

MASS FEAR AND FRONTLINE PRAYER

BY Ron Ballard

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN

if another tsunami hit coastal countries? A tornado in Dallas? Hurricanes off the Gulf Coast? Or a bird flu pandemic? What about world economics if oil prices keep rising? These questions are ones no one is really immune from these days. We've heard them all-or at least contemplated them. And with such uncertainties highlighted in the media and the threats of disaster hovering over the earth, it's no wonder a sense of mass fear accompanies these predictions.

Disasters and their threats deserve preparedness. Take for example Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who learned this lesson the hard way when a tsunami devastated his country two years ago. But after the 6.3 earthquake that struck Indonesia on May 27, the president acted quickly, moving his office to the quake's center and even sleeping in a tent with survivors (See *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 30, 2006, "Another kind of quake in Indonesia").

But how can we also prepare ourselves for the onslaught of fear that seems to accompany disaster preparation? Certainly taking reasonable steps to assure the safety of others is both wise and compassionate. However, emphasizing threats and assuring populations that it is not a matter of if but *when* disaster will strike can stir up fear that actually might exacerbate rather than improve the situation. And no one wants that.

Disasters and epidemics and the fear of them are not exactly new items in human history. Centuries ago, civilizations explored the advantages of prayer-based approaches to quelling fear and promoting preparedness. An old standby psalm advises: "Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling" (91:9, 10). While these words are comforting, some may wonder about the actual practicality of such a sentiment in dealing with the fear. Is there really any rationale underlying a completely spiritual approach?

Actually, there's much more to this approach than blind faith. More and more attention is being given today to the effect our thought has on our environment-and to the powerful effect prayer has on changing what appears to be "outside" of us. Over a century ago, Mary Baker Eddy observed that "what are termed natural science and material laws are the objective states of mortal mind. The physical universe expresses the conscious and unconscious thoughts of mortals. Physical force and mortal mind are one" (*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, p. 484). It was her conviction, based on her experience with prayer, that the universe around us largely evidences the current beliefs and resulting convictions that we hold about it.

What are some of those beliefs and convictions? Certainly a major one is that the forces of our universe are essentially material and therefore are objective (meaning external to thought) rather than subjective (meaning determined by thought). As long as we feel that what is called physical force is objective, then we will conclude that what we hold in consciousness makes no outward difference at all; such force and its effect is going to occur regardless of our role in it. But what if we were to begin to allow for the prospect that collective thought largely determines the results of physical force? Quite naturally we might be more careful with our conclusions and prediction: But more than just involving hopeful thoughts about outcomes, this approach needs to be based on a deeper understanding of God, the divine intelligence that governs the universe-and that dissolves fear.

All too often when the word God is mentioned in relation to human experience, the imagery is of a superhuman being intervening in the affairs of a material creation. Because humanity has held to this imagery for so long, and because the assumption is that the character of this God is much like the personality of mortals (sometimes benevolent, sometimes vengeful), it is hard to perceive of God as a presence and power, an intelligence and nurturance, without a physique. And yet as we come to accept the implications of the Bible-based terms used for God in Christian Science-such as *Love, Truth, Mind, Life, Spirit*, and *Soul*-we get a clearer sense of the nature of God by seeing that these terms connote an *absolute* character (meaning without mixture), an unconditional force or presence in creation-and as creation. And realizing that this divine Spirit can only create out of its own nature, we must come to grips with the false belief that God creates materiality and regulates life imperfectly.

A God that is Mind creates ideas, comprised of spiritually mental substance. Those ideas have to express the character and nature of their divine source. Since that source is Love, clearly those ideas can only evidence the nature and substance of Love itself. This Love must be consistently benevolent, blessing all that it creates.

Then what about a force that wreaks havoc on humanity? This cannot possibly be the evidence of a divine intelligence, an unconditional Love, a supreme harmony. And if it is not of this divine Presence-what is it? According to the Science of Mind, it is representative of pent-up fears and material perceptions. Through this kind of thought process, people buy into the belief that the natural forces of the universe are both good and evil, and that these forces are necessary to one another to maintain some sort of natural balance or selection.

What we assume is a force that is sometimes helpful and

sometimes destructive actually amounts to nothing more than a misconception or misinterpretation of the spiritual forces of being-ignorance, if you will, of what really exists. Mrs. Eddy wrote about those spiritual forces in her work *Science and Health*. She observed: "We tad on forces. Withdraw them, and creation must collapse. Human knowledge calls them forces of matter; but divine Science declares that they belong wholly to divine Mind, are inherent in this Mind, and so restores them to their rightful home and classification" (p. 124).

We must grow out of our sense that the true forces of the universe are anything but spiritual, naturally harmonious, and

exclusively benevolent. And as we claim spiritual reality as the basis of our thought, we will no longer fear outside circumstances that seem beyond our scope of control, be they disease, war, economics, weather, or any other

fear-producing phenomenon. A belief in the inevitability of evil must become obsolete as we become more attuned to the reality of God's nature and its immutable expression as life itself.

The question then arises, But if everyone isn't holding the same spiritual convictions as I do, how can I as an individual effect a change in the collective environment? In the Bible there is a story about one individual who, because of his fidelity to God, saved an entire city (see Eccl. 9). And there are countless examples of individuals who have done much to save their "cities" from disaster, by understanding the immutable nature of divine force.

Our family owned ranches in the midwestern section of the United States, in what is called Tornado Alley. Fear of tornadoes was widespread where we lived-and we were always prepared to go into our storm cellar until a threat passed. But beyond this practical preparation, I remember our family prayed to feel peaceful before, during, or after any storm. We prayed to realize that all true force was divine, not material, and that God did not express His nature in destruction. This was not an issue of asking God to intervene in our human lives and avert an outcome that we did not want to happen; it was the process of realizing what we called the scientific facts of creation that have God as their source. We wanted to get a clearer sense of the divine presence in our lives and learn more of the good nature of that presence. We also realized that prayer was inclusive because it was based on universal law and therefore had to include our "city"-the people in our community. So in a sense, we made a point of separating our thought from the collective fear about storms in our area and at the same time attempted to see that no one could be out of God's complete control. I'm grateful

that during the years our family ranches that area, no one in our neighborhood ever lost a house, animal, or crop. And this kind of prayer not only addressed tornadoes but also drought, floods, and insect infestation.

What good is prayer if an epidemic has already broken out or a natural disaster has already struck? For some who have suffered from disease or devastation, a story about how others averted it may not sound all that comforting. And if one follows the line of reasoning in this article, one might even be tempted to feel guilty that somehow their poor thoughts and fears got them into their mess. While it is certainly true that

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there is much that can be done through prayer to effectively preclude trouble in our lives, it does not follow that what happens to us is our fault. Prayer gives us the necessary tools to assert our mental dominion over any human need, and this poised thought can be applied no matter what human circumstance we face-or fear we'll face in the future.

Several years ago after the 1989 earthquake struck in San Francisco, there was a great deal of fear about how the quake might have affected the infrastructure of the city-the integrity of gas and water lines, the safety of public buildings and streets, and even the composure of people's attitudes and outlooks. The religious community stepped forward in those times to emphasize the spirit of God's immutable love and how it could be relied upon to structure our city's attitude to the future and each other. In fact, in the weeks and months that followed, rather than fear gripping the city, a great sense of community evolved with people helping others rebuild their lives and their confidence. It was one of the most thrilling times I ever experienced as a resident. Those days evidenced the fact that there is never a situation, no matter how much we fear it, where the love of God is not present to lift us above our circumstances.

So what of the fear of disaster? Maybe we would be best served by nurturing the expectancy of God, good, in our lives. Then, we are doing our part to help our neighbor and ourselves-and we can genuinely feel "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). css

Ron Bollard is a Christian Science practitioner and teacher. He divides his time between San Francisco, California, and Ashland, Oregon.