

A Conversation With RIVER JORDAN

About *PRAYING FOR STRANGERS*

Let's start with the word "praying" in the book's title. Could you describe your personal form of prayer? Do you feel this book somehow might reclaim the word "prayer" in a way that's not so religiously or politically charged?

A. The word prayer has become a little mega charged lately with what I think are almost negative overtones. That's sad. The fact is millions of people pray everyday for a better world without malice. There are some beautiful books on prayer, some incredible websites on prayer. I've tried to come up with a word substitution but there really isn't a great one. My personal form of prayer – well, laughingly I'd tell you honestly my first reaction is "That's really kind of personal don't you think?!" Then I realize I've written this very, personal book about this resolution and it's only natural for people to ask. (I just added a short podcast about considering the word prayer on the Praying for Strangers website that I think would help people understand this.) Just today I was reading selections from the book and opened to the specific chapter on Prayer that describes the way I pray. May I paraphrase myself? I mentioned the fact that I happened to believe in prayer and while I don't usually talk about it with the world I won't apologize for that fact either. I have prayed standing up, on my knees, lying in bed, driving down the road and my most desperate prayers seemed to have been with my head on the steering wheel. Parked of course. Those were 'I totally give up' prayers. I'm Episcopalian so I'm very comfortable praying with a lit candle and visiting cathedrals. I'm also comfortable praying in a little country Baptist church like the one my Grandmother took me to, next to waterfalls, and walking down a crowded sidewalk. Sometimes I listen to music and the words and melodies seem to do the praying for me. And let's just say for the record those songs are not typical prayer or praise music, it's music that speaks to me. (Quite off the record – Dire Straits – Brothers In Arms, Great prayer music. And The Subdudes. Pretty much all their stuff. And some Bob Marley. The Rolling Stones cause you don't always get what you want but if you try real hard – you might just get what you need! And so on.) The most important thing is there is no perfect formula. I have friends from every background, religion and denomination. They all pray differently. I'll take their prayers any day.

Tell us a little bit about what was going on in your life at the time when you decided to start praying for total strangers.

A. I can tell you the last thing on my mind were strangers. As the book opens both sons are being deployed to two different war zones. We were having this mad rush to get the entire family together in the Blue Ridge Mountains – everyone coming from different locations before ‘the boys’ as we call them left. Looking back on it I can see I was just a little edgy, probably bordering on hysteria. I was very focused on trying to make that holiday get together as perfect as possible. Then I get his great inspired idea for a resolution to begin the New Year. To be honest, if it weren’t for the chance meeting with a tiny, stranger on the December 31st, I doubt I would have embarked on this journey with such dedication. Readers can find that story in the book as well.

You say that you did not anticipate telling these stories publicly and that you feel your spiritual self is very private. What finally convinced you to write a book about this New Year’s resolution to pray for a new stranger every day?

A. I’ve just always felt things that were spiritual were sacred in such a way that discussing them openly might take away a touch of that special feeling. You’re very correct in that I never planned to write this book. When I would share with a few friends about my resolution they’d get wide-eyed and say what a great idea for a book?! And I’d say, No, no – it’s not a book. It’s a resolution. But I’d come home repeatedly and say to my husband, “You won’t believe what happened today.” And I’d share a story about a stranger and their reaction to me telling them I’d pray for them before I went to sleep. He kept telling me, “You’re a writer and you absolutely must be writing down these stories.” I’d pretty much reply – I’m a novelist. I’m not that kind of writer. But then the longer I did this, and I did keep a journal in the process, I began to see an incredible larger picture evolving. One that had so much to do with people connecting with one another in a personal way. I began to see how hungry the world was for that caring and compassion. It changed the way I looked at things. I put a little bit of my ‘private’ in my back pocket and stepped up and started talking to people.

A. Your previous books have been Southern gothic novels, and your true story told in PRAYING FOR STRANGERS is quite a big departure from those works. Did you find the book difficult to write for that reason, or surprisingly easy?

A. Writing this book was much, more difficult. I’m used to entering another world when writing and to some degree, I am sheltered by those settings and those characters. Even if I draw from real life inspirations I am still not writing about my real life. This book was an extremely personal departure from that. I felt raw and revealed on every page. And people in my family would tell you I’m a very private person. (And you can underline very.) I’m proud to say that I wrote this story being very open and honest. I told the story that needed to be told.

On your website, you say you began this journey believing that “the world needed me.” What you discovered, though, was “that I needed the world.” Can you

elaborate on how this act changed your own life, just as much as it has bettered lives of others?

A. Well, I can't say I ever felt the world needed me until I took on this prayer resolution. Then I thought, well, I'm doing a good thing, see? The world must 'need me'. I'm praying for a stranger every day whether they know it or not and it has to be helping those people 'out there.' Then I began to realize that I was getting as much or more out of this thing I was doing than I could possibly be giving. If I was really angry, or frustrated, or worried – fill in the blank with a thousand negative emotions, being sensitive to someone around me and praying for them made a difference in me. Instead of only focusing on my needs and my sons being away, I watched people differently, was more sensitive to absolutely everyone in an expectant kind of way. And the days when I told someone they were my special stranger for the day and they hugged me, and thanked me profusely. Are you kidding? I felt just like that moment that the Grinches heart grows three times larger that day. I went from being grouchy and just trying to check my resolution box for the 'needy' when I realized I was the one greatly in more need, and also the one receiving. The heartfelt appreciation of so many of these people changed my view from the inside out.

What are some of the most uplifting examples you have experienced of how your praying has affected the lives of the strangers you've chosen?

A. There have been a few times that I've had the wild coincidence of bumping into this people again. Sometimes at odd hours in a completely different part of the city and once even in a different city completely. It was great in those instances to see that their lives seem to be in a much better place than the moment we first met. I can't contribute that to my prayers nor will I discount the power of taking a selfless moment to have compassion on a stranger's life. After all, I appreciate anonymous heartfelt prayers for me. But so many other times my just sharing a quick word with these people and telling them that they stood out to me as someone special and that I would be remembering them in my prayers that evening, knowing that alone seemed to literally light up their life – from the guy that acted like he had just won the lottery to the woman that had said she had just been asking God that morning if anyone in the whole world was praying for her and that I was an answer to prayer. Oh, and a woman at a drive in fast food window who said she had just walked restaurant telling the people at work she needed somebody out there praying for her – then I drove up to her window and said, "Hi, today you're my strangers . . .", and the woman that hugged me and said we'd be sisters forever. I smile thinking about them all. (And thanks, I needed that.)

What would you say to those, both non-religious and religious alike, who might want to try to do something similar? What are your suggestions for readers who might start "praying for strangers" themselves, now that they've heard about the book?

A. There is a great write-up on that on the Praying for Strangers Website titled 'How do I pray for a Stranger?' but basically what it says is there is no wrong way. One person

taking notice of another in this world and praying blessings for them that day, visualizing goodness and peace in their lives, lighting a candle on their behalf – all those things count. I very clearly state that I certainly hope no one ever reads this book and gets the thought to pray to ‘change’ someone to believe a different way than they do. I wouldn’t want someone praying that I would say – dye my hair blonde, or get a tattoo. You see what I mean? I believe in praying for goodness, mercy, peace, and joy in someone’s life. There’s a prayer card on my website that people can forward to friends and family as well. I think it’s very representative of both the prayers I say and those I’d like to receive. I would also really like to encourage people to try this if only for one week or a month, and to keep a journal about the way that his practice is affecting their lives. They might really be surprised at the outcome. They can also share their personal stories on the website and read stories from other readers.

If you could, sum-up in your own words why you feel these stories, and their messages, need to be shared.

A. The world obviously has a few dark days here and there, yes? The news can be overwhelming with the negative things going on both on international levels and the things that are happening in our own private little worlds that we try to keep to ourselves. This experience has shown me that people in this world are thirsty for the human touch and that amazingly, a word or a touch from a stranger, can mean so very much. The overwhelming response from people on the street, in stores, restaurants, hotel lobbies, diners, bars, and parks and so on, has shown me that the value of this one, tiny thing is immeasurable. And that it is something that everyone in this world can do that doesn’t cost them anything at all but a small moment of their time. That is something worth sharing.

You have an unusual name. Is there a story behind it?

A. Absolutely. I wrote under that name as a young woman so originally it was a pen name. It was inspired by a moment that I can only imagine mirrored one Mr. Samuel Clemens had upon hearing ‘mark’, and ‘twain’ over and over working on those riverboats until something clicked in him. What could be a better nom-de-plume than words that meant clear passage. I think considering the Jordan river had the same effect on me. Then one day I realized it was no longer a pen name at all. Furthermore, as Mark Twain well have discovered we needed him to be Mark Twain and no other. Now, it’s my legal, down to the bone, actual name. No one calls me anything other than River and it would feel bizarre if they did. People love it. It seems to brightened their day. Now, people tell me they are naming their babies that name. And *that*, brightens my day. I think it’s one of the most hopeful names around. I wear it proudly.