

Secular Wisdom of the

Bad Dalai Lama



Prophecy & Advice from the World's Worst Religious Leader

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The Hypocrisy of

Thoughts & Prayers

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Latest Incarnation of His Badliness

Whenever there is a mass shooting, natural disaster or some other tragedy in the news, residents of the virtual world issue “thoughts and prayers” in response. These usually take the form of messages posted on social media: “My heart goes out to the people of X for the horrible Y they just experienced. Sending them my thoughts and prayers.”

I’ve always regarded these messages with suspicion. How do thoughts and prayers help the people affected by the tragedy? The implication is that just by thinking or praying, you can somehow change real-world outcomes.

Humans have always been drawn to magical thinking. It is part of our DNA. When the problems of the world seem too much, you can always pray to a god of your choosing or think positive thoughts. There is no evidence that this actually helps anything, but if prayers make the supplicant feel better, what is wrong with them?

I didn’t realize how poisonous thoughts and prayers could be until I became the subject of them. In July 2018, I was diagnosed with lymphoma, a systemic blood cancer. At the time of my diagnosis, the cancer had spread throughout my body, with hundreds of tumors from head to toe.

I was calm about it. Whether I lived or died was out of my hands, so I took my cancer as just another adventure, like a trip to Kazakhstan. As with all my journeys, I published my progress on social media. Within 24 hours of learning I had cancer, I announced it publicly on Facebook. I wasn’t seeking sympathy as

much as saying, “Look at this interesting thing that’s happening to me.”

That’s when the thoughts and prayers started rolling in. Hundreds of them. No one actually used the term “thoughts and prayers,” because it is already a well-worn cliché, but they were praying for me and “sending positive vibes my way.”

My first observation about thoughts and prayers was that prayers outnumbered thoughts by about ten to one. In comments, tweets and emails, people I hardly knew said they were praying for me. One cousin even got his whole church to pray for me at their Sunday service, which is a little creepy when I didn’t ask for it.

My second observation was that people who pray are not the people who donate. Within a few days of my cancer diagnosis, I set up a GoFundMe page. I was covered by a good medical plan, but during my long hospitalization I was unable to work to cover my other expenses. The response to my funding page was remarkably positive. People I hadn’t heard from in 20 years donated generous sums, while those who said they were praying for me donated little.

People who pray also lack curiosity. No one who announced their prayers to me asked me any questions about my condition, like “What kind of cancer do you have?” They all assumed the worst from beginning and were blind to any other data.

I concluded that prayer, and the public announcement of it, was a mechanism of disengagement. The world is full of tragedy, far more than any of us can handle directly, so we come up with methods to cordon it off. Sending

thoughts and prayers is one of the ways people disengage from tragedy, so it isn’t their problem anymore.

When someone says they are praying for you, what they are really saying is: “I’m turning this matter over to God. It’s out of my hands now, so I won’t be engaging you anymore.” Then they vanish.

People have the right to pray to any god they choose, but announcing those prayers is a different matter. Telling me about your prayers means you want credit for them, and I am supposed to thank you. You are oblivious to my own beliefs, which may not match yours.

Personally, I don’t believe in prayers. I believe in science. People have been praying for cancer cures for as long a religion has existed, but only oncology—the study of cancer cells—has yielded any verifiable results. My own strategy for dealing with cancer was to let my doctors do their thing, while at the same time thoroughly understanding that thing and why they were doing it.

In my case, the strategy worked. Within two months, all detectable cancer had cleared, with treatment continuing for three more months to be sure.

Yet people continue to pray for me, not bothering to look at my social media posts. Three weeks after my tumors had vanished, a relative sent me a book, *What Happens When I Die*, filled with Biblical quotations that were meaningless to me. He said he and his wife were praying to Jesus for me.

It’s like I can’t die quickly enough for these people.

—G.C.

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