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### what we pray

**Most prayer writers see God as providing strength and support rather than explicit answers to life's difficult questions.**

By Wendy Cadge

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The vast majority of Americans believe in God and communicate with him through prayer. Yet even at times of great crisis - the kinds of occasions that send people to the hospital, for example - people don't expect God to solve their problems for them.

How do I know this? Because I've read people's prayers, hundreds of them.

In times of economic distress and in times of plenty, close to 90 percent of Americans pray - more than half of us once a day or more. We pray for big things: to stay healthy, to keep our jobs and to strengthen our relationships. And we pray for small things: to find parking spaces and missing items. Some of us are sure God exists and others pray simply to cover the bases.

As a sociologist studying prayer and spirituality in hospitals, I discovered books full of prayers written by families and patients at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. They contain a treasure trove of information about why we pray, how we think of God, and what we hope our prayers will yield.

Consider the mother of two who entered the hospital on a cold Baltimore morning. Beneath paintings and photos of the hospital's founders, she wrote a prayer in the cardboard-bound prayer book that sits on a plastic stand at the base of a 10-foot statue of Jesus Christ in the hospital's rotunda. "Dear Lord," the prayer began, "thank you for the countless blessings and helping me to deal with each day, 1 day at a time. Please continue to bless and watch over me. Love U!" She returned several times over the next weeks, writing prayers that thanked God for her blessings and asking for guidance with an important decision. Two weeks after the initial prayer, she asked the Lord for "courage" to deal with her decision and offered thanks "for yet another chance at motherhood." She also asked the Lord to help a man, identified by his initials, to "come to terms with the pregnancy and accept what he has to do."

This woman's writings are typical of the prayers left in the hospital rotunda. About half of the messages I studied include prayers of thanks, like this one: "Dear God, thank you for everything." Sometimes these are linked to a request: "Thanks a lot, Dear Father God. You have blessed me so much. I am at a turning point in my life. I just ask that you keep me on the right path."



Most writers anthropomorphize God, addressing him as they would a relative, friend or parent, and preferring familiarity over deference. They imagine a God who is accessible, loving, a good listener - in short, someone to lean on for emotional and psychological support, and who at least sometimes answers back.

When they make requests, prayer writers are pragmatic, framing their requests broadly so they can most likely see them answered. For example, rather than asking God to cure a disease, a request that may be unlikely to be granted, they ask for strength to get through a difficult time. Rather than asking God for particular news at a doctor's visit, one writer requests that the Lord "remember M ... as we go to see his doctors today. Remember him in prayer and bless him always." This request can be met regardless of what happens in the doctor's office; the supplicant will not be disappointed.

These prayers are snippets of intimate, often hopeful, conversations people have with God. Whether they are thanking God for good outcomes or making desperate requests, people are focused on what really matters in their lives: not fame or fortune, but being good, making the right decisions, and taking care of themselves and the people they love.

Much as the woman above never asked God what to do about her pregnancy, most prayer writers see God as providing strength and support rather than explicit answers to life's difficult questions. Prayer writers are hopeful that better times are possible - not because God will create them, but because God gives us the strength and guidance to create them ourselves.

Wendy Cadge is an assistant professor of sociology at Brandeis University and a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard. She is writing a book about religion and spirituality in hospitals. Her e-mail is [wcadge@](mailto:wcadge@brandeis.edu)

[brandeis.edu](http://brandeis.edu).

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