

Prayer chain: Compassion and connection

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

People have asked me to pray for them or for their loved ones all my adult life. I practice intercessory prayer very seriously, but that doesn't stop me from wondering what I'm doing. Is intercession magical thinking? Does something actually change somewhere else when I pray? Doesn't God know our needs before we ask? What's the use of praying when I can't actually go actively help? Despite these questions I'm faithful to the practice, if only because praying for other people and for the world makes me a better person.

I recently found a collection of my intercession notebooks from years past. In addition to containing lists of names (including the church directories I prayed through regularly), my notebooks bulge with photos, professional business cards scrawled with childlike petitions, op-ed columns, and maps of warfare, drought, starvation, slavery and human trafficking. Looking at them now, the clippings serve as a kind of time capsule of current events during my intercessory life.

Overall, my intercession notes for individual people reflect life cycles—times of discernment, marriage, birth, trauma, tragedy, transition, death. Each event could introduce new intercessions and convoluted relationships: somebody's *friend's husband's daughter in Laramie, Wyoming*. I can see over time that each person I prayed for had his or her own extended network of cares. Names begat names.

Handling these old scraps of paper, I notice the intensity of feeling with which I remember praying. Years later I feel a visceral pull of concern, curiosity, love, and a surrender of part of myself to each name, each cause, each request for prayer.

A school collapses on students during a freak tornado. An earthquake buries villagers alive in the rubble. Wildfires consume homes.

Touching the notebooks, I also remember the places and times I prayed: the wing chair in the evening after the children had been put to bed, the office desk cluttered

with piles of work to do, my little brown rocker by the lily lamp in the rectory.

Now I pray in a convent chapel built for praying the divine offices: morning, noon, late afternoon and evening; silent meditation, Eucharist, daily intercession. We chant the offices as acts of intercession or in thanksgiving for petitions great and small. The Episcopal nuns I pray with receive intercession requests from around the world. But their own charism includes reparation for the ravages humans have inflicted upon the land in our time. The sisters consecrate their farming to reconciliation and awe, and in gratitude for Mother Earth. Sisters come from the morning's labor to pray, and then go back out again to dig, plant, weed, harvest.

. . . for rivers and streams, the water table, the oceans, for clean air, for the ozone layer, in repentance for poisoning the ground . . .

It is easy to get overwhelmed praying the newspapers or praying in increments of increasing awareness of environmental issues. It is hard to pray every day for peace throughout the world: *for Iraq, Afghanistan, Congo, Sri Lanka. . .* It is increasingly painful to acknowledge the extent of suffering: *for refugees, displaced persons, victims of rape, torture. . .*

An elderly nun with a profound vocation to intercessory prayer taught me to place these overwhelming concerns "at the foot of the cross." Others "lift" those they pray for in their hearts to God. A colleague taught me to pray for people who have harmed me. "With no agenda," she said, "simply say their names every day as a kind of inoculation" so that their presence in my psyche does not erupt negatively in, say, dreams or conversation.

It is also a weird comfort, in those ragged times of life when prayer is impossible, to know someone is praying for you.

At one time or other, most people of faith confront the question of what we're doing when we pray for others. Who knows? Perhaps the universe is heartless. Perhaps prayer is only or at best a kind of map of the human mind. Nevertheless I create place after place in my notebook and in my hard heart for friends and strangers, victims and aggressors, "little ones" and enemies, people near and far. Somehow in the long run the discomfort is worth it. Name by name I'm drawn into a plane of consciousness connecting me exponentially to names I do not know. Praying name by name links me to every other name; one human organism and the whole of the small beautiful earth.

Meanwhile, this prayer carves a warren of interconnecting passageways into my widening heart. I give each person a shelter in which to rest before they go on to where The One Who Loves Them has prepared a place. As my heart empties and fills again, my heart of stone breaks piece by piece to reveal flesh. Praying for others teaches compassion and connection. Maybe that's reason enough to pray for others; simply, out of love.