

The Experience of the Act of Praying

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Background

The act of praying is a personal spiritual behavior, central to an intimate relationship with God, and a practice that provides comfort and peace to one who prays and for those for whom prayers are said. Review of the literature revealed that praying is a universal human experience that promotes a sense of well-being, peace, and enhanced quality of life. There was little qualitative research describing first-person experiences with prayer as connected with health and quality of life.

Objectives

The purposes of this study were to

- describe what the personal experience of the act of praying is like,
- discover new knowledge about the act of praying that can be used as a guide in nursing research and practice, and
- contribute to nursing's unique knowledge base by expanding the transpersonal caring-healing model (Watson, 1979, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

Watson's caring science perspective is grounded in a relational ontology of *being-in-relation* and a worldview that acknowledges the spirit-to-spirit connection that promotes caring and loving relationships and wholeness. Prayer also facilitates a caring relationship, a spiritual belonging and interconnectedness of self and other that leads to a feeling of peacefulness and wholeness. The definition of praying, *a healing transformation arising from unveiled stillness in communion with the sacred*, was interpreted through Watson's theoretical framework, which underpins the disciplinary perspective.

Participants

The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Loyola University Chicago. Individuals 18 years of age or older, who spoke English, and had an interest in the phenomenon of the act of praying were invited to participate. Six women volunteered and signed informed consents following written and verbal explanations of the study.

Methods

The study method was *heuristic inquiry*. This methodology seeks to discover the heart and depths of a person's experience – portraying events and relationships, thoughts and feelings, values and beliefs – recreating the lived experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person (Moustakas, 1990).

Phases of the heuristic research method included the following:

- Initial engagement
- Immersion into the topic and question
- Incubation
- Illumination
- Explication
- Creative synthesis

Interviews were digitally recorded. The researcher encouraged a free flow of ideas, thoughts, feelings, and images to a point of natural closing. In addition to narrative descriptions, participants were encouraged to share poems, diaries, songs, music, artwork, and other personal items that enhanced their praying experiences.

Individual *portraits and depictions* were developed from the six transcribed interviews. A *composite depiction* represented universal qualities and themes for the group, including the researcher's reflections and insights.

Results

The act of praying for Ann involves a trusting relationship with an ever present God. She tells God all of her needs and experiences a sense of peace and confidence in the image of His Light in the darkness, as she feels a global connection while praying.

The act of praying for Barbara arises through confiding in a personal, caring God in whom she places her trust and shares her greatest concerns. In quiet aloneness she hears God's reassurance and experiences peaceful relief and hope while praying sacred songs.

The act of praying for Claire happens with the intimate conversational way of talking with God wherever she finds herself. She experiences God's constant loving presence in the background of her life and she feels protected and reassured by praying the words of scripture and sacred music.

The act of praying for Donna involves an emotionally-charged, conversational relationship with God, where she spontaneously and passionately expresses her needs. She enjoys a close connection with God when she is receptive to letting herself go. She often feels so wound up and high after talking to God that she cannot sleep. She experiences God as always present and knows that He answers all prayers.

The act of praying for Ellen emerges as a fundamental form of communion with an ever-present and loving God. Using informal, simple language, she experiences personal guidance and requests intercession on behalf of human suffering and global discord.

The act of praying for Florence occurs through continuous informal dialogue with God, who guides her daily life and makes her happy and relaxed. She experiences deep feelings of transcendence and unity of spirit while praying and chanting the words of sacred music directed toward an ever-present God.

Creative Synthesis

Findings were shaped into an artistic integration of the participants' experiences in the form of a *poem* and a *song*.

We Dance to Silent Music

I share my inner thoughts and needs each day
With a loving God who hears the words I pray.
In the stillness my heart sings
With the joy your presence brings.
Your words of reassurance guide my way.

The cherished conversation that we share
And confidence you always answer prayer
You're always there to hold me
In peacefulness enfold me
A deep awareness of your love and care.

Chorus:

I love you with abandon
As I dwell in you tonight
We dance to silent music
We dance to silent music
You fill me with your energy and light.

All worries, thanks, and sins I will confide.
Unveiled and opened up, I do not hide
My trust in you will not end
As our loving spirits blend.
I melt into your sacred space inside

Conclusions

The healthy women in this study felt a sense of reassurance, protection, and peacefulness in the act of praying. Nurses may encourage practices such as imagery, visualization, prayer, and meditation to enhance healing and promote wholeness at the spiritual level of consciousness.

References

- Moustakas, C.E. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and application*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Watson, J. (2005). *Caring science as sacred science*. Philadelphia: Davis.