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The Power to Uplift

By Pamela Paul

Not many people could smile through what Karen Granger, 41, suffered last year. First, her husband Eric was laid off from his telecom job. Then in March, finally pregnant and eager to start a family, she had a miscarriage. One month later, her closest cousin Sharon received a diagnosis of advanced breast cancer. No sooner did Granger return from visiting Sharon in Tower Lakes, Ill., than two hurricanes smacked her hometown of Boynton Beach, Fla. Finally, in early December one of her best friends died at age 50 from a brain tumor. After that, she found herself asking, "Why, God? Why?"

But Granger, a devout Christian who attends Presbyterian services weekly and prays daily, doesn't allow circumstances to get her down. "We're not in heaven yet," she says, "and these things happen on this earth." Granger credits religion with helping her cope and giving her a feeling of connection and purpose. "We're putting our lives in God's hands and trusting he has our best interests at heart," she says. "I've clung to my faith more than ever this year. As a consequence, I haven't lost my joy."

Comfort and joy. Inner peace. A sense of well-being. Sacred texts and sermons have long promised such rewards to the faithful. Now the rigor of scientific research is being applied to this seemingly ineffable tenet of religious belief. According to Dr. Harold Koenig, a co-director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University, from 2000 to 2002 more than 1,000 scholarly articles on the relationship between religion and mental health were published in academic journals--as opposed to just 100 from 1980 to 1982. Such studies indicate that religion buffers its adherents from worry. Religious people are less depressed, less anxious and less suicidal than nonreligious people. And they are better able to cope with such crises as illness, divorce and bereavement. Even if you compare two people who have symptoms of depression, says Michael McCullough, an associate professor of psychology and religious studies at the University of Miami, "the more religious person will be a little less sad."

Chances are, he'll also be a little happier. Studies show that the more a believer incorporates religion into daily living--attending services, reading Scripture, praying--the better off he or she appears to be on two measures of happiness: frequency of positive emotions and overall sense of satisfaction with life. Attending services has a particularly strong correlation to feeling happy, and religious certainty--the sense of unshakable faith in God and the truth of one's beliefs--is most closely linked with life satisfaction

The question is why. To find out, researchers have begun to examine nationwide data and conduct smaller in-depth studies asking people what they believe and why they pray. We know religion's benefits can be roughly divided into four areas: social support, spiritual support, a sense of purpose and meaning and the avoidance of risky and stressful behaviors.

The value of social support is the easiest to demonstrate. Religion, after all, derives from the Latin *religio*, meaning "to bind together"--linking individuals to family and ancestors, friends and community, clergy and congregation. A person with strong social connections could get similar benefits from family meals or knitting circles, McCullough allows, but "people who are religious may just get more of it." Plus there's the added layer of spiritual support. "If you believe there's a God watching out for you, that's profoundly comforting," he says. "It's the grand-scale equivalent of thinking, If I can't pay my rent at the end of the month, my dad will help."

Doing good works through acts of charity or prayer and meditation provides another sense of connection to community for many believers. That is a key factor in Buddhism's capacity to foster happiness, says clinical psychologist Lorne Ladner, who has written on the topic. "A person might emulate the Buddha by imagining he's breathing in the suffering of others and breathing out energy to heal them," Ladner explains. "You literally breathe in sadness and exhale joy. This doesn't magically alleviate people's suffering, but the practice does help a person develop a strong sense of compassion, and compassion has been linked to happiness."

So has the sense of purpose and grand design that religious faith provides. Studies show that those who believe in life after death, for example, are happier than those who do not. "Religion provides a unifying narrative that may be difficult to come by elsewhere in society," says sociologist Christopher Ellison of the University of Texas at Austin.

It's not just what religion gives but what it takes away. "The 'thou shalt nots'--no adultery, no drugs and so on--keep people from getting addicted or otherwise increasing their level of stress," says Koenig. (That is, if they follow the rules.) The strictures of religion may simplify life for adherents, and that can be a huge relief. "One of the benefits of observance is that it helps people solve the freedom-of-choice problem," says Barry Schwartz, a psychology professor at Swarthmore College and the author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. "This wasn't always a blessing. In a more restrictive society, people may not have embraced being told what to do. But in a world in which anything is possible, religion can provide guidelines to those who are overwhelmed by an abundance of options."

Judy Lederman, 42, a modern Orthodox Jew from Scarsdale, N.Y., has consciously added religious responsibilities to her daily life. Such restraints, she believes, keep her in check emotionally. Though raised Jewish, Lederman rebelled against her parents as a teenager. It wasn't until after the birth of her third child eight years ago that Lederman returned to her religious roots. "I realized my life was missing something, and I needed solid ground under my feet," she recalls. Life was seeming increasingly complex and chaotic. One of

her children received a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Lederman had gained about 80 pounds, which she attributes to stress. She felt moody and adrift. Bit by bit, she began to add religion and ritual to her life. She started to attend synagogue regularly and exercised while listening to spiritual music. She decided to keep a kosher kitchen and observe the Sabbath. "Happiness isn't a constant for anyone, but I feel more at peace and balanced now," she says. "I absolutely feel more satisfied with my life."

Religion's contribution to well-being appears to be nearly universal across various faiths and ethnic groups, although, not surprisingly, studies suggest that those who are single, elderly or in poor health gain the most. Still, faith seems to succor the young as well. A 2003 national study involving 3,300 adolescents found that teens who attend services, read the Bible and pray feel less sad or depressed, less alone, less misunderstood and guilty and more cared for than their nonreligious peers.

Does religious affiliation make a difference? Apparently so. In their 2003 study of adults 55 and older in North Carolina, Adam Cohen, a social psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and Dan Hall, an Episcopal priest at Duke, found that Protestants reported slightly higher levels of well-being than Catholics did and significantly higher levels than Jews did. Cohen says such differences may be explained in part by the fact that Protestants voiced a greater belief in an afterlife than did Jews. Another possible factor: the stresses of being a minority. Additionally, Cohen's study suggests that Protestants derive relatively more joy from their internal faith in God, whereas Jews and Catholics draw more comfort from their religious communities.

But people can benefit from spirituality without subscribing to a particular doctrine. Kim Garretson, 54, a marketing executive from Minneapolis, Minn., was raised an Episcopalian but refused to get confirmed at age 13 and hasn't practiced since. But he experienced a spiritual revival after he was told he had advanced prostate cancer three years ago. He credits his Christian friends' prayers and laying on of hands with helping him. He also saw an alternative religious healer who practiced a method called the healing touch, something Garretson would have scoffed at before his illness. Not only did Garretson's health improve dramatically, but also his entire life was transformed. Now Garretson says he's a spiritual person, feeling more connected to others and the world around him, although he has no desire to join any formal religion. His wife calls him Giddy Boy. "I'm in a state of exuberance," he says. "Before, I was living my life on autodrive. Today my mind is devoted to sharing the exuberance of life--spending time with my wife and kids, starting my own nonprofit to reach out to men with prostate cancer. I actually walk around with a lighter step because of my connectedness to things spiritual."

All that doesn't necessarily leave nonbelievers down in the dumps. Atheists and agnostics who follow some framework of belief--be it secular humanism or pure science--can derive benefits similar to what others gain from religion. And the blessings of community support and love are also available to doubters. In a far-ranging study that followed 724 men over seven decades, Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant found that some of the men whose lives were "most blessed with loving and fulfilling relationships" were

completely unreligious. Meanwhile, in his private practice, Vaillant found that "three of the most religious patients I've had were victims of severe parental abuse. Often it's those most in trouble who shift to a more spiritual stance."

Like all research that's based on surveys, studies of faith and happiness depend on the candor of participants. Some researchers question professions of happiness by the devout. "Maybe as religious people, they feel obliged to say they're happy because if they don't, they might be perceived as less faithful," says Cohen. After all, Christianity holds joy as evidence of God. In short, some people who attribute their happiness to religion may be allowing doctrine to tint the truth. But then again, it's hard to refute the Karen Grangers of this world--serene and smiling through a vale of tears.