

Inspired

The power of praying for strangers

by Kelsey Allen

It doesn't matter how you do it, whether you are talking or yelling, walking or standing. In fact, River Jordan has found the most successful method is the "head on the steering wheel" position. What matters, says Jordan, is taking the time to pray for a stranger every day—a resolution she made to herself on December 31, 2008. That this commitment would morph into the subject of a book, or that it would have such a transformative impact on her life, were things she could not have forseen back when her sons were headed to war.

"I can't pray for anybody but my kids," Jordan remembers

Photo: Chris Benz

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thinking after discovering one of her sons would soon ship off to Iraq, the other to Afghanistan. "Not that I live my life that way, but if there has ever been a moment where I felt like me, me, me, it was when both of my sons were getting on planes to go to different warfronts." But just when Jordan expected to be consumed with her own family's issues, an idea popped into her head. She describes it as similar to how an idea for a character pops into her head when she is working on a new novel (Jordan is a critically acclaimed novelist and playwright). The idea? "New Years resolution—pray for a stranger every day."

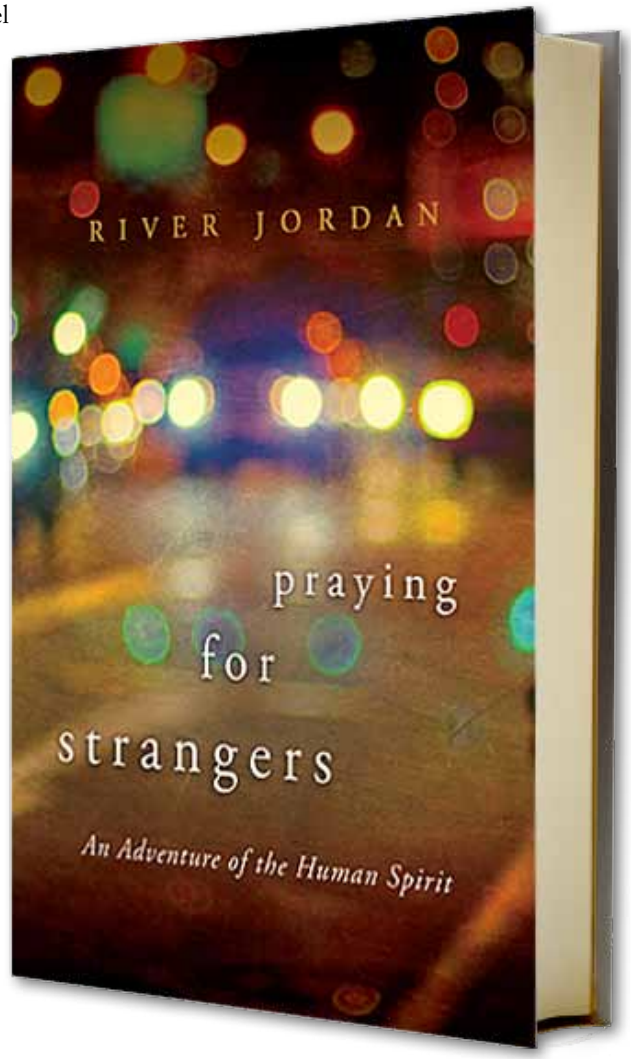
The next day while on vacation at a ski resort, Jordan overheard the sad cries of a small boy whom she concluded was the victim of child abuse. Before she was able to do anything, the child and his mother disappeared. "I realized that night that there was nothing I could do but say a prayer," Jordan recalls. "I realized that I had found my stranger."

Two years later, Jordan is still praying for strangers daily. She even recorded her stories in her first work of nonfiction, *Praying for Strangers*. She never intended to write the experiences down, let alone share them with the world. But day after day, Jordan began to see that, in her words, "there is a story going on here that deserves to be told."

That story is about connecting and the human spirit. Jordan puts it simply in her book when she writes: "My prayers are worth something to a stranger. And now that stranger is worth something to me." Jordan says that the connectedness she feels with the strangers she prays for doesn't necessarily have to come from the "Dear God" and the "Amen" that start and end a stereotypical prayer. Rather, it comes from her willingness to give up a few seconds to concentrate her energy on caring about someone other than herself.

She remembers back to that night at the ski resort: "All I had was that moment of caring enough to pray for him and the faith that that prayer was going to make a difference. I am willing to gamble everything that I can make a difference in a stranger's life. I am willing to risk those few moments of connecting and caring about that stranger."

But it isn't always easy, Jordan admits. In her book, she recounts a time when she impatiently stood behind a slow-moving woman in a checkout line. Jordan immediately recognized that this woman was her stranger for the day. (It's a recognition that Jordan can't really explain. "It's not like everyone else turns to black and white and they are in color," she says. "But suddenly, that is the person I turn to.") But instead of stopping the person and sharing her resolution story, Jordan breezed passed the woman and continued on with her day. It was a head on the steering wheel kind of moment. "Yes, I prayed for this woman," Jordan writes in her book. "I really did. I prayed she'd meet a better person than I am. And I prayed that I could be a person like that more often than not."



Jordan believes that these two years of praying for strangers have shown her how to be a better person. She doesn't feel like a do-gooder, she says. Instead it is a new feeling of awareness. "Something happens when you connect with another person," Jordan says. "I am always praying for my family, but when you take an interest in another human being, something shifts. In the process of that, it brings peace into my messy life.

"It is easy to feel like the broken one, but there are no lives out there that are normal," she says. "You can't be too broken to make a difference." ■

Praying for Strangers
River Jordan
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