer is not recognized as a peacebuilding activity because of its mystical nature.

**With regard to the importance of how prayer is formulated:**

During my Master’s degree program in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation at SIT, I studied John Paul Lederach. In his 2005 book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* Lederach writes:

“Peacebuilding requires a vision of relationship. Stated bluntly, if there is no capacity to imagine the canvas of mutual relationships and situate oneself as part of that historic and ever-evolving web, peacebuilding collapses. The centrality of relationship provides the context and potential for breaking violence, for it brings people into the pregnant moments of the moral imagination: the space of recognition that ultimately the quality of our life is dependent on the quality of life of others. It recognizes that the well-being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy’s grandchildren” (Lederach, 2005, p. 35).

In terms of my definition of prayer, imagination such as what Lederach describes here is an integral component of prayer as it accompanies the creation of thought. “Not

confined by what is, or what is known, imagination is the art of creating what does not exist" (Lederach, 2005, p. 28). As it relates to spirituality, Lederach (2005) gives us a deeper understanding of what he means by moral imagination stating that

"we typically connect moral with morality and then relegate morality to the sphere of religion. Though I come from a religious community, the moral imagination is not the commodity or exclusive realm of a particular religious belief, much less religious establishments or systems..." (p.28).

"as terms, they beckon us to rise toward something beyond those things that are immediately apparent and visible. The quality of this phrase I most wish to embrace reverberates in this potential to find a way to transcend, to move beyond what exists while still living in it" (Lederach, 2005, p. 27-28).

It appears that Lederach's moral imagination is no different than prayer in its purpose of bringing about what is not immediately apparent or visible, and transcending or moving beyond what exists. Tanya Luhrmann, a Stanford University anthropologist who studies how evangelicals use imagination in prayer says the goal of those prayers "is to use your imagination to make what you're focusing on more present. That changes you. . . ." (Boorstein, 2013). Luhrmann's description here is useful for considering the temporal nature of prayer, and how change can come after the passing of a time period of which one is not focused.

In his 1992 text *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard J. Foster writes that "our problem is that we assume prayer is something to master the way we master algebra or auto mechanics. That puts us in the 'on-top' position, where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent" (p. 7-8). He goes on to quote

Emilie Griffin who writes, “to pray means to be willing to be naïve” (Foster, 1992, p. 8).

This data suggests that it may be beneficial to not assume to know a formula for prayer to work. In my view, to be willing to be naïve is to also have trust in a higher power who will provide wisdom and guidance.

**With regard to the importance of faith in prayer:**

Thich Nhất Hạnh writes “If our prayer doesn’t have the energy of faith, compassion, and love, it is like trying to use a telephone when there is no electricity in the wire. The mere fact that we pray doesn’t lead to a result” (Thich, 2006, p.3). This is useful for my analysis of the importance of faith in prayer. There is more to prayer than just words. As it relates to faith, Foster (1992) describes a human dilemma:

“We today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We experience the agony of prayerlessness. We are not sure what holds us back” (p. 7).

This data is useful as it reveals how prayer is a practice. It is a practice that one can aspire to learn and become very competent at doing. Claire Halverson and Aqeel Tirmizi (2008) share The Learning Stages model – a model that describes the “change process in individual behavior in four stages using two variables: awareness and behavior or skill (p. 69). I have found this model to mirror my understanding of the process of learning the power of prayer. The Naïve Stage is where we begin, the

Learning Stage follows it, then the Performing Stage, and finally the Habit Stage (Halverson and Tirmizi, 2008, p. 69).

		<b>BEHAVIOR OR SKILL</b>	
		<b>Incompetent</b>	<b>Competent</b>
<b>A W A R E N E S S</b>	<b>C O N S C I O U S</b>	<p><b>LEARNING STAGE</b></p> <p><b>Conscious Incompetence</b> We are conscious of our lack of skills and unable to behave differently. We learn from mistakes. Acceptance of ignorance is critical in order to move forward.</p> <p><b>We know that we do not know.</b></p>	<p><b>PERFORMANCE STAGE</b></p> <p><b>Conscious Competence</b> Awareness and skills come together in proficiency and high performance.</p> <p><b>We know that we know.</b></p>
	<b>U N C O N S C I O U S</b>	<p><b>NAÏVE STAGE</b></p> <p><b>Unconscious Incompetence</b> The beginning of the learning journey for all of us.</p> <p><b>We do not know that we do not know.</b></p>	<p><b>HABIT STAGE</b></p> <p><b>Unconscious Competence</b> We act skillfully without awareness of either positive or negative implications.</p> <p><b>We do not know that we know.</b></p>

\*Author Unknown

Figure 1 The Learning Stages model (no date)

Foster (1992) writes: “healthy prayer necessitates frequent experiences of the common, earthy, run-of-the-mill variety... To be spiritually fit to scale the Himalayas of the spirit, we need regular exercise in the hills and valleys of ordinary life” (p. xii).

Applying his perspective to The Learning Stages model, it is apparent that being able to “spiritually fit to scale the Himalayas of the spirit” would come with conscious



competence (the Performing Stage). Halverson and Tirmizi (2008) explain that after considerable practice at the Performing Stage, “we reach the Habit Stage, where we become unconscious of our acquired competence” (p 69). As it applies to the power of prayer, this Habit Stage would be the stage where we would find prayer most powerful.

**With regard to the importance of the words in prayer:**

In his 2011 text *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*,

Larry Dossey describes his perspective of prayer:

“Prayer may be individual or communal, private public. It may be offered in words, sighs, gestures, or silences, or silence. Prayer may be a conscious activity, of course, but as we shall see, it may flow also from the depths of the unconscious. Prayer may even emerge in dreams, completely bypassing our waking awareness” (p.6).

Dossey’s description of prayer challenges the limitations of what form prayer can take. It is data such as this that inspires me to dig deeper into the depths of prayer, to understand why prayer is so powerful.

**With regard to the importance of sound in prayer, as free verse, prose, song, mantra or chant:**

Many people all over the world pray with their entire bodies and not just their mouths. Yoga is one example of a spiritual practice that involves the full body and is practiced in Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Bon (ancient Tibet religion) (Nath, 1998, p. 793). I have also learned through personal practice that yoga is practiced in the Vedic religion, Hinduism, Self-Realization Fellowship, and Vedanta Society (a US-version of Hinduism). Yoga has been known as a way people pray to different Gods such as

Surya, the Hindu Sun God (Mitchell, 1998, p. 40). Aside from studying the works of Lederach at SIT, I also studied Dr. Carl G. Jung, a renowned practitioner in the field of Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. Jung writes

“Quite apart from the charm of the new and the fascination of the half-understood, there is good cause for Yoga to have many adherents. It offers the possibility of controllable experience and thus satisfies the scientific need for “facts”; and, besides this, by reason of its breadth and depth, its vulnerable age, its doctrine and method, which include every phase of life it promises undreamed-of possibilities” (Self-Realization Fellowship, 1982, p. 6).

Indeed, the practice of yoga itself involves gaining the self-control to reach what one may feel is impossible. In my experience of taking various types of yoga classes across the US, I have found that all of my instructors lead their students to let their efforts to achieve what seems impossible (i.e. a physical pose) reflect or mirror their efforts to achieve what seems impossible in other areas of their life – whether they be personal conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, etc. This silent reflection that occurs throughout the meditation is a prayer, a dialogue with the inner self. As Jung points out that yoga offers the possibility of controllable experience, North Dakota State University psychology professor Clay Routledge, also sees self-control as a benefit of prayer:

“Studies have demonstrated that self-control is like a muscle. That is, it gets fatigued. You can only do so many push-ups before your muscles give out. Similarly, activities that require self-control are fatiguing, making it more difficult to make good choices the more you have to use your “self-control muscle.” Think about it. You are more likely to lose your cool or engage in mindless eating when you are mentally exhausted. Recent research indicates that prayer can help you get more out of your “self-control muscle.” Research participants who said a prayer prior to a mentally exhausting task were better able to exercise self-control following that task” (2014).

It is apparent that prayer can be done without sound. Thich Nhất Hạnh (2006) writes “a prayer can be a silent meditation or full chorus of chanting. In some traditions people sit and pray, in others they lie prostrate, kneel, stand, or even dance” (p. 1). This perspective on prayer extends further into the possibilities of how prayer can take form.

**With regard to the importance of knowing one’s own will power:**

Foster (1992) seems to share my perspective on prayer as it relates to my definition of power:

“In Authoritative Prayer we are calling forth the will of the Father upon the earth. Here we are not so much speaking to God as speaking for God. We are not asking God to do something; rather, we are using the authority of God to command something done” (p. 229).

Data such as this helps me to understand what power is (as it relates to prayer) and why prayer is so powerful to other people.

**Research/Practitioner Inquiry Design**

The Content Analysis method is an unobtrusive method to conduct research. It is done by analyzing materials instead of obtaining data directly from people and groups by means of in-depth interviews or observational ways. Hesse-Biber and Leavy explain in their 2011 text that Content Analysis and other unobtrusive methods use nonliving materials “to study the social world. Texts, in their varied forms [or artifacts], are used as the starting point for understanding social processes and generating theories about social life” (p. 227). I chose to use this data collection method because it

has the potential to provide empirical evidence that is not biased. From my previous experience of using the Content Analysis method for a research project in an SIT course, I was told by my professor Tatsushi Arai that the data I presented was unbiased and objective. It was my hope that this research paper would do the same. I also chose to use this data collection method as it will yield the most dynamic type of data for my research. I define “dynamic” as appealing to different types of interest a person may have (e.g. historical perspectives, modern-day perspectives, phenomenon across cultures, literature across genres, etc.). In my research, I worked to gather and analyze data that is subjective and speaks to personal experiences. I collected as much data from as many varying religions/spiritualities or non-spiritualities as possible. All data presented is of equal relevance to the context of each section of inquiry. My upbringing as a Christian gives me a deeper understanding and experience of prayer within this religion.

Content Analysis can be employed qualitatively or quantitatively. I use a qualitative approach to Content Analysis that is mainly inductive and follows “a method of research design that allows the investigator to, metaphorically, dive in and out of the data as she or he proceeds” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 235). Hesse-Biber & Leavy explain that in this model, “a researcher generates new understandings, with varied levels of specificity, during each phase of the project and uses this information to double back and gain more information” (p. 235). This method is not a linear model of

research design (like the quantitative approach) where the researcher has a preconceived set of steps and follow a vertical path through each phase of the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 235). My literature review and data are sometimes the same because I am doing secondary research where I am using literature to go into depth.

In my research, I interpreted and reflected on data as I go. To deconstruct these pre-existing texts and artifacts, and to interrogate the legitimate power of prayer, I conducted a systemic examination of the written texts across various religions and spiritualities. I used two different approaches to analyze the data in my qualitative approach to Content Analysis: a semiological reading of the text approach and a deconstruction approach. I use a semiological analysis to examine the way meaning is constructed through a process of signification or connotation. As for the deconstruction approach, Hesse-Biber and Leavy explain that:

“The aim of deconstruction is not to find ‘the truth’ of the text but rather to displace assumptions within the text (such as the meaning, the truth, and authorship/authority). Ultimately, this process shows that the meaning of a text is never single or fixed” (p. 237).

These methods were all very useful tools in my analysis of the data gathered.

As seen in the Introduction, linguistics research was also used as a methodology to inform my inquiry discussion. Linguistics research often reveals deeper meanings and understandings of concepts or phenomena, as well as the origins or time in history when their attributed meanings or understandings came about.

Despite all of these carefully chosen methods, there are limitations that I have, one being the fact that most religious texts (e.g. the Bible) that are in English have been translated from their original scripts. There is a margin of error in such practices because the meaning of words is contextual to the time and place in which they are used. It is my hope that all translations convey the actual meaning of the author. Another limitation of my research is that it questions something that is theoretical and full of mysticism: supernatural power and prayer. Most of the data regarding prayer is essentially theories and even claims of the miracles prayer has caused are based in epistemological positions. Despite these limitations, there are indeed verifiable variables of prayer than can be analyzed for the purpose of answering my inquiry question.

## **Presentation of Data**

### **With regard to the importance of how prayer is formulated:**

- When conducting linguistics research, I found that the Oxford English Dictionary (2016) defines "Amen" as being the ending "part of a formula." This suggests that there is a formula for prayer to work.
- Within the Catholic religion, there are formulated steps to Pray the Rosary, which include making the sign of the cross, saying the "Apostles' Creed, "Our Father" prayer, three "Hail Mary" prayers, "Glory be the Father prayer", "Our

Father Prayer”, etc. all the while meditating on different virtues and mysteries of the faith (“The Holy Rosary,” n.d.).

→ The French psychotherapist Emile Coué introduced into America around 1920 a method of self-help stressing autosuggestion (Couéism), featuring the slogan “Every day in every way I am getting better and better (“couéism,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2016).

→ Within the faith of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad says “it is better to teach knowledge one hour in the night than to pray all night” (Freeman, 2014).

**With regard to the importance of faith in prayer:**

→ The Christian Bible quotes Jesus as saying

“Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (New King James Version, Mark 11:24).

→ In *Journey To Self-Realization* (2000) Paramahansa Yogananda says:

“Once you have said, “I will,” never give in. If you say, “I will never catch cold,” and the next morning you have a terrible cold and are discouraged, you are allowing your will to remain weak. You must not get discouraged when you see something happening that is contrary to what you have affirmed. Keep on believing, knowing it will be so. If outwardly you say, “I will,” but inwardly think, “I can’t,” then you neutralize the power of thought and emasculate your will... Develop your will power and positive thinking, and you will find your body, mind, and soul working to mold everything in your life according to your will” (p. 27).

→ Thich Nhất Hạnh (2006) writes “some people pray regularly with devout faith, others pray only as a last-minute plea for help” (p. 1).

→ Reporter Michelle Boorstein (2013) posted an article in The Washington Post, sharing that “new research on atheists by the Pew Research Center shows... of all Americans who say they don’t believe in God – not all call themselves “atheists” – 12 percent say they pray.” Boorstein (2013) also shared

“Atheists deny religion’s claim of a supernatural god but are starting to look more closely at the “very real effect” that practices such as going to church, prayer and observance of a Sabbath have on the lives of the religious, said Paul Fidalgo, a spokesman for the secular advocacy group the Center for Inquiry.”

**With regard to the importance of sound in prayer, as free verse, prose, song, mantra or chant:**

→ Paramahansa Yogananda (2016), who brought the wisdom of the East to the West, writes in *Autobiography of a Yogi* that

“the infinite potencies of sound derive from the Creative Word, Aum, the cosmic vibratory power behind all atomic energies. Any word spoken with clear realization and deep concentration has a materializing value... The Aum vibration that reverberates throughout the universe has three manifestations or gunas, those of creation, preservation, and destruction. Each time a man utters a word he puts into operation one of the three qualities of Aum. This is the lawful reason behind the injunction of all scriptures that man should speak the truth.”

→ Connor (2012) writes that in *Anam Cara*, John O’Donohue says the same thing, but in a sweet Celtic way: “Each person brings sound out of silence and coaxes the invisible to become visible.”

→ Paramahansa Yogananda also writes in *Scientific Healing Affirmations* (2016) that

"spoken words are sounds occasioned by the vibrations of thoughts; thoughts are vibrations sent forth by the ego or by the soul. Every word you utter should be potent with soul vibration. A man’s words are lifeless if he fails to



impregnate them with spiritual force... Words saturated with sincerity, conviction, faith, and intuition are like highly explosive vibration bombs which, when set off, shatter rocks of difficulties and create the change desired."

→ Conner (2012) writes:

"If you've been a silent pray-er, just speaking your prayers aloud can be an adventure. But if you want to go all the way, sing them. In all the ancient monastic traditions, monks sang gorgeous rhythmic chants. If you'd like to hear truly sacred music, listen to Gregorian or Byzantine chants, ancient Sanskrit chants sung by Deva Premal, or the transcendental melodies written by Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century. As you listen, notice how sweet the music is and how easy to follow. Once the pattern gets inside you, it wants to ride out on your breath. Let it. Spiritual singing is powerful medicine. Andrew Newberg discovered why: singing and spiritual practice stimulate the brain. An active anterior cingulate tamps down the fear that pours constantly out of our ancient fight-or-flight limbic brain."

→ Within the Ramakrishna Tradition, "mantra power is increased if you have faith, and it increases even more if the teacher has faith" ("Guru, Mantra and Initiation," 2012).

→ Within the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA) led by John Morton

"a mantra is a specific sound or tone which, when spoken or chanted, can invoke a spiritual essence. A mantra can be said out loud or inwardly. Mantras, or tones, are sounds that originate from various dimensions and planes of being. Some originate from what we call the lower worlds – the astral, causal, mental, or etheric realms. When chanted, these tones lift you to the level from which they came. Most of the tones we teach originate in the pure realms of Light – the Soul realm or above. When chanted, they invoke the essence of perfect purity" ("The Hu Chant and Breathing Meditation," (n.d.).

"Hu," meaning God in Sanskrit, is one of the mantras used in the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness by members all around the world.

→ Through my personal communication with members within the Buddhist faith Soka Gakkai International, I learned that “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo” is a mantra chanted repeatedly which means “devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound or vibration” (personal communication, February 2017). They believe that you can manifest many things when you connect your vibration with the vibration of the universe.

**With regard to the importance of the words in prayer:**

→ There is a quote by Aeschylus (525-456 BCE) saying “Words are the physicians of a mind diseased” (Chang, 2006, p. 474).

→ James Baldwin writes in *Notes of a Native Son*, 1963, “Every legend contains its residuum of truth, and the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it” (Chang, 2006, p. 477).

→ In my personal life experience of participating in Christian organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom, I have found that there are Christians in many places around the world that believe speaking in tongues is a way to pray to God without the devil knowing what is being said. “A person who isn't spiritual doesn't accept the things of God's Spirit, for they are nonsense to him. He can't understand them because they are spiritually evaluated” (1 Corinthians 2:14 International Standard Version). Yet all of the people I came in contact with who spoke in tongues also did not understand

their utterances. This suggests that the source of power in prayer may not be the words or the even the sounds, but the intent.

→ Deepak Chopra (1994), a prominent leader within the New Age Movement, also sees power in intent, writing that

“attention energizes, and intention transforms... Intention is the real power behind desire. Intent alone is very powerful, because intent is desire without detachment to the outcome. Desire alone is weak, because desire in most people is attention with attachment. Intention combined with detachment leads to life-centered, present-moment awareness” (p. 73).

In regards to this, Chopra (1994) explains

“attachment... is based on fear and insecurity – and the need for security is based on not knowing the true Self. The source of wealth, of abundance, or of anything in the physical world is the Self; it is the consciousness that knows how to fulfill every need” (p. 84).

→ Chopra (1994) further shares

“your intent is for the future, but your attention is in the present. As long as your attention is in the present, then your intention for the future is created in the present. You must accept the present as is. Accept the present and intend the future” (p. 73).

### **With regard to the importance of knowing one’s own will power:**

→ The Self-Realization Fellowship (1984) defines prayer as “the unlimited power of God within each of us” (p. 5).

→ In *Autobiography of a Yogi* (2006) Paramahansa Yogananda writes

“the will, projected from the point between the eyebrows, is known by yogis as the broadcasting apparatus of thought. When the feeling is calmly concentrated on the heart, it acts as a mental radio, and can receive the messages of others from far or near. In telepathy the fine vibrations of thoughts

in one person's mind are transmuted through the subtle vibrations of astral ether and then through the grosser earthly ether, creating electrical waves which, in turn, translate themselves into thought waves in the mind of the other person."

- The Christian Bible shares Jesus's words "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do [such as Jesus healing with his words], because I am going to the Father" (English Standard Version, John 14:12).
- There is an ancient Kemetite saying in *Temt Tchaas: Egyptian Proverbs*, Muata Ashaya Ashby, ed., 1994: "If Mind and Divine Speech are used as meant, you will not differ from the immortals in any way" (Chang, 2006, p. 474).
- In *Journey To Self-Realization* (2000) Paramahansa Yogananda writes:

"Thought is the matrix of all creation; thought created everything. If you hold on to that truth with indomitable will, you can materialize any thought. There is nothing that can gainsay it" (p. 26-27).
- In Hindu spirituality Ramakrishna says "God is everywhere but He is most manifest in man. So serve man as God. That is as good as worshipping God" (Freeman, 2014).
- In the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Tradition "the atman within is the real guru. The atman is nothing but God, or the Ishta. In other words, that guru is the real guru, which is God" ("Guru, Mantra and Initiation," 2012).

## Analysis of Data

My analysis of the data collected revealed five major learnings:

1. In all its worldly types, prayer is the act of sending a message, like mailing a letter or sending an email.
2. In all its worldly types, prayer messages are only sent to an entity of which one cannot see with their physical eyes or cannot communicate with effectively (e.g. the higher spirit of a rebellious teenager).
3. Like words, body movements and positions (e.g. yoga or standing on bended-knees) also act as prayer messages because they have attributed meanings.
4. Thought occurs without the ability to hear or speak (e.g. deaf people have thoughts).
5. Worldwide, people send prayer messages to someone who they know has direct access to the thoughts of other people or forces of nature (e.g. God).

### **With regard to the importance of how prayer is formulated:**

1. Using the deconstructive approach of Content Analysis, I found that in all its worldly types, prayer is the act of sending a message, like mailing a letter or sending an email. The intrinsic nature of a prayer includes a greeting or salutation to whom the message is for, the message, and the closing (e.g. "amen," "thank you," etc.). *This is what prayer is essentially; its purpose.* Verbal signatures are often omitted in prayer messages. Prayer messages can be short like a mobile

phone text message, omitting both the greeting and the closing, or long like a letter from a wrongly convicted inmate who is begging for help out of prison.

**With regard to the importance of faith in prayer:**

2. Using a semiological approach to Content Analysis, I found that in all its worldly types, prayer messages are only sent to an entity of which one cannot see with their physical eyes or cannot communicate with effectively (e.g. the higher spirit of a rebellious teenager). People across the world do not pray to a living person or a person with which they feel will understand them when they speak. Thus, although prayer may be packaged with a language of the world, it is delivered by a different (non-material) means to be received by a being with a non-material form (i.e. a spiritual being). In order to send a message to a non-material being, the form of the message would also be non-material for them to receive it – this is *thought*. *This is the necessary component of prayer that causes its transformative nature.* If you wrote a material letter to God and left it in a tree hole, it would remain unopened forever. But God would already know what the letter said because God would have received the thoughts that preceded each written word. Likewise, we can feel the vibrations of sound from a vocalized prayer, but we cannot feel a vibration of the thought that preceded the vocalized prayer. It is that thought that preceded the sounds which was sent (delivered on a non-material realm/dimension) to the recipient before the sentence was even finished.

**With regard to the importance of sound in prayer, as free verse, prose, song, mantra or chant:**

3. Using a semiological approach that examined signification and connotation in the data, I found that like words, body movements and positions (e.g. yoga or standing on bended-knees) also act as prayer messages because they have attributed meanings. With no way to package body movements/positions with a greeting or closing, the greeting and closing in a prayer message are done through thought alone. In regards to going beyond what is initially visible or audible, Lederach (2005) writes:

“Voice is not the externalization of sound and words. Literally and metaphorically, voice is not located in the mouth or on the tongue where words are formed. Voice is deeper. Words are only a small expression of that depth... Voice is located where breath dies and is born, where what is taken in gives life, where what has served its purpose is released anew. Voice is located at the source of rhythm, the internal drumming of life itself. When the poet Emerson said we walk to the “beat of a different drummer,” he was talking about voice, the sense of internal rhythm. We cannot underestimate the enormity of the Genesis stories, and of parallel narratives in many traditions, of how life itself came to be: God breathed into clay. Life was created from the place where breath and earth met, and from that place voice arose. Voice is the essence of being a person. Where you find that meeting place, the home where heart and lungs gather, where breath meets blood, there you will find voice. When you find your way to that home, there you will find yourself, the unique gift that God has placed on this earth. You will find the place from which your journey begins and to where it returns when the road is confused and hard. This is the deeper sense of vocation” (p. 166).

This beautifully written passage relates to my analysis of *how prayer works (how miracles happen)*.

**With regard to the importance of the words in prayer:**

4. Using a deconstructive approach to Content Analysis, I found that thought occurs without the ability to hear or speak (e.g. deaf people have thoughts).

Thought existed before words or the first human language was created. The fact that infants cry, laugh and smile indicate that they have thoughts, even when they have no human vocabulary. Babies express these thoughts with whatever sounds their mouths can make given the fact that having no teeth limits the range of sound they can make. Therefore, thoughts are not words but a different form of communication that we can innately understand. Its form is mystical; thought could be a sound, a sight, or a sensation/feeling. Therefore, underneath its clothing, prayer is not a human language – prayer is thought which may not even be the form of a language at all seeing as those humans used thought to create language. *Thus, the power of prayer is its form as thought. This is why prayer works.* Common phrases by English speakers are “a thought appeared” or “a thought popped into my head.” Barry Gordon (2013), professor of neurology and cognitive science at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine writes in regards to this:

“We are aware of a tiny fraction of the thinking that goes on in our minds, and we can control only a tiny part of our conscious thoughts. The vast majority of our thinking efforts goes on subconsciously. Only one or two of these thoughts are likely to breach into consciousness at a time. Slips of the tongue and accidental actions offer glimpses of our unfiltered subconscious mental life... Even deliberate decisions are not completely under our



power. Our awareness only sets the start and the end of a goal but leaves the implementation to unconscious mental processes. Thus, a batter can decide to swing at a ball that comes into the strike zone and can delineate the boundaries of that zone. But when the ball comes sailing through, unconscious mental functions take over. The actions required to send him to first base are too complex and unfold too quickly for our comparatively slow conscious control to handle.”

These scientific findings align with my analysis of the data presented. Since the subconscious mind thinks on its own, this tells us that the subconscious is a being that is both a part of and separate from us with a mind of its own. If we expand our consciousness, we will find that that being is connected to others in the same way that it is connected to us. It gives us all breath. As MSIA’s John-Roger (1997) states “very frankly, something else is breathing you, other than you, ’cause you can’t stop that. Even if you went unconscious it would still breathe you. If you went into a coma, it would still breathe you.” It is why our thoughts can be sent (delivered) to others. “Openness” during prayer – mentally opening one’s mind to receive or exchange on an etheric level – is a way to expand our consciousness and access the part that is directly connected to the subconscious of the people of which our prayer is about. *This is why prayer has power.* I define “etheric level” as a plane in which one’s energetic body (e.g. spirit) takes form. Lederach (2005) states that “in conflict resolution and peacebuilding we expend a lot of energy teaching people how to listen [to others]” (p. 166). He goes on to say that “I am increasingly of the view that

people who listen the best and the deepest to others are those who have found a way to be in touch with their own voices” (Lederach, 2005, p. 166). Indeed, if we listen to our thoughts more, we can understand more the universal “language” of thought (because words and thoughts are not the same thing and we will have a deeper understanding in how is it that people can think the way they do).

Thinking transforms thought from its mystical form to our linguistic form, like describing an image in our head or relaying a message in our own words. As Stephen Levine says: “so much of our life is a reflection of what has just occurred rather than a direct participation in the unfolding moment” (p. 42). Our thinking can be a reflection of what thoughts are surfacing within our subconscious.

The excerpts above are the first additional data gathered after diving back in and out of the data during the analysis phase of the project. As will be seen in the final analysis to follow, the inductive qualitative approach to Content Analysis brought about further research and I was able to gain more information useful for deeper analysis and generating new understandings.

**Going further into depth on the concept of “unity of consciousness,” the following data was collected:**

→ The director of the Center for Spirituality and the Mind at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Andrew Newberg, conducted a study of “Tibetan Buddhists in meditation and Franciscan nuns in prayer which showed

comparable decreased activity in the parts of the brain that are associated with sense of self and spatial orientation in both groups” (Schiffman, 2012). These findings align with mine.

→ New York Time’s bestselling author Chris Mooney (2014) wrote an article about the emerging science of the “self:”

“Much depends on what you mean by the "self" in the first place. If you think of your self as an essence—something you'd describe with adjectives like "unified," "continuous," and "unchanging"—well, science has some bad news for you. *New Scientist* [magazine], for instance, cites an array of neuroscience experiments showing how easy it is to make us believe we are outside of our bodies, or that we're in the body of a mannequin, or that a rubber hand on a table is our hand...and much else.”

In Mooney’s (2014) article regarding neuroscience challenging the idea that we have seamless, continuous, consistent identities, he writes “There are an estimated 100 billion neurons in the human brain, and as for the connections between them? Sheesh. There may be as many as 100 trillion synapses, or spaces where these neurons exchange information.”

→ Pim van Lommel, a renowned Dutch scientist in the field of neuroscience, has similar findings after investigating why patients with near-death experiences remembered the events that had taken place when they were declared dead. He writes:

“The mind seems to contain everything at once in a timeless and placeless interconnectedness. ... The information is not encoded in a medium but is stored non-locally as wave functions in nonlocal space, which also means

that all information is always and everywhere immediately available” (van Lommel, 2010, p. 224, 244).

“In this new approach, complete and endless consciousness with retrievable memories has its origins in a nonlocal space in the form of indestructible and not directly observable wave functions.

These wave functions, which store all aspects of consciousness in the form of information, are always present in and around the body. The brain and the body merely function as a relay station receiving part of the overall consciousness and part of our memories in our waking consciousness in the form of measurable and constantly changing electromagnetic fields.



*Figure 2 Author Unknown*

In this view, brain function can be seen as a transceiver; the brain does not produce but rather facilitates consciousness” (van Lommel, 2010, p. 265).

→ The Gospel of Luke also aligns with my findings:

“And when he [Jesus] was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (King James Version, Luke 17: 20-21).

→ The Self-Realization Fellowship shares the wisdom of Paramahansa Yogananda and how

“the highest wisdom is Self-realization—knowing the Self, the soul, as eternally inseparable from God...All great teachers declare that within this body is the immortal soul, a spark of That which sustains all. He who knows his soul knows this truth: “I am beyond everything finite...I am the stars, I am the waves, I am the Life of all; I am the laughter within all hearts, I am the smile on the faces of flowers and in each soul. I am the Wisdom and

Power that sustain all creation [quote by Paramahansa Yogananda]" ("How to Use Thoughts of Immortality to Awaken Your True Self," (n.d.).

→ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who is accredited for bringing Transcendental Meditation to the West, taught that transcendental consciousness serves as a bridge to three "higher" states of consciousness—cosmic consciousness, glorified cosmic consciousness (god consciousness), and unity consciousness (Purcell, 2015).

→ An ancient excerpt from "The Over-Soul", an 1841 essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson (2010), also expresses the unity of consciousness:

"...within man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. . . .(p.56)"

**With regard to the importance of knowing one's own will power:**

5. Once again using the deconstructive approach to Content Analysis, I found that worldwide, people send prayer messages to someone who they know has direct access to the thoughts of other people or forces of nature (e.g. God). People who send prayer messages to a higher power don't expect that the higher power will appeal before a problematic person/entity and plead on their behalf for whatever it is the pray-er favors. All groups belief that the higher power need not ask, beg, negotiate or demand what it wants. Instead, they believe the change occurs in

the mind of the person or natural entity (e.g. storm) as an act of the higher power. The only authentic change of mind/heart that occurs without verbal coercion or influence from another being is when a person feels like something was their own idea. Thus, it must be so that prayer messages are delivered in the form of a thought that appears before the mind of another, causing them to change their action because they think it was their own idea— when in all actuality, they heard the thought of a delivered prayer (or higher power). I was not able to find in my research any stories of God begging a person to change their evil ways. There are, however, numerous stories of how a person could not bring themselves to do something unethical (e.g. steal or inflict harm on another) because their conscious was telling them not to. This internal battle within the mind shows that they have subconscious thoughts that contradict their conscious thoughts/intentions. *This is how prayer has power.* Thich Nhất Hạnh (2006) writes:

“We and God are not two separate existences; therefore the will of God is also our own will. If we want to change, then God will not stop us from changing. The poet Nguyen Du Put it like this:

When necessary, the heavens will not stand in the way of humans.

The result of past actions can be lifted,  
future causes and conditions can be created” (p. 4).

## Conclusions

To conclude, prayer does not have to be done in a language that the user understands to work. Prayer works without words and without sound; all that is needed is *thought*. The universal formula for prayer is its purpose as a message meant to be received by a spiritual being, therefore one does not have to believe in God [in its traditional sense] but in a spiritual being (e.g. Angel/Spirit Guide). The power of prayer is its form as thought – a direct connection to our source of life’s conscience. Prayer can be more powerful with openness which expands our consciousness. Whether or not a pray-er is aware of or believes that the power of prayer is within them verses in an external force, they can still yield the power. Lederach (2015) noticed that many poets such as Attar, Saadi, Saanai, Rumi, Hafez used references to the reed flute; he quotes Faredun Hodizoda, the son of the most prominent living scholar on Persian literature in Tajikistan, Rasul Hodizoda, as he able to explain to him the meaning of the flute:

you see, the flute is made by cutting the cane, the reed. When the flute is played, lips are placed on the mouth piece and breath is blown into [the] reed. The sound, you may have noticed, is mournful. It calls out... The sound of the reed flute is a call to find a way home. The poets use the reed flute to say it is like God placing lips on humans and breathing life. The breath creates a sound, a voice in the body that searches for this source of life (p. 166-167).

This, and much more, I have learned in my research. The findings of this paper may be beneficial to anyone. The implication for professional practice these findings present is that a deeper awareness of “Self” is needed to understand people’s miraculous way of

resolving conflict via prayer. An understanding of the power of prayer increases its effectiveness.



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