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Bill Wigmore BA & Matthew Stanford PhD

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PERSPECTIVES

Two Way Prayer: A Lost Tool for Practicing the 11th Step

Bill Wigmore, BA^a and Matthew Stanford, PhD^{b,c,d}

^aRecovery Ministries, Episcopal Diocese of Texas, Houston, Texas, USA; ^bHope and Healing Institute, Houston, Texas, USA; ^cDepartment of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, USA; ^dDepartment of Psychology, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, USA

ABSTRACT

Two Way Prayer formed an essential part of Oxford Group and early Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) spiritual practices. Pioneer AA members considered it more essential for recovery than attendance at meetings; however, it was gradually lost as a component of contemporary 12-Step programs. The article gives an overview of its history and provides a model for a more contemporary form of its practice. Initial evaluation suggests promising outcomes among a sampling of youth and adults engaged in a peer-support group for drug and alcohol recovery. The article includes a discussion of its use with individuals not having a religious conception of spirituality.

KEYWORDS

12-Step spirituality; prayer and meditation; quiet time; Two Way Prayer; Oxford Group; 11th Step

Introduction

The Oxford Group origins of Alcoholics Anonymous

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) derived many of its practices and most of its 12 Steps directly from the work of Dr. Frank Buchman, an American-born Lutheran minister of German descent. In 1908, Buchman underwent a personal conversion experience while attending a conference of evangelical Christians in Keswick, England. Through this transforming encounter, Buchman experienced forgiveness for a group of men against whom he had nursed a deep-seated resentment. He also claimed a new sense of God's immediate presence in his life that had previously eluded him. Buchman determined his hurt pride and anger had been the things blocking him from an experience of God.

One day, while cycling in Cambridge, Buchman was struck by the thought that he might be used as God's instrument to remake the world (Sporerri, 1976, p. 63). He soon became convinced that God was directing him to help others achieve similar "life-changing" experiences by uncovering and surrendering the blocked portions of their own lives and seeking God's plan for their lives through Two Way Prayer (TWP). In 1936, Professor B. H. Streeter, then Provost of Queen's College, Oxford, and a strong Buchman supporter wrote,

CONTACT Bill Wigmore, BA  revbillw@gmail.com  1102 Deep Wood Drive, Round Rock, TX 78681.

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“At this point someone will say, how am I to know God’s plan? There is no need, I would reply, to know the whole of God’s plan. All I need to know is His plan for *me*. . . . then experience shews (shows) that the ‘still, small voice of the Beyond that is within’ will tell us the next thing that God wishes us to do” (Streeter, 1936, pp. 20–21). Buchman later confided to a friend, “Many years ago I gave up trying to organize things according to my own ideas. I started listening to God and letting Him have His own way in everything” (Hunter, 2009, p. 12).

Following the First World War, Buchman was deeply troubled by the moral and economic destruction he witnessed throughout Europe as well by the spread of communism, fascism, and unbridled capitalism. He believed the only way to avert a still more devastating war was through a new form of experiential Christianity, one that resulted in changed lives and subsequently led to changed nations (Russell, 1932/2003, p. 290). Buchman began gathering around him small groups of highly motivated men and women, many from among prestigious universities in Europe and America. He experimented with training them in his methods and sending them out in small teams witnessing to others the radical “life changes” they had undergone themselves. Known originally as “A First Century Christian Fellowship,” Buchman’s groups were less concerned with theology and more with discovering effective spiritual tools for personal transformation. Buchman’s teams became known as the Oxford Group as their center of operations shifted from America to Oxford, England. When the world’s powers began rearming for yet another war, Buchman changed its name again, this time to Moral Rearmament. He saw his movement as a moral and spiritual counterbalance to the world’s growing militarism (Mowat, 1994, pp. 74–75).

Frank Buchman was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his vision of achieving world peace through radically changed lives and nations. Buchman biographer Garth Lean quotes a letter from Cardinal Franz Koenig, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Vienna, affirming:

Buchman was a turning-point in the history of the modern world... In the last century, there was a feeling among intellectuals that we could build a better world without God. Then came the First World War, and many felt that many things had gone wrong. Buchman was among them, and he began to think what could be done. His great idea was to show that the teaching of Jesus Christ is not just a private affair but has the great force to change the whole structure of economics, of political ideas, if we combine changing of structures with a change of heart. In that sense he opened a completely new approach to religion, to the teachings of Jesus Christ, and to the life of modern man. (Lean, 1988, p. 532)

The Oxford Group’s development and decline

In knitting together his new program, Buchman borrowed freely from some of the leading Christian teachers of his day. From Professor Henry Wright of

Yale, Buchman borrowed the concept of individuals fully surrendering their lives to God. Before each class, the professor required 2 minutes of silence from his students to ponder these words he wrote on the board: “The world has yet to see what God can do in, for, by and through a man whose will is wholly given up to Him” (Lean, 1988, pp. 77–78). Frank Buchman was determined to become that man.

From Dr. Robert Speer, a noted Presbyterian missionary from Princeton, Buchman borrowed the Four Standards Speer had suggested as a summary of the principles lived by Jesus Christ: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. These principles quickly became the Oxford Group’s litmus test for examining their thoughts and actions to know if they truly originated with God. The standards also formed the bedrock of the 12-Step program that would later evolve. Shortly before his death in 1950, Dr. Robert Smith, AA’s cofounder said in his last major AA address, “The four absolutes, as we called them, were the only yardsticks we had in the early days, before the Steps. I think the absolutes still hold good and can be extremely helpful” (A.A. World Services [AA], 1975, p. 17).

Finally, from the noted evangelist and Congregational minister F. B. Meyer, Buchman borrowed the idea of devoting sufficient time each morning to listening for God’s guidance and writing down whatever thoughts occurred. “Meyer had asked Buchman, ‘Do you let the Holy Spirit guide you in all you are doing? . . . (D)o you give God enough uninterrupted time really to tell you what to do?’” (Lean, 1988, pp. 35–36).

At Birmingham, England, in 1936 Buchman addressed a crowd of 25,000. . . . His topic was “How to Listen.” “When man listens, God speaks. When man obeys, God acts. We are not out to tell God we are out to let God tell us. . . . The Holy Spirit is the most intelligent source of information in the world today. . . . Divine guidance must become the normal experience of ordinary men and women. Definite, accurate, adequate information can come from the mind of God to the minds of men. This is normal prayer. (Hunter, 2009, pp. 127–128)

Buchman’s movement reached the height of its power and influence in the mid-1930s. He addressed crowds of 25,000 in Copenhagen, Denmark, and more than 30,000 in Los Angeles, California (Lean, 1988, pp. 230, 286). His campaigns attracted people from all walks of life and from nations all across the globe. One group, Buchman’s work attracted, was alcoholics seeking a way out from their crippling addictions; however, though the Oxford Group’s principles helped many find recovery, some of the newly sober proved more interested in changing other alcoholics than in changing the world. When Buchman heard that the newly sober alcoholics intended to separate from the Oxford Group and form their own fellowship he responded, “But we also have drunken nations on our hands” (Hunter, 2009, p. 15).

Before the cofounders of AA met one another in June 1935, each was actively involved with the Oxford Group in his own city. In 1933, Dr. Buchman and a team of Oxford Group members had spent 10 days in Akron, Ohio, holding prayer meetings and rallies at the invitation of Harvey Firestone, the rubber baron whose son had been saved from alcoholism by the Group. In New York City, Bill Wilson was introduced to the Group through an old school chum who had also found sobriety through their methods. Wilson quickly became friends with Rev. Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopal priest and the leader of the Oxford Group in the United States. Following Wilson and Smith's meeting in 1935, they began attracting more and more alcoholics to their fellowship and envisioning the day when millions of the world's alcoholics might find sobriety through the spiritual practices they had learned through the Oxford Group.

In March 1960, Bill Wilson belatedly acknowledged AA's debt to the Group when he wrote:

Where did we learn about moral inventory, amends for harm done, turning our wills and our lives over to God? Where did we learn about meditation and prayer and all the rest of it? The spiritual substance of our remaining ten Steps (Steps 2 through 11) came straight from Dr. Bob's and my own early association with the Oxford Groups, as they were then led in America by that Episcopal rector, Dr. Samuel Shoemaker. (AA, 1988, p. 298)

When the break from the Oxford Group finally came, Wilson did not want the new fellowship to be associated with it in the mind of the public. As a result, references to the Four Absolutes and to the Group's reliance on Two Way Prayer were removed from their literature; however, Wilson later reflected, "something was lost from A.A. when we stopped emphasizing the morning meditation" (AA, 1980, p. 178).

In 1938, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had dispatched his secretary Frank Amos to study the alcoholics in the Oxford Group who were then finding recovery in what appeared to be unprecedented numbers. Bill Wilson had approached Rockefeller for funding, but the philanthropist first wanted to know the reasons underlying the success of their new recovery approach. Amos reported that the newly sober alcoholics considered meetings to be "important, but not vital"; however, "(an alcoholic) must have ... a quiet time of prayer and devotions ... or there is grave danger of backsliding" (AA, 1980, p. 131).

The Oxford Group, though now greatly diminished in size and influence, still exists and is known as Initiatives of Change, headquartered in Caux, Switzerland. It continues seeking world peace by helping individuals overcome their anger and resentments while also encouraging them to begin, "listening to the still small Voice" (Brown, 2007).

Two Way Prayer (TWP) adapted for contemporary use

A 1939, two-page Oxford Group pamphlet titled “Listening to God” and published in Akron, Ohio, provides a helpful model for synthesizing the Group’s beliefs and prayer practices (Paton, 2000, pp. 305–306). The pamphlet summarizes some of the Group’s core beliefs: that God is everywhere, can do anything, cares for all, and will guide those truly seeking to know His will. The pamphlet then notes the conditions required for hearing God’s Voice: to be quiet and still, to listen and be honest, and to test each thought by the standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. When a recorded thought fails to meet any part of that test, they believed, it could be discarded because it could not have originated with God.

One of the authors incorporated these general directions into a two-page, contemporary set of instructions for those engaged in 12-Step recovery. Additional items included were, adding simple breathing exercises, praying in a set place daily, allowing freedom to address God by whatever name one is comfortable using (e.g., God, Lord, Heavenly Father/Mother, My Spirit Guide), writing “a very honest” question to God reflecting the practitioner’s emotional state and immediate needs at the time of prayer, for example, “Dear Spirit, I’ve tried getting clean and sober before, please help me see what I need to do that’s different this time.” The “question” places each prayer session within the context of the continued inventory practice as recommended by AA’s 10th Step.

Another important difference in the contemporary TWP model that can be helpful for individuals without a religious conception of spirituality is the incorporation of C. J. Jung’s work on active imagination into the TWP practice (Johnson, 1986, pp. 137–138). Jungian analyst Robert Johnson (1986) writes:

The coming together of conscious and unconscious mind on the common ground of the imaginal plane gives us an opportunity to break down some of the barriers that separate the ego from the unconscious, to set up a genuine flow of communication between the two levels of the psyche, to resolve some of our neurotic conflicts with the unconscious, and thus to learn more about who we are as individuals. (p. 25)

Use of active imagination in prayer can open a powerful source of inner healing for individuals in recovery by encouraging a more conscious and affirming connection with their higher power. Suggesting that the response to one’s question begin with a term of endearment, such as, “My Child,” “My Daughter/Son,” or “My precious” enhances the experience of spiritual intimacy. The model encourages practitioners to write much as they might approach a creative writing exercise, not concerning themselves whether the voice they hear in their minds is their own or belongs to another.

Testing the efficacy of TWP among an alternative peer group

An “alternative peer group” agency located in a southwest, metropolitan city was selected to begin measuring the effectiveness of TWP. The agency provides after-school activities and social functions along with 12-Step meetings and parent-driven family training for youth struggling with alcohol and drug issues. The youth ranged in age from 13 to 25. A smaller test group of clients and families at the agency had previously shown positive results with TWP, and staff wanted to engage more clients in the practice.

Thirty-seven parents and 84 youth assembled for a joint, one-hour training session that began with the administration of the Christian Inventory of Spirituality (CIS) described below (Shorkey & Windsor, 2010; Windsor & Shorkey, 2010). The group was also asked to complete a one-page demographic questionnaire. This was followed by an oral presentation by one of the authors grounding TWP within the more familiar context of the 11th Step prayer and meditation practices. Participants were given handouts that included the original Oxford Group pamphlet along with the more contemporary model described above. The test group was then led through a step-by-step explanation of the practice and heard sample writings from a peer and a staff member previously trained in TWP. Following a brief question-and-answer period, the group was given a 5-minute period of silence to engage in the prayer practice. Upon completion, several parents and youth shared their writings aloud with the group. The group was then challenged to practice TWP each morning for the following 60 days. A show of hands indicated that nearly all agreed to participate. There was no direct contact by the authors with any participants during the 60-day period.

At the conclusion of the 60-day challenge, each participant was mailed a second copy of the CIS for posttesting along with a one-page questionnaire to assess their experiences with the practice. They were asked how frequently they engaged in TWP, how helpful they found the practice to be, and whether they had shared any of their writings with others. Study participants were informed they would receive a \$10 gift card for completing and returning their forms. Twenty-two parental posttests were returned along with 53 from the youth. The completion rates were 59.5% and 66.2%, respectively.

The CIS was developed “to measure changes in feeling, thinking, and behaviors toward self, others, and God accompanying spiritual transformation of persons completing [Christian] spiritually based alcohol/other drugs (AOD) recovery programs” (Shorkey & Windsor, 2010, p. 17). The instrument includes 48 items scored on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 4 (*completely agree*). The inventory measures five fields that include (1) Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Others ($n = 14$), (2) Reliance on God ($n = 15$), (3) Spiritual Practices ($n = 9$), (4) Self-appraisal ($n = 6$), and (5) Reliance

on Self ($n = 4$) (Shorkey & Windsor, 2010, p. 26). Research data support the scales' reliability, stability, and validity (Shorkey & Windsor, 2010).

Three scale questions were slightly modified to improve the scales assessment of broader concepts of spirituality related to recovery language. Question #14, "I am filled with the Holy Spirit" was changed to "I sometimes feel filled with God's Spirit, question #35, "I accept Christ as my Savior" was changed to "I accept God as my Higher Power", question #41, "I seek solutions to my problems in the Bible" was changed to "I seek solutions to my problems in the Bible or other spiritual literature." Although the CIS does not measure spiritual change directly, it is a useful tool to gauge progressive transformation regarding important external referents of spirituality (Windsor & Shorkey, 2010).

Results

Parents group in recovery

Twenty-two parents of youth in recovery completed the CIS before TWP training and approximately 60 to 70 days after. Analysis of the results using a dependent samples t test found a significant increase in the CIS total score pre- to posttraining: pre $M = 136.8$, post $M = 149.4$; $t(21) = -4.185$, $p < .001$, $d_{rm} = .90$, where d_{rm} is a measure of effect size. Analysis of the CIS subscales found that individual CIS subscales indicated significant increases among four subscales and that changes in the Reliance on God and Self-appraisal subscales were the most significant: Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Others $t(21) = -2.43$, $p = .024$, $d_{rm} = .53$; Reliance on God $t(21) = -3.39$, $p = .003$, $d_{rm} = .73$; Spiritual Practices $t(21) = -1.95$, $p = .065$, $d_{rm} = .425$; Self-appraisal $t(21) = -3.40$, $p = .003$, $d_{rm} = .71$; Reliance on Self $t(21) = -2.131$, $p = .045$, $d_{rm} = .45$ (see Table 1).

Youth group in recovery

Fifty-three youth in recovery completed the pre CIS before TWP training and the post-CIS approximately 60 to 70 days after. Analysis of the results using a dependent samples t test found a significant increase in the CIS total score pre- to posttraining (pre $M = 125.62$, post $M = 129.53$; $t(53) = -1.965$, $p = .000$,

Table 1. Parent: Paired sample pre- and posttest (t test).

	Mean	SD	SE Mean	t	d_{rm}	df	Significance (2-tailed)
Total	-12.455	13.958	2.976	-4.185	0.9	21	0.00
Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Others	-2.227	4.298	0.916	-2.431	0.53	21	0.024
Reliance on God	-5.091	7.037	1.5	-3.393	0.73	21	0.003
Spiritual Practices	-2.273	5.479	1.168	-1.946	0.425	21	0.065
Self-appraisal	-1.545	2.132	0.455	-3.4	0.71	21	0.003
Reliance on Self	-1.318	2.901	0.619	-2.131	0.45	21	0.045

Note. d_{rm} = measure of effective size per Dr. Stanford.

$d_{rm}=.272$. Consistent with parent group results analysis of the CIS subscales indicated the most significant changes in the Reliance on God subscale. Results on Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Others $t(53) = -.416, p = .679, d_{rm} = .06$; Reliance on God $t(53) = -2.857, p = .006, d_{rm} = .39$; Spiritual Practices $t(53) = -.959, p = .342, d_{rm} = .14$; Self-appraisal $t(53) = -.604, p = .548, d_{rm} = .07$; Reliance on Self $t(53) = .185, p = .854, d_{rm} = -.03$; see Table 2.

An exploratory analysis of the results using a 2 x 2 mixed factorial design (independent variables: Time sober [≥ 6 months, < 6 months] and TWP pr [pre, post]) found significant main effects for time sober ($p = .038$) and TWP practice ($p = .035$). The interaction was not significant. Youth who had been sober 6 months or longer showed significantly higher post-CIS total scores than those who had been sober fewer than 6 months, ≥ 6 months $M = 131.7, < 6$ months $M = 120.8; F(1, 49) = 4.53, p = .038$. Youth in recovery also showed a significant increase in CIS total score following TWP training, pre $M = 123.9, post M = 128.6; F(1, 49) = 4.40, p = .035$. As with the parent sample, analysis of the subscales found that Reliance on God was driving these differences.

Step 11 reads, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry it out” (AA, 2001, p. 59). The basic text of AA goes on to say, “. . . (The book’s) main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself, which will solve your problem” (AA, 2001, p. 45). Interestingly, 38 of the 50 youth responding to a survey question found prayer and meditation to be either “somewhat or very difficult.” Among parents the difficulty levels were lower with 10 of 21 reporting difficulty. In posttesting feedback, several participants from both groups noted TWP helped them in overcoming this difficulty.

The following are samples of TWP writings recorded by several the study’s participants:

Sample #1: A youth having troubled relations with his Step-Dad.

Question: Father, will (_____ name deleted) and I ever be able to have a real relationship?

Table 2. Youth: Paired sample pre- and posttest (t test).

	Mean	SD	SE Mean	t	d_{rm}	df	Significance (2-tailed)
Total	-3.906	14.466	1.987	-1.965	0.272	52	0.055
Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Others	-0.34	5.945	0.817	-0.416	0.06	52	0.679
Reliance on God	-2.774	7.067	0.971	-2.857	0.39	52	0.006
Spiritual Practices	-0.66	5.011	0.688	-0.959	0.14	52	0.342
Self-appraisal	-0.226	2.729	0.375	-0.604	0.07	52	0.548
Reliance on Self	0.057	2.222	0.305	0.185	0.03	52	0.854

Note. d_{rm} = measure of effective size per Dr. Stanford.

Voice: My son, you two do have a real relationship. You could practice being more loving to each other and unite as one voice over the household instead of two separate ones. You both love me and steer the family towards me. The only thing I would change is that you two do it together instead of separately. You both have different strengths and weaknesses that you could unite to become stronger in me. I love you my son; hearken to my voice!

Sample #2 Background: A mother struggling to find greater patience with family members.

Question: God, how can I be a more patient person, especially to those I love?

Voice: My precious child, walk by faith and trust me. Your impatience is found in your will. Choose my will and you will have all the patience you need to help (_____ name deleted). Walk with me and I will show you patience. Focus on me and not on the things of this world. Do not focus on how or who you think people should be. This is the impatience seed. See them through my eyes and know that they are who I made them and that I love them unconditionally – and you will too.

Impatience is your sign that you are wondering off the path I have laid for you. Do not be hard on yourself. Accept the sign, be thankful for it, and come back to me. You cannot help others or yourself but through me. Impatience tells you where you've cut me out of the picture. I love you unconditionally. I love who you are and all of your flaws. I am patient with you and can show you the way. I am your loving Father.

Sample #3 Background: A youth coping with feelings of awkwardness.

Question: God, how can I grow closer to the people around me today? I'm tired of feeling lonely in a group of people.

Voice: My son, it's simple. Be real and genuine with the people around you. Talk with them and share your story. You are a very lovable man, my son. People want a relationship with you. You just need to let them in.

Sample #4 Background: A youth struggling with intimacy issues.

Question: God, why am I still so scared to build relationships with people around me?

Voice: Son, you have been hurt in the past and that plays a part. However you don't have faith in me with that part of your life. You must have faith in me, and trust me, and you will gain the relationships you deserve.

Discussion

Studies correlate participation in 12-Step fellowships with improved substance use outcomes (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012, p. 237) and the majority of alcohol and drug treatment centers in this country employ the 12-Steps as a major part of their treatment modalities. This study evidences affecting positive changes in the samplings of parents and youth tested. The CIS field measuring “Reliance on God” was primarily driving the higher spirituality scores in the posttesting improvements. Parent group scores also indicated improved “Self-appraisal” scores, but similar positive changes were not replicated among the youth. Overall, it should be noted, parent scores were more than three times higher than those of the youth.

During questioning in the initial training, most of the youth acknowledged, through a show of hands, having heard an “addict voice” in their minds speaking words that often coaxed them toward a return to drug use as well as identifying an “inner critic voice” that often judged them severely. Finding access to a positive and loving “inner voice” through this prayer practice may help those in 12-Step recovery overcome these self-defeating “voices” and result in improved abstinence rates, much as they did among AA’s pioneer members. Broadening the concept of God from the more traditional Oxford Group model to one allowing greater self-definition of a higher power opens the prayer practice to individuals not having a religious conception of spirituality. Finally, many persons in recovery lack access to clinical resources and TWP may help provide a simple and affordable way for discovering positive inner resources.

The study’s lack of significant change noted in the other four CIS fields may be due to the instrument’s intended use among participants within specifically Christian treatment settings, often under more controlled conditions than this study afforded. Outcome data did support the premise that more frequent practice of TWP resulted in higher scores in both test groups.

Study weaknesses include the lack of a control group, imprecise measurements in recording the exact number of individual TWP sessions completed, and data verification based solely upon self-reporting. Posttrial, there are suggested indications of improved outcomes when a strong accountability component is added. Anecdotally, the study agency reported a 10-day, post-study field trip when a group of 24 youth that had participated in the testing met daily and practiced sharing their TWP writings each morning. Daily practice rates approached 80%. Agency counselors also report youth benefiting from voluntarily bringing their TWP writings to share privately during one-on-one counseling sessions. The practice shows promise in helping individuals arrive at deeper levels of honest sharing more quickly and might be used effectively to deepen trust levels within a therapeutic or 12-Step sponsoring relationship.

Further study trials of TWP would be beneficial if conducted under more controlled settings where time for the prayer practice is made a regular part of a group's daily schedule. Controlled testing of TWP that includes interaction between 12-Step sponsors, therapists, recovery coaches, and peers could be expected to generate improved outcomes over those recorded in this preliminary study. Finally, as the original prayer practice was not developed specifically for those in recovery, TWP may well have applicability outside the 12-Step fellowship models and could be tested among diverse populations, including church and youth groups, prisoners, or any population attempting change and open to practicing prayer and meditation.

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