

Pray without yawning: The power of intercessory prayer

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

Some questions just will not die. “Why is there something instead of nothing?” is a perennial. Perhaps the second-most persistent question is this: “Is yawning contagious?” or “Why is yawning contagious?” The empiricists ask the first of these, the metaphysicians the second. Even if scientists cannot give definitive answers, the question is sufficiently fraught with theological and ecclesiological implications that it deserves to be revisited.

Robert R. Provine, a University of Maryland psychologist, brings up the issue in *American Scientist* (November-December): “Yawns are so infectious that simply reading or thinking about them can be the vector of an infectious response.” Are you still with me, or are you yawning already?

Provine and other experts use the yawn to explore “the neurological roots of social behavior, face detection, empathy, imitation, and the possible pathology of these processes in autism, schizophrenia, and brain damage.” Yawning, Provine asserts, has nothing to do with response to high levels of carbon dioxide in the blood.

Chimps yawn contagiously. Fetuses at three months can yawn, and probably do if vibrations from the wearying pro-life/pro-choice debates reach them. Covering your mouth when yawning does nothing to stop contagious effects. Catching and passing along a yawn may be an unconscious form of showing empathy, says Provine, who signs off with a yawner: the subject may be “a reminder that ancient and unconscious behavior lurks beneath the veneer of culture, rationality, and language, continuing to influence our lives.”

Time for theology and ecclesiology. Why not test the contagion theories during a denominational convention? Let someone fake a yawn and see whether others follow. Objection: at a church convention odds are that everyone is already yawning, so how could you tell what was being unconsciously induced?

Consider yawning and liturgies. We have heard of congregations that want to cut out elements of the service to allow worshipers to get home in time for the football game. What should they cut? Attention turns to “the pastoral prayer” or “intercessory prayer.” “It’s too long. It’s boring. We’re all yawning during it.”

Such responses come from a basic misunderstanding of the intentions of prayer. Theologian Bill May and others have taught me what goes on or should go on in this most public event. Intercessory prayer is like tightrope walking without a net. It’s like “guts Frisbee,” played glovelessly with a rusty saw blade, as in the old Princeton University way.

Listen to May: It is scary to pray for “Mollie B. who asks for our prayers and needs help with her terminal illness,” or to hear “Let’s remember in prayer Corporal R., who is being sent back for a third round in Iraq.” And every petition lifts up to view the otherwise invisible: the people who live under bridges or those denied health care. And one must pray for enemies. Let your pastor obey Jesus and try praying for Islamist militants, and she will soon be run out on a rail that slopes into purgatory.

May implies that when someone prays for another a commitment follows. An old definition of intercessory prayer is “loving your neighbor on your knees.” There’s no danger that anyone will yawn during a good one. More likely, the alerted will grow in awareness that life after such prayer is a lot like “guts Frisbee.” Bare-handedly addressing everything to which prayer commits us is the best defense against the yawn, or the best suppressant if yawns are already in the air. As Jesus would have said, “Pray without yawning.”