Effects and Potentials of Self-Created, Heartfelt Embodied Prayers in Times of Uncertainty

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Can prayer offer a tool to enhance life-circumstances? This paper investigates different creative ways to develop prayer, as well as prayer’s potential for psychological well-being, embodiment, transpersonal states and inner transformation. An experiential pilot study on self-created heartfelt embodied (SCHE) prayer was conceptualized and conducted with eight research participants over the course of six weeks during the uncertain times of COVID-19. Participants enacted four prayer cycles with the support of optional guidelines and two group prayer webinars. Their experience was documented with a prayer workbook and qualitative questionnaires. The present study applied a heuristic inquiry methodology beneficial for the investigation of unexplored territory. The article includes a descriptive analysis of three participants’ lived experiences and insight into three types of group composite depictions. Significant findings are revealed via various creative and statistical representations of data. The results of this research suggest eight themes and processes, and identify connection as the core theme. Further highlighted themes include: relationship to self, depth and feeling, transformation, heartfelt experience, discovery and insight, finding my way/style, and transpersonal experiences (divine/source and nature/planet). The findings, which suggest a number of benefits, are discussed, and considered alongside other prayer approaches and contemporary evidence-based studies.

Keywords: transpersonal, self-created prayer, experiential, creative, spiritual practice, body-mind-heart, transformative potential, non-denominational prayer
In every culture with a recorded history, we can find some evidence of prayer, dating as far back as 50,000 B.C.E. (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989). Over millennia, prayer was associated with religious petitions to God (Brown, 2012). However, in the last century, modern psychology influenced by transpersonal psychology has been instrumental in asserting that prayer can be practised outside of religious contexts (Dein & Littlewood, 2008). Nowadays, prayer is also described as a way for a conscious, non-denominational mind to commune with cosmic spirit (Dossey, 1997; Sheldrake, 2020; Spira, 2017). Researchers from the field of prayer (e.g., Benson & Klipper, 1975; Braden, 2016; Brown, 1994; Dossey, 1997; Spilka & Ladd, 2013) confirm that all forms of prayer express common universal needs, for example, praise, thanksgiving, longing for divine presence, desire for justice, repentance, and pleas for protection and healing.

Despite the issues in measuring the efficacy of prayer and controversies associated with prayer experiments, a growing body of scientific research has taken place in recent years. Relevant research has been published in the fields of psychology and sociology, for example, by Dein and Littlewood (2008) and by Spilka and Ladd (2013) who describe the nature, development, and effects of prayer. Medical researchers such as Brown (2012), Dossey (1997) and others, have used clinical trials to explore the potential effects of prayer on healing and health; and neurologists such as Newberg and Waldman (2009), have focused on the human brain to learn about its functioning during contemplative practices. Positive outcomes of studies, such as Jankowski and Sandage’s (2011), on meditative prayer suggest that prayer serves an affect-regulation function to manage emotions. Another study on the biological response of the body in states of contemplation, known as the relaxation response (Benson & Klipper, 1975), showed that while engaged in relaxation response, participants had greater access to the internal observer presence, which decreased reaction to stimuli and increased ability to self-regulate. Despite such progress, prayer remains a largely undifferentiated concept, and the research fails to mirror its multiple dimensions (Poloma & Lee, 2011).

But what does spirituality, and within that prayer, mean in today’s world of humanitarian and ecological uncertainty? COVID-19 brought unprecedented collective and individual challenges. It catalysed a giant leap, giving new momentum to an already existing pandemic of disconnection (Eisenstein, 2020). Eisenstein, a modern thought-leader and change-maker, advocates that amidst turmoil there is hope and the potential for transformation.

What effect does prayer have on our ability to cope and imagine new possibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic? My aim was to do a research project which would, as Creswell and Poth (2018) define, hold scientific value, while simultaneously embodying a sense of social responsibility. The intention was to offer and explore a new, timely, and uniquely individualised form of praying, free from dogmas, religion, rules, and traditions. A prayer-process that allows therapeutic, spiritual, emotional, and creative elements to come together in a way that is suitable for the intentions of the person praying.
Self-Created Heartfelt Embodied (SCHE) Prayer

The term SCHE prayer was created by the researcher in order to define an embodied prayer practice that is not linked to any specific technique. Rather, it invites practitioners to develop their own individual approach, including creative expression and contemplation. For some, this practice poses a challenge in letting go of past identifications with prayer. However, it also offers a liberation from potentially outdated cultural or traditional methodologies. Not only may one feel a greater connection to one’s own creativity, but also to divine creation (Keating, 2006).

I define “heartfelt embodied” as a type of presence where one engages by feeling and listening to the heart and body (Ferrer, 2008) while praying. This allows prayer to arise spontaneously, as well as to be deeply related to what is meaningful to the person praying. Dossey (1997), Braden (2016), Spira (2017), Sheldrake (2020) and others, further emphasise the significance of feeling the prayer, i.e., feeling the praise and gratitude in the heart and body. This parallels Ferrer’s (2008) notion of “spiritual embodiment”, where the spiritual encounter includes and integrates all senses.

To analyse emotional, cognitive, spiritual and social experiences, the data organisation of the SCHE prayer study was inspired by Spilka and Ladd’s (2013) cognitive aspects of prayer direction model (inward, outward, and upward). The findings were divided into four directions that were most relevant for the SCHE study: self (inward), others (outward), planet/nature (outward) and divine/source (upward).

The study utilised four recognized prayer types: petitionary and thanksgiving (Spilka & Ladd, 2013); transformational (Foster, 1992); and mystical/ultimate (Poloma & Pendelton, 1989; Spira, 2017). Figure 1 depicts these types; however, it is important to note that overall statistical analysis suggests that all types of prayers may flow together (Lee et al. 2013), meaning the person can oscillate between the different types within one prayer.

Method

For this experiential study the researcher applied the heuristic inquiry method developed by Moustakas (1990). Heuristic inquiry focuses on discovery as a shared process between researcher and participants. Furthermore, it engages ontological and epistemological perspectives in an embodied way. It applies methods, such as experiential learning, self-inquiry, and holistic creative data collection, combined with analytical analysis to unravel the essential nature of a profound human experience (Sultan, 2020). Additionally, heuristic inquiry is known to delve into mystical and unexplored topics that emerge in transpersonal explorations (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Braud & Anderson, 1998; Sela-Smith, 2002). It has been a popular research method in counselling and humanistic sciences (Mihalache, 2019). The method consists of seven main processes (identification of research topic, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and internal frame of reference),
and six phases of inquiry (initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis) (Moustakas, 1990). This leads both the researcher and the research through multiple layers and phases to arrive at core themes.

The heuristic method approach has no set templates. Each researcher has to find a way of working with the multi-dimensional layers - a complex challenge and freedom, which I welcomed. A heuristic researcher has to be available to relate, engage, and feel (Sultan, 2019).

The experiential aim of the study was to observe how participants construct and enact a prayer when they allow what feels relevant to emerge. From a relational perspective, I wondered if the prayers would support a deeper connection to oneself and the web of a cosmic whole. From a psychosomatic standpoint, I aimed to understand the effects of prayer on my research participants’ abilities to be present, engage in psychodynamic processes, increase coping and stress regulation, and expand or stabilise overall wellbeing. I also wondered, from the perspective of self-development, if the study would provide evidence for consciousness expansion and emotional growth. Lastly, I wanted to discover if the participants’ ability for social intelligence and overall care for the greater world would increase.

**Procedure**

Ethical approval for the study was sought, in accordance with the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) guidelines, and approved by the ethics committee at Liverpool John Moores University.

The pilot study was open to eight adult participants from the general population (Table 1), independent of denomination, cultural background or level of education. Some previous...
experience with inner work and contemplative or creative practice was required. The study ran over the course of six weeks and involved four prayer cycles. Initial recruitment took place through advertisements on social media. Screening of participants was done through an open-ended qualitative autobiographical prayer experience questionnaire which the researcher had created for the study.

Table 1
Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Religious/spiritual background</th>
<th>Previous prayer practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bernett</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Innkeeper</td>
<td>Christian roots, currently not religious, very spiritual.</td>
<td>Christian prayer circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bela</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Movement therapist, Director of Administration</td>
<td>Catholic background, left church in her 20s. Believes in the divine.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Consultant &amp; coach</td>
<td>No religion. Believes in the divine, mystical.</td>
<td>Prayer as divine meditative practice, dialogue with something bigger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Artist &amp; yoga teacher</td>
<td>Meditation, yoga, and spirituality are central to her life.</td>
<td>Yes, as own inquiry. Sitting, being quiet, listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Transformational coach</td>
<td>No religion. Feeling there is more than just us humans on the planet.</td>
<td>Was a part of group that did centering prayer practice, 10 years ago.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanni</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Catholic background. Not religious today. Interests: Buddhism, meditation, mantras.</td>
<td>In childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jester</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Kinesiologist, Co-Managing Director of a non-governmental organisation</td>
<td>Christian upbringing. As a child felt light beings and was fascinated by Jesus. Today connected to the more than human world.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After a brief check-in with each participant, the group began their prayer cycles using two provided methods for documentation and guidance:

1) SCHE prayer workbook.
2) A qualitative, open ended experience questionnaire, to be filled after all four prayer cycles were completed.

Participants were asked to document their experiences immediately before and after each prayer in the workbook. A variety of representations were encouraged, including words, drawings, images, and symbols. This preparation of the prayer in the workbook, enactment of the prayer, and then response or reflection, was how I defined a prayer cycle. The final questionnaire was designed to understand how the participants experienced the preparations for the prayers, the prayers themselves, and finally how they were integrated into the person’s life.

The data from the workbook and questionnaire was collected and processed using Sultans’ (2019) embodied relational coding and compared with the four major prayer types and prayer directions. Implicit and explicit experiences based on contextual meaning and themes were highlighted (Sultan, 2020).

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) made a convincing case for the researcher’s reflexivity as an ethical concern, underlining the need for discernment between personal biases or projections and the raw data. As part of the six phases of the heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) I did a creative synthesis to process and acknowledge the implicit and explicit dimensions that this research brought forth in myself as the researcher.

Results

It is difficult to do justice to the depth and insights of the contributions from all eight participants in an article of this length, and to include the various facets and integration of their documented experiences (e.g., cognitive, emotional, somatic, spiritual, and relational) (Sultan, 2020). What follows are three individual creative depictions and the group composite depictions that will illustrate a few major qualities and themes manifested in the data (Moustakas, 1990).

Creative Individual Depictions
Three sample artefacts are highlighted in Figure 2. Overall, seven of the eight participants incorporated creative elements such as expressive enactment, art, rituals, props, poems, dance, working with natural elements, movement and chanting.
Figure 2
*Three Creative Sample Artefacts*

![Muffins](image1)
![Drawing](image2)
![Poem](image3)

*Note: A- muffins baked by Bernett, B- scribbled drawing by Bela, C- poem by Jester*

Figure 2A shows the muffins participant Bernett baked in a “prayerful thanksgiving action”. In her words, the prayer was about “expressing gratitude for life and people. I baked for friends in senior housing, to bring both joy and gratitude to them. To me, making food is prayer”. Bernett’s overall most meaningful experiences of the four prayer cycles were:

To realise that I am guided; it is possible to transform anger about uncertainty into peace; through prayer I become less critical and more loving of others; connecting to the deep importance of prayer and that it can be anything you choose.

Bela’s scribble drawing in Figure 2B is a depiction of her transformation prayer. She describes one of her prayer cycles: “The prayer emerged spontaneously out of frustration with my current life.” She asked for guidance in her prayer, and then experienced a sudden impulse to draw: “Through drawing I can release tension and see the chaos inside.” Eventually, after connecting with it and expressing it, she experienced “a calming space opening around and within me.” Bela noticed certain changes over the course of the four cycles: “Preparation became less structured, more emergent. This was when the strongest connection to heart/body happened.”

Jester reflected on the poem she wrote during her petitionary/transformation prayer in Figure 2C, which she titled “Prayer for Expression”: “It feels as if this space [during prayer] – so rich and full of beauty – has always been there. Just needs me, needs anyone to show up. So much help, so easily available.” In her reflections on the four SCHE prayer cycles she wrote:

From cycle to cycle I became more accustomed to the reality of prayer and was able to access this space quicker. I got to know a flow within myself that I was not familiar with so far. After having done the four cycles I know all I have to do is show up. Time is not of the essence, but showing up is.
Composite Depictions
At the end of the study, there were a total of 34 individual prayer cycles that had to be thematically analysed to extract common themes and patterns (Mihalache, 2019). There is a multiplicity of ways that themes can be organised. In order to obtain a rich portrait of the data, I used three variations of composite depictions to guide the analysis.

1. Prayer types as presented in Figure 1. The results are presented below in Figure 3
2. Prayer directions are also shown in Figure 3
3. Emerging composite themes derived from the documentation materials

Below you will find a brief account of the composite depictions, how prevalent they were, and a selection of quotes from the participants on the importance of the major themes. They will be explored further in the discussion section.

Figure 3
Prayer Types and Prayer Directions

A. Prayer Types
B. Prayer Direction

Note: Prayer type (A) describes the content of the prayer, i.e., what kind of prayer it is, or who / what is being prayed for. Prayer direction (B) describes where the prayer is aimed towards, i.e., who is being prayed to, or in dedication of.

Composite Themes
1) Connection
The theme of connection was the most experienced core group theme. All eight participants documented frequent experiences of “connecting” to self/other/divine/planet. Difficulties with connecting were expressed by Zora as “losing connection” and by Hamilton as “feeling disconnected”. Nanni spoke about a “connection to people in my life who have lost a lot”. Other more heartwarming connections were worded as “deep connection to joy” (Jester) and “connection to heart” (Bela). Each participant explored how inner availability, receptivity and conscious presence was the key to connection. Zeus expressed this by asking, “what is my side of the connection with God?”
2) **Relationship to Self**
The prayer work book showed a wide range of inner experiences and intentions concerning the relationship to Self. Hamilton, for example, was committed to her intention of “listening to myself and staying true to myself”. Zora was going through difficult experiences she termed “struggling with myself, it’s dark and light at the same time”. Raven described her self-exploration as “feeling myself in my body” and Nanni talked about “acknowledging different aspects of myself”. In one prayer cycle Bernett actively tended to her “desire to take care of self” and was interested in developing “finding pleasure in aging.” Many experienced a self-expansion and, in some way, a deeper sense of belonging to themselves.

3) **Depth and Feeling**
All participants reported that SCHE prayer confronted them with their feelings and allowed access to a deeper sense of presence. Some had a heavier tone such as “feeling something curls up in me and says ‘no’” (Hamilton), or “delicate, yet, strong and intense [feelings]” (Zora). In one prayer cycle Bernett let her “anger and sadness due to political situation in US” rise to the surface, and Jester was in touch with “fears around corona, illness, death, possible loss in an instant”. At other times participants experienced feelings of support and calm, like a “deep sense of being held” (Raven), and a “feeling of inner peace” (Bela).

4) **Transformation**
Descriptions of transformative experiences, changes or inner shifts were given by all participants at some point during their prayer process. On many accounts this meant transforming something that felt heavy/difficult into more ease and peace, like “moving from knotted pain in my throat into my soft heart” (Zora), or “I felt some immovable forces like rocks starting to shift” (Raven). Bela spoke of a subtle experience in which she “felt the change of energy in and around me”. Participants documented that surrender and letting go of control was key for transformation to take place.

5) **Heartfelt Presence**
The intention of moving into the heart or feeling the heart during prayer was frequently stated across the documentation. Bernett described “learning ‘being from the heart’”. Physical experiences of the heart were mentioned, such as a “strong physical sensation in my heart” (Raven). Zeus articulated his heartfelt experience of love as “felt heartfelt experience of prayer as learning, like learning how to love God, capacity to be heart centred is beautiful”. Eventually he experienced his “heart full of love has merged with BIG LOVE [God]”. Participants explored different kinds of heartfelt presences, as in feeling the heart or resting in the heart. Many voiced their gratitude toward heartfelt states, like Jester, who expressed “it is a blessing to open up the heart to prayer.”

6) **Discovery and Insight**
The documentation revealed discovery and insight through awe, wonder, a sudden or deeper understanding and meaningful encounter. Bernett, for example, was “struck by
simplicity of prayer”, while Jester was in awe at “realising freedom of expression and that prayer lives inside me as a constant self-created resource”. Bela’s insight was that “I do not have to take on all burdens/overwhelm”, and she allowed herself to unburden and relax into prayer. Heartfelt states were not familiar to everyone. Zeus, for instance, shared that it was “unusual for me to be heart-centered” and explored this state with great interest during all four cycles.

7) Finding My Way/Style
All participants commented on the sense of freedom in navigating and finding their style with SCHE prayers. Jester explored “expressing what feels right in my creative way”, and Hamilton found out what “doing what is good for me” meant to her. Zeus experienced a “sense of new track, new method” and arrived at an understanding that “prayer is anything, including all the senses”. He described finding his way as “freeing”. Jester discovered: “I created them [prayers] myself and I can always create more of them”. In finding her way, the prayer became part of her, which she voiced as “it feels like the prayers live inside me now.” This, she states, “enhances my feeling of self-effectiveness.”

8) Transpersonal Experiences
Participants often felt an embodied and/or heartfelt transpersonal awareness of the larger system around them, or felt connected to a greater whole/source/God. In Nanni’s terms it was a sensation of “connected to cosmos, feeling divine consolation that everything is allowed to be”. Bela spoke of “expanding into an energetic field” and Jester similarly called it “dissolving into an all-encompassing energy”. Some participants, including Zora, described longing. For her, this was a “deep longing for the divine through my heart”. Zeus documented his experience of “expanding my connection to the divine in an act of loving God”. In another prayer cycle Bela sat quietly in “connection to world”, while Jester sought an active interaction “calling to nature, woods, pond” and explored the experience of “being a drop”. Some participants further demonstrated the ability to be with harsher collective topics. In one prayer cycle Zora was “praying for prisoners of war”, and Zeus processed the “outer world, outer shadow that needs to be faced” in prayer.

Further participant reflections with SCHE prayer during uncertain times
In addition to the above themes, a few more quotes capture how SCHE prayer was experienced related to this particular uncertain time (COVID-19):

“I was upset and confused [referring to uncertain times] in first prayer, then I relaxed. Transformed anger into a way of relating that brings peace/hope” (Bernett).

“More scary than I think [referring to uncertain times], confusion around what I want/ don’t want [experienced during SCHE prayer study]” (Hamilton).
“Lockdown felt like a minor subplot to the greater drama/ mystery, this [SCHE prayer process] helped erase uncertainty. Opportunity to shift and affirm” (Zeus).
Creative Synthesis

To synthesise the data for myself, I created a painting (Figure 4). I experienced waves of gratitude in the process. I let myself immerse and incubate (Moustakas, 1990) with the research project as a whole, and the research material of the eight participants (all of us depicted in the nine round shapes). The painting expresses the theme of connection in relationship to the participants as well as the transpersonal realm.

Figure 4
Creative Synthesis

Discussion

The overall analysis of the individual and composite themes highlights connection, transformation, heartfelt presence and relationship to Self as most prominent in this study. The overarching theme was connection. In regard to the types and directions, the transformation type and the direction towards self were the most prevalent, being 44% and 35% of the group respectively.

The three artefacts I chose to highlight in the creative depictions (Figure 2) show the diversity of practices that participants used in order to enact their prayers. They also express the freedom, intuition, and creativity that the prayer cycles included. As noted by Malchiodi (2013), the depictions illustrate that whatever the creative technique, when creativity is expressed undisturbed by theory [this could be applied to praying as well], it often stimulates movement of emotions, and leads to what expressive arts psychoanalyst Robbins (1993) calls “inner transformation”. Ram Dass (2011) explains that in combination with creative expression prayer becomes an instrument for the formless spirit to take shape. Both points are relevant, as the results suggest that creative modes of expressing prayer can reinforce the prayer, as well as the overall meaning and impact of the prayer on the person. Below is a brief discussion of the three samples.

Bela’s impulse to channel her emotional turmoil through prayer via creative embodied expression led her through a transformative, healing and spiritual experience. Her experience demonstrates what Levine and Levine (1998) describe as “the therapeutic power of art rests
not in its elimination of suffering but rather in its capacity to hold us in the midst of that suffering so that we can bear the chaos” (p.31). Her process shows that creative prayer can hold complex inner problems while strengthening a sacred union. In Bela’s reflection on the four prayer cycles, she describes simply letting prayer happen rather than asking for guidance. She became more trusting of herself, letting go of the need to structure the prayer or have a specific outcome.

For Bernett, her symbolic “gift of gratitude prayer” demonstrates that creative acts combined with prayer not only work well together, but also reinforce the experience of and identification with the prayer. Bernett dedicated each prayer cycle to something specific: the situation in the USA, self-love, birds, and giving gratitude. Like Bela, Bernett experienced a transformation of her difficult emotions during the course of the four cycles. She reports feeling more love towards others and finding the instrument of prayer very important to connect to love.

Jester entered the study with no previous prayer experience and was deeply moved at the unforeseen ease with which she created her prayers as well as the impact they had on her. The effects she documented included “grounding and connecting deeply in self and finding my voice [through poetic prayer], freedom of expression and connecting to a greater whole”. Teasdale (2001) stated that many mystics of world religions describe their prayer experiences in the language of poetry. Jester’s ability to find her own voice to pray led her from fear and anger into an opening of space through which love and compassion for self and others could be felt.

The level of connection that the participants achieved in the prayer cycles (in themselves, the heart, body and to inter- and transpersonal matters) influenced the prayer experience and outcome of the participants, as well as their overall psychological wellbeing. Referencing Brown’s (2012) and Jankowski and Sandage’s (2011) studies once more, I tentatively conclude that SCHE prayer benefits the psychosomatic wellbeing of the person praying, while decreasing emotional stress and improving coping skills.

In general, there is a potential shadow side to the traditional petitionary and mystical prayer types. They can lead one to bypass uncomfortable emotions by externalising them, for example, into God’s hands, or asking for support without facing the cause of the problem. Expecting support from outside forces without tending to one’s own life in a responsible way can develop into avoidant behaviour and has little to do with true spirituality. We see from the participants’ accounts that SCHE prayer practice is helpful in this case, because it asks the practitioner to take responsibility and engage in inner work - facing, feeling, and processing the intersubjective realm of emotions. As the results illustrate, this approach to prayer can catalyse new understandings, a sense of co-creation, nurturing self-acceptance, and in some cases a sense of self-mastery. SCHE prayer provides a prayer process, inclusive of light and shadow, that can lead towards integration.

In regard to the collective depictions, the prevalence of the transformation prayer type was surprising. This demonstrates the participants’ willingness to let the prayer transform.
them rather than asking prayer to do something for them (Spilka & Ladd, 2013), as often is the case with petitionary prayer. For many, a central observation was that the mystical prayer experiences evolved as the prayer went on, in the second stage of a thanksgiving or transformation prayer. The mystical prayer experience was described with words such as: love, peace, altered state of consciousness, heart open and wide, light, and vibration.

The core theme of connection was not only experienced personally, as a feeling of connection to oneself, but also in relation to each other, the world, and the transpersonal. A key observation from participants was that the more connected they felt to themselves, the more they felt connected to nature, society, and the divine. From evaluating the data, SCHE prayer is perhaps a way of returning to the fullness of connection. The data suggests that this factor of connection, and not the medium, resourcefulness, or competence with prayer practice, was the key to inner transformation and experiencing the divine.

How does someone know if they are in the heart, or if they are embodying the prayer? Clark (1973), and others, e.g., Braden (2016), Ram Dass (2011), Sheldrake (2020), claim that the problem of determining when a prayer is truly heartfelt is mostly an intellectual one. Those who are in the heart know they are there because of an undeniable feeling/experience. The participants too did not comment on any difficulties or confusions around what felt heartfelt. The overall accounts of their heartfelt experiences deliver evidence that in the moment of the direct heart experience the question of the analytical mind ceased to be important. The results of this pilot study show further that heartfelt presence and embodiment, such as one can experience during prayer, was an influential factor for a variety of mental, emotional, and physical issues concerning wellbeing (e.g., Brown, 2012; Dossey, 1997; Ferrer, 2011; Sheldrake, 2020). The outcome additionally validates the significance of Ferrer’s (2008) “embodied spiritual practice” when it comes to connecting and experiencing the divine.

It is interesting to note that the social context of the global pandemic (or more broadly, times of uncertainty) was not referred to as often as I thought it would be. The results of the 34 prayers revealed that the participants were less engaged with relating to times of uncertainty during prayer. The prayer cycles were predominantly utilised for self-development, introspection, transformation, healing, spiritual growth, and overall deepening the relationship to self, other and the divine. On one hand, these results may show evidence of the study’s success because all participants reported repeatedly having connected to heartfelt embodied experiences. On the other hand, there was no significant evidence that SCHE prayer was stated to be particularly useful in dealing with times of uncertainty, and this surprised me.

The customised evaluation categories of heuristic inquiry (i.e., immersing oneself with the data, letting the material incubate, finding creative ways to work with data), were very useful in order to gain a deep understanding and experience of the layers of SCHE prayer and the participants experiences, as well as to dig into key themes. As the evaluation process is not about “ascertaining ultimate truths or realities” (Sultan, 2019, p.14), the creative synthesis was an opportunity for me to immerse, incubate and make meaning of the experiences
described by my co-researchers. By means of meditative, embodied and creative engagement, I felt I was also able to process and integrate the multidimensional aspects this research has brought up in myself. My experience corresponds with Sultan who suggests that this type of research evaluation fosters integration of the research experience for the researcher. I did not feel any tension in combining different evaluation strategies, as heuristic inquiry allows a very loose and creative way to work with data, suited to the type of study and the interest of the researcher.

This very individual and highly subjective experience with prayer may be why Sloan and Bagiella (2000), criticised studies on prayer harshly, asserting that as long as investigators cannot control and measure exposure to prayer and identify specific outcome variables, these studies cannot be conclusive and should not be undertaken. Despite this logic, I disagree with and question Sloan and Bagiella’s (2000) extreme declaration that prayer studies, regardless of their kind, should not be attempted. Unfortunately, materialist science and spirituality are in continual tension. Tart (2010) declared, and I agree with him, that it is time science embraces research of evidence-based spirituality. I see the long lineage of prayer from ancient civilizations, to major world religions, to non-denominational practitioners, continuing to evolve in the era of modern social scientific research we find today. As Brown (2012), Dossey (1997), and Sheldrake (2020) demonstrated, I too have found that the complexity and richness of prayer, and the research around it, delivers compelling evidence and deserves careful further exploration.

**Limitations and Implications**

Due to personal meaning associated with the topic and the engagement of the researcher, boundaries between the researcher and the participants may blur. Because of these challenges, empirical researchers do well to question this approach and review the research critically. In terms of the present research, it was an explorative pilot study and therefore not conclusive. A broader study would be needed to measure and verify effects on society at large.

The questionnaires and workbook have been useful in evaluating the experiences. Future research might attempt to replicate the findings of this pilot study by correlating validated measures of physical and mental health with prayer. Further interest and work with SCHE prayer include continued explorations and facilitation in group workshops, retreats, and incorporating SCHE prayer into therapy groups. Developing a mainstream approach with SCHE prayer practice is also a potential, for example, by providing a self-help workbook with SCHE prayer guidelines.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of the multiple themes delivers compelling evidence that SCHE prayer can be a useful tool for a variety of aims, such as self-development, transformation, connection, heartfelt presence, social care, consciousness expansion, and a greater union with the divine. Openness to the prayer experience, as well as the level of connection with oneself and to the prayer process, was highlighted as having been a crucial element for the prayer experience.
to be effective and meaningful. The study concludes that prayer itself has a number of psychological and emotional benefits. It reinforces existing research into the efficacy of prayer and stands as a contribution to gaps in academic literature by experimenting with, and presenting data on, self-created heartfelt embodied prayer situated outside of religious literature and practice.

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References


**About the Author**

Jasmin Bloch graduated with a BA (Honors) in Psychology, an MA (Distinction) in Art Therapy and Creativity Development (USA), and an MSc (Distinction) in Consciousness, Spirituality, and Transpersonal Psychology (UK). She is a certified transpersonal psychotherapist EUROTAS, combining creative arts therapy, dream work, depth psychology, meditation and embodied heart-mind approaches. She works out of her private practice in Zurich, both in person and online. She is also the program leader at the expressive arts therapy training institute Inartes in Zürich. Jasmin enjoys working with groups and individuals around the world on self- and potential development, and expanding ones abilities for self-awareness and self-care to become healthier integrated adults contributing to a wholesome global community.