

When a plan comes together

Kris King – August 7th 2011

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So what have you been up to this weekend? A spot of gardening? Went clubbing? Visiting relatives, perhaps? If you're anything like me you've probably tried to do as little as possible, maybe even going so far as to achieving absolutely nothing at all. Well, if that's the case, and you happened to be in Houston, Texas yesterday, there was something that might well have appealed to you (assuming, of course, that you're up for achieving fuck all in a really big and pointless way). Around 30,000 people gathered at Reliant Stadium for a massive prayer rally, the sole purpose of which seems to be to beg, en masse, their invisible sky-gnome to wave his cosmic beard and magic away the myriad problems that the state, and indeed the nation, are unable to solve by themselves. Or, to put it less euphemistically, the problems that they're too lazy, cowardly, or just too plain fucking stupid, to do anything about.

"The Response: A Call to Prayer For a Nation in Crisis" was the brainchild of Texas governor Rick Perry and, although he hasn't announced anything yet, the fact that he's a southern, bible-frotting Republican points toward a strong probability that he'll one day make a run for the presidency. Even if we ignore for a moment the idea that this rally seems to blur the line of church-state separation to the point of near invisibility, it surely has to be obvious to people other than myself that an enormous "please help us!" cry to the heavens like this constitutes the biggest, most criminally misguided waste of time and human effort since "Live Earth"? How fucked does the situation have to be for thousands of people to throw their hands up in the air and say, "We quit!?" Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether it's the insurmountable scale of the problem, or the perceived powerlessness of the individual to solve it, an appeal to prayer equates to only one thing; surrender.

However you look at it, getting down on your knees, clasping your hands, and attempting to telepathically communicate with a long-dead Palestinian Jew (or, preferably, the dead-beat, absent one of his two dads who had him murdered to prove a stupid bloody point to himself) in the hope that said Hebrew zombie can sort some shit out for you, surely epitomises the complete abrogation of personal responsibility, as well as being an insufferably deplorable form of intellectual treachery towards one's own species? Are your problems really so utterly beyond your wits to solve that you have to delegate them to some sort of celestial secretary to do the work for you? What of the people around you, your friends and family? Are they so weak and feeble in your eyes that your metaphysical P.A gets the phone call before they do? You really don't think much of yourself, or your fellow humans, do you?

Or perhaps it's because you're a lazy bastard who's dug himself right into a world-hole of trouble and now can't be bothered to sort out the mess he created? "Ah fuck it", you think to yourself, "let god sort it out for me, that's what he's there for". It could certainly be said that one of the problems that Rick Perry had initially declared the rally was meant to help solve, that of the state's crippling financial situation, was a problem he, as state governor, played the largest part in helping to bring about in the first place ... and now the cheeky sod is calling on the almighty to bail him out? If your elected representative tells you, "Yeah, I've, erm, kind of spunked the contents of the public purse up a tree – can you all come pray with me to get it back?" and your response is to *join* him rather than kicking the living shit out of the useless treasury-pisser, there is something VERY wrong with you.

It might seem harsh of me to say so but, in my opinion, regardless of your reasons, the fact that you pray *at all* means there is something wrong with you and, for the most part, it's that you're not just content with wasting your time whispering to yourself rather than genuinely achieving something, but that you actually feel positively *virtuous* for having done so. Putting aside the arguments that it denotes a person is either too cowardly or lazy to take control of their own life, or that they have such a poor opinion of themselves (instilled, no doubt, by a faith that teaches them to feel worthless) that they're rendered impotent in the face of real-life issues, there's the unavoidable mountain of elephants in the cosmic room spelling out the incontrovertible truth that prayer *simply doesn't work*.

"Nothing fails like prayer", is not just a cute retort, but a demonstrable one too.

There has not been, in all of recorded history, a single event that can in *any* way be shown to have been as a result of prayer. *Nothing* attests to its religiously-claimed efficacy, there's not one scrap of supporting evidence. *Not one*. Yet, if you were to believe the claims made by those of the cloud-fairy persuasion, prayer is more reliable than a German car, the Japanese rail network, and a thunderstorm during British barbecue-season combined. So many good, lovely old christian grannies have been cured of cancer solely through the prayers of their loved ones, yet the equally devout amputee next door remains unblessed as his body fails to regrow a new limb. Is it because he isn't faithful enough? Is it, as the disgusting internet christian VenomFangX has it, that [amputees don't deserve their limbs](#)? Or is it that prayers are only answered for things that medical science can actually achieve, or for the kind of spontaneous remission that medical knowledge is well aware of?

Many studies have been conducted into the effectiveness of prayer, the largest of which was a controlled, multi-million dollar, double-blind experiment [carried out by Harvard Medical School](#) on post-op heart surgery patients. The results were pretty much as you'd expect, in that whether a patient was being prayed for or not had almost no statistically significant bearing on their recovery. I say "almost" because, in a surprise twist that must have really annoyed the piss out of the various christian groups who were hoping that their hated enemy science was about to finally validate their beliefs, those patients who were aware that they were being prayed for actually did *worse* (presumably because they figured their situation was dire enough to warrant prayer, and that affected their recovery). Naturally, christians did try to spin this rather damning report by [claiming it in fact proved the exact opposite](#) of its conclusion.

Engaging in such a demonstrably worthless activity with great fervour renders prayer very similar to masturbation; whatever your motivation, the only thing you'll ultimately get out of either is a few, brief seconds of feeling good about yourself. Additionally, as far as I, and I'm sure many others, are concerned, both are things that I'd rather you did in private and not try to force the rest of us to join in, watch, or listen to. Like any other aspect of faith, prayer is inherently narcissistic because it's all about the individual; it's all about **you**, it's all about what **you** want, what makes **you** feel special (we're back to wanking again, aren't we?) Even when you pray for someone else, it's still all about you because, should your prayer be answered, it's a sign that your god favours *you*. After all, he wouldn't have granted your wish if he didn't like you, would he? You must be really doing well!

In this way, prayer is about seeking affirmation for one's life and deeds. We all want to know whether or not we're doing the right thing, whether our lives are on the right path, and to have the all-powerful and all-loving master of the universe bestowing his blessings upon you, and fulfilling even the smallest of your wishes, is going to give you, as a believer, at least the *illusion* that your deeds are righteous, and your life is good. As with drugs and alcohol (yes, okay, and wanking – god you people are obsessed!), prayer can become dangerously addictive simply by virtue of appearing to work, and there's no doubt that the most pious, religious dickhole with a beatific smile is someone who prays every day for something really simple, and then feels like god's pet monkey when their prayer is answered and they're able to find their car keys.

But what happens when they *don't* get what they want? What does it mean when prayers are *not* answered? Well, the response to that has always been that it's because it was not their god's will – it was not part of his "plan". To avoid facing the reality that reality is, in fact, largely unpredictable and frequently random, theists invented this idea that their imaginary friend had planned out **everything** – not just for them, but for **everyone** and **everything**. Nothing happens that isn't according to their god's will; he knows everything that has ever happened, or will ever happen, because he planned it. Sadly, this backs the theist into a massive logical corner that is impossible for them to get out of, partly because the qualities of omnipotence and omniscience that they've assigned to their god are mutually exclusive, but mainly because it makes every single one of their prayers utterly futile.

If god's plan doesn't include whatever it was they were praying for, then their prayer is rather wasted because they're not going to get what they want anyway. If their wish *does* form part of the divine plan, the prayer is equally unnecessary because they were going to get their way all along. This assumes, of course, that the plan wouldn't ever change, but to assume otherwise would un-stitch the fabric of god until it completely unravels. If the plan can be changed, omniscience is out the window because god didn't see it coming (if he did, it would be in the plan); if he *did* see it coming, then bang goes omnipotence because he clearly knew that he would grant your wish and change the plan and, therefore, is largely a slave to his own designs. And besides, have you considered what kind of fucked up plan this unholy incompetent has got running here? It's *seriously* messed up ...

Christopher Hitchens beautifully demolished the idea of a listening, moral, and loving god who answers prayers in a debate [by raising the question of Elisabeth Fritzl](#), and how she must have spent almost every waking moment of her 24 years of imprisonment, torture, and rape, praying to god and getting nothing but cold indifference in return. To suggest that this god has a plan is to suggest that Fritzl's two-and-a-half decades of hell were absolutely a part of it. Ask yourself what kind of ultimate aim the plan must have in order that this sick, demented, fucked up god can possibly justify putting someone through such torment while ignoring her screams and her pleas the whole time it was taking place. If you believe in god, and you believe he answers prayers, you **cannot** simply sweep this one under the theological carpet.

If you eliminate the idea of a god from the universe, you eliminate with it the idea that everything shitty that ever happens to anyone is deserved, or even necessary. You eliminate the idea of a cruel, heartless being watching over us with absolute indifference, and instead see every bad thing that happens as just some fucking bad thing that happens. No plan to it, no grand design of which your misery forms an integral part, it's just some fucking bad thing that happened and that's that. And, without some kind of supernatural superintendent, we have no one to turn in times of trouble but each other. That's right, in times of great need, we have only the near 7 billion other members of our own species to call on – and I can't think of anything more inspiring than all the things we've done by way of trying to solve our problems for ourselves.

Humanism is an infinitely more noble view of the world than theism, because it places our belief squarely in **us**; we believe in ourselves, and in our ability to get shit done without feeling the need to constantly appeal to some external entity like drooling, helpless little children. It teaches us that our greatest achievements have come from working together to figure things out, rather than always tugging at the big guy's trouser leg to ask yet another bloody question that begins with the word "why?" As Phil Plait, creator of the ["Bad Astronomy" blog](#), put it in a speech he gave at TAM 8, "teach a man to reason, and he'll think for a lifetime". There can be no greater example of the power of humanism, no better representation of what we, as a species, are capable of when we get off our knees and start thinking together instead of praying together, than science.

Carl Sagan described it as a "collaborative enterprise, spanning the generations"; certain motivational-poster style images have a more pointed take on it – "Science, bitches: it works". However you like to think of it, the scientific enterprise truly is the greatest thing our species has ever achieved, and we did it all through working together, solving puzzles, figuring things out. We didn't get the answers via a booming voice from the sky or a smouldering hedgerow. We didn't build the civilisation we have by following the ramblings of some ancient priest. Show me one disease we've managed to eradicate by praying it away? Name me one satellite that was put into orbit by engineers who did so by simply referring to scripture. Give me one example of a technical advancement that has ever been made by men in white coats sitting down to read the gospels of the bible?

Just look at where you are right now; the internet – a world-wide network of interconnected computers, billions of people, in every country, in every last little corner of our world, sharing information, ideas, and culture, communicating with one another, building relationships, fostering understanding, and shining light into dark corners. This is what happens when humans get together and come up with a plan. And it's a *real* plan, born of *real* ideas and hard work instead of incessant pleading and whining. It's a plan that is a direct product of the effort that was put into it, and was not contingent on the unknowable whims of some overseer. We wanted something, and we got it – not because we prayed for it, but because we worked for it, and because we *planned* for it.

And I love it when a plan comes together ...

