

EFFECTIVE PRAYER REQUIRES AFFIRMATION, NOT PETITION

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A classic book by Arthur M. Abell, *Talks with Great Composers*, published in 1955 by Philosophical Library, reports fascinating conversations Abell had with a number of nineteenth-century composers on the question of how they got their inspirations.

Johannes Brahms stated that he *received* his inspirations, always in a prayerful state. During those times of inner upliftment, he said, he felt himself to be in communion with a Higher Power.

Brahms concluded with a crucial explanation of how inspiration came to him. “I have always found,” he said, “that an affirmation is much more effective than a mere petition in drawing inspiration while composing.”

What a marvelous discovery! Most people think of inspiration as simply coming to us on its own; something over which we can exert no control. Yet Brahms claimed to have found *from experience* that prayer for inspiration works better if we actively affirm the response than if we merely offer a petition.

Arthur Abell quotes Brahms as claiming also that this method of praying is fully in keeping “with Jesus’ own precept as revealed in the Lord’s Prayer, in which we find seven entreaties, every one of them an affirmation.”

Brahms, then, applied his own statement on inspiration more broadly to the whole subject of prayer. Prayer for any purpose, he claimed, is more effective when offered with the affirmation of a response than

when it is offered beggingly.

How different this concept from people’s usual notion of prayer! For aren’t we usually taught to pray as though we had to beg favors of God? “Lord, please effect this healing; bestow that blessing; ward off this or that disaster. Do these things for us, not because we merit them, but out of Your own infinite goodness and compassion.”

The thought that *we ourselves* might have some role to play in the healing, in attracting the blessing, in saving ourselves, or others, from disaster, would appear, to the average

worshiper, a concept so startling as to seem almost blasphemous.

Yet Brahms’s system worked, at least for him. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” Were it blasphemous to affirm, rather than merely to petition, surely his system of affirmation wouldn’t have worked even for him.

Jesus himself taught us to “pray believing.” (“And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.” Matthew 21:22)

Besides the impact of these concepts on the way we pray, there is also the possibility that prayer, if it can be proved effective, may help to restore the prestige religion has lost before the challenge of modern science to religion, namely, that religion offers no *proof* for its claims.

For it is because of religion’s very inability to prove its claims that it has, in recent centuries, lost the greatest number of its adherents. Believers everywhere nowadays—not Christians only, but Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, indeed, religious people everywhere—find themselves, in any confrontation with modern science, in a defensive position. The fact that their beliefs have been presented traditionally as transcending rational understanding has left those beliefs closed against any rational challenge.

Take only one example of a religious teaching—this one an article of the Christian faith, though it might easily be paralleled by teachings from other faiths. I refer to the dogma of the Christian Trinity. Has anyone ever offered an objective proof of the existence of the Trinity? None, surely, that would satisfy the skeptics.

Brahms’s statements, then, are fascinating not only because they offer a practical tip on how to pray, but also because they say, “Here is one aspect of the Christian teachings, and of religious teachings everywhere, a fundamental one, that *can* be tested.”



It would be difficult if not impossible to demonstrate *universally* the efficacy of prayer—prayers, for instance, for world peace, or for those in peril at sea. Prayer, however, that affects us personally, particularly prayer for personal guidance and inspiration, is another matter. What better test for ascertaining whether prayer really works, and *how* it can be made to work, than the very experiment Brahm conducted?

His, then, was a discovery of far-reaching importance. Going directly counter to the usual practice, it offered a practicable alternative.

Think of the way most people plead for guidance. “Why *don’t* You answer me?” they cry. “Why *don’t* You give me understanding?” Often, finding that they receive no response, they begin doubting the power of prayer itself. They may decide that God doesn’t even hear human prayers. And yet, the eternal answer to human disillusionment with God is that we have somehow failed Him: never that He has failed us. The flaw lies in some lack in our own attunement.

Brahms made it clear that he had tried the petitional form of prayer also. He found this method far less effective, however, than affirming his inner attunement, and then acting in cooperation with the inspirational flow that emanated from that attunement.

So then—why not try it yourself?

Let’s say you want guidance—not in writing a symphony, but in something close to home: in knowing what to say, for example, to your wife, your husband, your children, when they get upset about something. Higher guidance, received in a state of prayer, can make a big difference on such occasions. A statement that is merely mind-born, thrown out carelessly, might succeed only in fanning the flames of resentment. To soothe others with calmness and understanding, you must be able to speak from that level of consciousness yourself.



Brahms declared that mind-born compositions—as opposed to those musical inspirations received from the Spirit in a prayerful state—never rise above the level of mediocrity. Merely mental decisions on *any* subject, similarly, cannot but lack inspiration. They will always, even at best, be only hit-or-miss propositions.

Why not, try, then, to pray affirmatively—not petitioning God, but firmly resolving that He *will* give you, *and is giving you*, the very insight you need? Rely on the Divine in the very process of acting. Don’t wait, merely, for inspiration to come to you. As Jesus said, “Pray believing.”

Paramhansa Yogananda, the great Indian yogi, also taught how to pray for guidance. “You should say, ‘I will reason, I will will, I will act, *but guide Thou* my reason, will, and activity to the right path in everything.’” What he was saying is that answers to prayer are more likely to come in the actual process of doing than while waiting passively for divine revelation to come to you.

Brahms, at another point in his conversation with Arthur M. Abell, used a very interesting word to describe more exactly how he brought inspiration into outward manifestation. “When I compose,” he said, “I always feel that I am *appropriating* [the spirit].” Appropriation, used in conjunction with his concept of affirmation, signifies a will to *draw* inspiration from above rather than in any way trying to impose one’s own preconceptions on the Divine Will.

Science has taught us to arrive at the truth by a process of experimentation. Why not experiment, then, with making God your active, even if silent, Partner in life? Whatever you need from Him, affirm that it is yours already, but accept what He gives you: Don’t presume, with your human will, on His infinite wisdom.

You need only to call on inspiration lovingly, with perfect faith, to make it your very own.

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