



It's ok: a paradoxical prayer narrative for death¹

*“Está tudo bem!”: uma narrativa de oração paradoxal
para a morte*

KEVIN L. LADD ^a

Abstract

Spoken at many critical life and death moments, the phrase “it’s ok” often belies the actual situational reality. Conceptualizing “it’s ok” as a form of prayer, the present paper considers how to understand the paradox of claiming that things are “ok” or “acceptable” when they clearly are not. The conclusion is reached that “it’s ok” as a prayer intends to tell a story of hope that recognizes and points beyond the frailty of the human condition.

Keywords: Prayer. Death. Narrative. Hope.

Resumo

Falada em muitos momentos críticos da vida e da morte, a frase “está tudo bem” desmente, com frequência, a situação real de fato. Conceituando “está tudo bem” como uma forma de oração, o presente artigo reflete sobre como entender o paradoxo de afirmar que “está tudo bem”, ou que as coisas são “aceitáveis” quando estas claramente não são. Chega-se à conclusão de que a frase “está tudo bem”, como forma de oração,

¹ Thanks are extended to Arryngton D. S. Ladd for the insights and links to Irish folklore and lullabies. Thanks also to Meleah L. Ladd and Mary R. G. Esperandio for comments and suggestions that notably improved the manuscript in multiple ways.

^a Indiana University South Bend, IN, USA. PhD, e-mail: kladd@iu.edu

pretende contar uma história de esperança que reconhece e aponta para além da fragilidade da condição humana.

Palavras-chave: *Oração. Morte. Narrativa. Esperança.*

Prologue

This work is dedicated to the author's mother, Kay Elaine Saunders Ladd (1939-2022), who died while the paper was developing. During the early stages of the temporal lobe dementia that would eventually cause her death, she adopted and persisted in the habit of introducing herself by saying: "I'm Kay, as in Oh, Kay! That's who I am, how I am, and how you can remember me." Her ability to find ok-ness whatever her own condition was a testament to her hope-filled faith and her keen sense of humor, both of which continue to guide and inspire.

Words of Comfort or Deceit?

"It's ok. It's going to be all right. Shhhh. Don't worry. Don't cry."

Lies?

Truth?

Probably within a few hours, and certainly within a day after our birth, each of us heard similar words whispered into our infant ears. Regardless of the language in which they were spoken, we had no idea what those constellations of sounds actually meant.

In fact, in many old Irish lullabies, while the tunes are peaceful and meant to comfort the infant, the singers take advantage of this very fact. They include lines such as "I have no milk for you ... I fear you will get the croup" (Shaw, 143) and "The disease that affects pigs ... may that afflict the wife of my lover." (Shaw, 147). These rather depressing examples of songs to comfort infants are not lies in and of

themselves, but their words, tunes, and tones of delivery constitute a deceptive practice evident to any knowledgeable listener.

If infants could understand the words being spoken or sung around them, they might become less, instead of more comforted. Rather than pausing their noisemaking, they might become louder. Peacefulness might have fled, leaving indignation or even anger behind. At birth, caretakers are lucky the infants didn't know about language, lies, and truth!

It is more than a little intriguing that at the other end of our lives, we are likely to hear the very same words. "It's ok. It's going to be all right. Shhhh. Don't worry. Don't cry." By then, we know what those words mean.

Lies?

Truth?

One version of events surrounding the 1912 sinking of the Titanic (Turner, 2011) features yet another form of these ambiguously comforting and deceiving words in the song *Nearer, My God, to Thee*:

Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
Darkness be over me, my rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I'd be nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!

As psychologists, caregivers, spouses, children, we have heard similar words spoken in quiet rooms, on noisy battlefields, in houses of worship, and beside open graves.

Lies?

Truth?

Robert Neale (2002) refers to this parallel use of language at birth and death, and in between those moments as well, as "life magic" or ways that people express their strongest desires in the face of threat. In essence, his argument is like many earlier others (Freud, 1940/1961; Taylor & Brown, 1988): People provide positive narratives for themselves in the face of deeply negative events. The self-deceptions can be either helpful or harmful (Valliant, 1994), depending on how deeply and for how long they are believed.

The narratives may be enacted through rituals (Xygalatas, 2022) or the narratives may occur in a more spontaneous, unstructured format. Sometimes those self-serving narratives involve faith traditions or other metaphysical frameworks (Ladd, 2007) and sometimes they do not. When the self-deceptive narratives arise from a religious or other metaphysical framework, they might appear as very focused stories, or even parables, that carry a particular point. Alternatively, the narratives could occur in the physical form of a painting, sculpture, clothing, a building, or some other tangible object that “tells” a story of victory in the face of actual defeat.

It's OK: a narrative prayer

Each of these manifestations of narratives at the time of death are revealing and informative. For the purpose of the present conversation, it will serve us well to narrow our consideration to a very specific form of narratives or stories that are synonymous with prayers situated in a context of faith and arising from the greatest of desperation, when people desperately want things to be “ok” even when it is clear that they are and will not be. This necessarily excludes a wide range of material, but will allow the construction of a basis from which to explore those other leads.

Initially, it may seem to be a stretch to call prayer a “narrative” or a story. Yet, the proposition makes sense if we conceptualize prayer as a way of connecting with ourselves, with the world around us, or with anything beyond the tangible realm, be it a deity or an amorphous spiritual principle (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). From the earliest known times, humans have connected with each other in many ways; storytelling has served as a principal mechanism. We tell ourselves stories. We tell stories about ourselves to others. We even tell stories when there are no readily apparent listeners. In stories, we ask, we give, we conceal, and we reveal; so, too, in prayers where “Dear God” supplants “Dear Listener” as a distinctive opening.

Prayers, therefore, as a form of connecting are one way of narrating what has, what is, and what may happen. Prayers are a way of expressing both facts and desires, telling stories about the past and the longed-for future. At birth and at death, those narratives are at the forefront, with a commonality driven by ambiguity comingled with dread or with hope that pervades all beginnings and all endings.

Does that mean that it is a prayer narrative when saying to an infant or a dying person, “It’s ok. It’s going to be all right. Shhhh. Don’t worry. Don’t cry.”?

Perhaps. It is certainly possible to argue that everyone is praying at all times, even if they do not realize it, do not desire to do so, or do not believe prayer is a feasible practice. It is likewise possible to argue in precisely the opposite direction, that no one ever prays, even if they try to do so, want to do so, and believe that it is possible. These positions are not convincing, however, because they do not rest on logically solid bases. Both the “all the time” and “none of the time” arguments fail on the same grounds that their fundamental premises are not scientifically falsifiable; believing in either is a statement of faith, not a statement of science.

So, I believe “it’s ok” is perhaps a prayer based on an awareness that people can interpret the very same words in highly divergent ways. Some may say that they have uttered a prayer. Others may say that prayer is decidedly not what they have done. The situation is even more complex, of course, because people other than the speaker may hear and experience a prayer regardless of the speaker’s intention. Such convoluted positions are beyond the possible scope of this paper but offer a clear way forward to expand the present thinking.

Fascinating as it is, I also set aside the question of “accidental” or unintended prayers from either the perspective of the speaker or the hearer. Likewise, I do not consider prayers that are rejected by anyone as such for any reason. Instead, I consider, for now, only prayers from people who intentionally employ and hear prayer as a narrative, specifically when in a situation of death, though many of the notions here likely apply with equal force to the situation of birth or other major life events.

Following my previous work (Ladd, 2015), the prayers or narratives employed at times of death have (at least) three facets: valence, motivation, and orientation. The first facet, valence, refers to the extent to which the prayer takes on a positive or a negative tone. The second facet, motivation, links to the motivation of the prayer; is the intent to hasten or to delay death? The third facet, orientation, addresses whether the death in question is of the self or of someone else (Figure 1).

This model covers a wide array of prayers, from the desire for the quick, and potentially painful death of an enemy, to the request for the delay of death for a

loved one. It considers prayers that are highly narcissistic and prayers that are purely compassionate. To confound the matter, each and every one of the various prayers may consist of precisely the same words, whether shouted, spoken quietly, or only thought.

The Paradoxical, Prayerful Complexity of OK-ness and Death

Why so many kinds of prayers? Why are the narratives surrounding death so vastly different?

With equal legitimacy, we can ask why should anyone expect prayers in the presence of death to be any more simplistic than the lives of those uttering them? Life narratives, even those that appear to be simple and direct, are never really simple or direct; this is equally true of prayers that arise within the actual lived lives of people. Rather than exploring the entire array of prayers and the tangle of lives that underlie them, I want to isolate a single prayer for consideration: “It’s ok.” I want to explore whether that narrative represents a lie or the truth.

In one sense, the utterance is clearly not true. At any stage of the experience of death, things are “not ok” in many senses. Relationships as previously known are irreparably disrupted. Routines as previously known are torn apart. W. H. Auden (1940) expresses this destruction of the narrative of life in the poem, *Funeral Blues*:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.
Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

Auden continues, going so far as to proclaim the demise of love and all that is good. Life’s entire narrative is negated by death. Auden observes that, in fact, everything is not ok; absolutely nothing is ok.

In this sense, the impulse to utter the prayer narrative, “it’s ok,” is clearly in opposition to the reality of the radical change occurring. The psychological literature addresses this misalignment as a state of cognitive dissonance: I know it’s not ok, but I’m saying it is ok. As with the notions of self-deception addressed earlier, this situation can create significant discomfort if allowed to exist unabated.

From another perspective, “it’s ok” is a narrative of truth. Untold numbers of deaths have occurred, and humanity has persisted. The cycle of growth and decay, of life and of death, is a biological necessity. To participate in this cycle is an expected part of being human.

It appears, then, that, somewhat like Schrödinger’s famous cat, the prayer narrative “it’s ok” when facing death is both false and true. The narrative is one of both destruction and preservation. This type of paradox has been addressed in multiple contexts across many, many years.

Arguably, the conversation about what is false/unreal and true/real can be traced backward in time to initial considerations of the fundamental nature of evil and good that are core concerns of the earliest known belief systems; evil is the false pathway while good is the true pathway. Leibniz (1686/1716) solidified this line of inquiry with his pointed theodicy question of how a benevolent deity could allow for the presence of evil (for a contemporary psychological perspective on the construct of evil, see Burris, 2022). In a similar vein, Otto (1924) and Eliade (1959) comment extensively on the tension between the profane (that which is not eternally true) and the sacred (that which is absolutely true).

As specific example of this tension, the “it’s ok” prayer narrative in relation to death allows us to grapple on a small scale with this much larger question of good and evil, truth and falsehood, profane and sacred. Recall that one way of understanding prayer is that it is a way of connecting with ourselves, with others, and with a perceived spiritual dimension that is beyond any physical realm. The notion of “connecting” often is associated with positive emotionality and qualities of goodness. This is not necessarily the case. For instance, enemies are connected just as much as are lovers, but with very different intentions.

This means that the nature and character of prayer are highly malleable and may be found offensive to listeners. While some prayers may be full of peace,

serenity, and love, other prayers may contain anger, turmoil, and even hatred. It is easy to embrace and think of the former, but the latter are counterintuitive and perhaps even scary to consider. Yet both approaches seek to connect, to engage along the wide range of honest human experiences which are not limited to only positive emotions. As with all other human experiences, prayers can be emotionally positive or negative. They can be selfless or selfish. They can be “all about me” or “all about others” (Ladd, 2015). Important research remains to be done on this full range of prayers and how the freedom (or restriction) of praying behavior expands (or stultifies) spiritual, mental, and physical well-being.

For the moment, however, we must set aside that incredibly important line of work and focus squarely again on the singular “it’s ok” prayer in the face of death. It is clear that this prayer narrative is both false and true simultaneously; it both embraces and rejects the dying experience. “It’s ok” encapsulates positive and negative valence (emotions) that inevitably accompany events prior to, during, and after death. The prayer “it’s ok” tells a story about me and about everything else. The prayer “it’s ok” is about seeking control and about confronting release. In some senses, then, existing at this point of balance, “it’s ok” may be one of the quintessential prayers.

To appreciate how this can be the case requires consideration of the nature of narrative. In some cases, narrative is purely factual; in other instances, narrative is purely fictional. While the former is often argued to lack compassion, the latter is critiqued for its lack of reality. Yet another form of narrative weaves together fact and fantasy, blurring the lines between that which is, that which is not, and that which is possible. The narrative prayer “it’s ok” is able to balance elements because its nature is consistent with this third form of narrative; this prayer is about what is possible in the face of what is. Fundamentally, “it’s ok” is a prayer both of the frustration with what is and of hope for that which is possible.

Using the framework of Otto (1924) and others before and after him, the profane and the sacred are fundamentally different, yet, in spite of this difference, there are points of contact or “liminal spaces” (Spilka & Ladd, 2021). For instance, water or food substances are primarily profane, common, ordinary elements. They decay, deteriorate, and are limited with regard to their physical characteristics. When

water or food are incorporated into ritual acts, however, for believers, the elements can take on sacred properties that emphasize a changed nature extending beyond their present, physical composition and offering a sense of future potential. In this sense, “it’s ok” as a prayer narrative is fully profane and fully sacred because it exists and is uttered in the liminal space of death.

As a profane narrative, “it’s ok” is clearly not an accurate reference to the specific events transpiring. It is not ok to experience grief, sadness, and loss. People uniformly rebel against these moments and expend great amounts of effort to avoid them. The prayer narrative, however, refers to the larger nature of the events as something that humans uniformly must confront. “It’s ok” to face death because this experience, while deeply tumultuous, confirms the inherent, intimate relation to ourselves and to others.

As a sacred narrative, however, “it’s ok” offers a story of a possible future where things are different, a future that outstrips profane experiences associated with physical existence and decay. The sacred nature of the words constitutes a form of ritual that persists from birth through death, recasting the profane as something merely in the temporal present, not something of the possible future.

To say “it’s ok” in the face of death recognizes the profane nature in which life occurs, but it refuses to celebrate or stop with a mere consideration of the pain and decay associated with that reality. Instead, claiming that “it’s ok” in the midst of turmoil, simultaneously carries the sacred message that the present is transitory, and the future is transcendent.

“It’s ok. It’s going to be all right. Shhhh. Don’t worry. Don’t cry.”

Lies?

Truth?

The question is hard to answer in any universal manner, yet it is clear that, as a form of prayer narrative spoken by a believer in the liminal spaces between life and death, the answer is yes, no, and more than either.

References

- AUDEN, W. H. *Another time*. New York, NY: Random House, 1940.
- BURRIS, C. W. *Evil in mind: The psychology of harming others*. New York, NY: Oxford, 2022.
- ELIADE, M. *The sacred and the*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1959. (Original work published 1957)
- FREUD, S. *The future of an illusion*. In: STRACHEY, I. J. (Ed.). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. v. 21, p. 1-56. (Original work published 1940).
- LADD, K. L. A Féna(s) Face(s) da Morte: A Matriz das Relações e Teoria da Oração Mimética Corporificada. In: AQUINO, T. A.; FREITAS, M. H.; PAIVA, G. J. (Eds.). *Morte, psicologia e religião*. João Pessoa: Nova Fonte, 2015.
- LADD, K. L. Religiosity, the need for structure, death attitudes, and funeral preferences. *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, v. 10, n. 5, p. 451-472, 2007. Disponível em: <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/13674670600903064>. Acesso em: 13 dez. 2022.
- LEIBNIZ, G. W. *Theodicy*. New York, NY: Oxford, 1985. (Original work published in 1710).
- NEALE, R. E.; PARR, D. *The magic mirror*. Seattle, WA: Hermetic Press, 2002.
- OTTO, R. *The idea of the holy* Translated by J. W. Harvey. New York, NY: Oxford, 1924.
- SHAW, M. F. *Folksongs and folklore of South Uist*. Oxford, UK: Oxford, 1977.
- SPIILKA, B.; LADD, K. L. *The psychology of prayer: a scientific approach*. New York: Guilford, 2013.
- SPIILKA, B.; LADD, K. L. A psychology of religion via thick phenomenology in thin places. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, v. 31, n. 3, p. 156-164, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2121.1899639>.
- TAYLOR, S. E.; BROWN, J. D. Illusion and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. *Psychological Bulletin*, v. 103, n. 2, p. 193-210, 1988. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.103.2.193>.
- TURNER, S. *The band that played on: The extraordinary story of the 8 musicians who went down with the Titanic*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011.

VAILLANT G. E. Ego mechanisms of defense and personality psychopathology. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, v. 103, n. 1, p. 44-50, 1994. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0021-843x.103.1.44>.

XYGALATAS, D. *Ritual: How seemingly senseless acts make life worth living*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Spark, 2022.

RECEBIDO: 08/11/2022
APROVADO: 16/11/2022

RECEIVED: 11/08/2022
APPROVED: 11/16/2022