

Notes on turning the act of (really) keeping my fingers crossed into a livelihood practice

Today, November 11, 2023, here at the HIGASHIYAMA BUILDING in Uno, Tamano City, Okayama Prefecture, I am pleased to announce my new business, 'I'll (really) keep my fingers crossed *But it costs a bit'.

In summary, for clients who have something they wish to pray for, I will cross my index and middle fingers and substitute their prayer for an hourly fee of €15.

You may be a little bit puzzled now, but this is something I've taken time to think through over the past few years, so I would like to share it with everyone.

0. 'I'll keep my fingers crossed' (often followed by 'for you')

This is an expression commonly used in Western culture. It's said to someone you want to wish good luck to, and usually accompanied by the gesture of crossing your index and middle fingers. This gesture is generally believed to represent a cross, and it signals 'I'm praying (perhaps to God?) that your wish comes true.'

This expression is used in various situations, such as for someone going to a job interview, facing an important exam, or tackling a big project. You can even use it to wish for good weather over the weekend. When translated by Google, it turns into '指を交差させておきます' in Japanese. I interpret this as a super casual act of prayer.

1. About the Habit of Crossing Fingers

Since this habit doesn't exist in Japan, it might not be very relatable for you. But in Western culture, when people say 'I'll keep my fingers crossed', they are definitely not (actually) 'keeping' their fingers crossed. The crossed fingers are always released after a few seconds. At most, the fingers might stay crossed for about five seconds.

I've lived in South America and Europe, and every time someone has said this phrase and crossed their fingers toward me when I was in a serious situation, I've felt a little bit strange. Their smug attitude, as if saying 'I'm thinking of you!', doesn't quite sit right with me. I say thank you out of politeness, but I can't fully accept it. Of course, I understand it's just a figure of speech, an idiom, but somehow it makes me feel like my urgent situation is being trivialized.

For example: In Japan, there's a folk belief called Ohyakudo-mairi. It's the custom of praying 100 times (or continuously for 100 days) at a shrine to show your devotion and increase the chance of having your wish granted.

There's also the custom of folding a thousand origami cranes to pray for someone's recovery from illness or injury.

Both of these are rituals that require time and effort for the sake of others.

I can't help but think that someone who hasn't put in that kind of dedication but has just crossed their fingers for a moment doesn't have the right to flash a smug face.

One day, when I was feeling troubled by these smoldering feelings, a friend told me she was waiting for the results of her child's kindergarten lottery and carelessly, I said to her, 'I'll keep my fingers crossed for you!' (I probably even had a smug face.)

Not wanting to be a liar, I really did begin to cross my fingers after I got home. But my fingers went numb, and I could only keep them crossed for an hour. Still, during that time, I wholeheartedly prayed for her to get good results from the lottery. (With my index and middle fingers crossed and my thumb, ring finger, and pinky folded like in a peace sign, one hand was completely taken up by this act, so I couldn't do anything else, and I turned off YouTube and podcasts to stay focused.)

Some days later, she told me they got the good news.

2. Effectiveness of Prayer

It would be far too presumptuous to believe that my prayer directly led to the fulfillment of her wish.

But then, was spending one hour with my fingers crossed just a foolish act that only left them numb? Is the Ohyakudo-mairi pilgrimage for a sick family member merely a form of aerobic exercise? Are a thousand origami cranes just colorful pieces of trash? Is Shichi-Go-San (the Japanese children's festival) nothing more than a cosplay photoshoot? Is the pilgrimage to the 88 shrines in Shikoku simply a glorified stamp rally? Or is the Indian sadhu who has kept his right hand raised for 45 years just an extreme masochistic homeless man?

No way. We want to believe otherwise.

It might feel satisfying to dismiss such earnest actions as unscientific, but that is a foolish form of intellectual laziness. Throughout history, humans have tried to maximize the effectiveness of their prayers by dedicating time, effort, and money. The greater the wish, the more time and intensity we invest in prayer. For some wishes, it may not be enough for just one person to quietly pray alone.

* I am fully aware that I am mixing examples from various layers of different religions, but since the definition of the Japanese word inori (prayer) is rather ambiguous, I allow myself to indulge in this mix.

3. The History of Proxy Prayers

Now, in medieval Europe, indulgences were all the rage, weren't they? To put it very simply, indulgences were like certificates sold by the clergy as proof that they had performed an act of penance on behalf of a person seeking the forgiveness of their sins. This penance—a prayer to God asking for absolution of original sin—was part of the Christian sacrament process, and by purchasing an indulgence, people could outsource their prayers to religious professionals.

In a similar vein, paying a large sum of money to have Shinto priests perform prayers at a shrine is a practice still trusted and forms a legitimate business. But is there really a difference in value between prayers offered by religious professionals and those earnestly performed by laypeople with all their heart...?

4. Me (as a Living Earner) and Substitution Work

Living in Brussels, Belgium, I don't have a typical white-collar job due to issues like language, status, motivation, and spirit. Instead, I do substitution work.

Specifically, I offer services such as babysitting (childcare substitution), cleaning and meal preparation (housework substitution), and pet sitting (feeding and walking substitution) for Japanese expatriate families. I do anything within my ability. My rate is €15 per hour.

I don't have any special qualifications and only possess the skills of an average Japanese person. I make it clear to clients that while I work hard, they shouldn't expect professional-level results.

Still, I am somewhat in demand. This work suits me well.

5. Me (as an artist) and Substitution Work

I have explored various ways to substitute myself for others, driven by my interest in how much I can live the lives of others, and how I can incorporate otherness into myself to shift my identity. I've done things like install someone else's memories and recount them as my own, or use an alias and act out a character based on the cultural background associated with that name. Essentially, I input other people's stories (software) into my body (hardware) and act under the influence from the software.

In that sense, my practice as an artist can also be seen as a form of substitution work.

Thinking along these lines, I have now decided to make praying for others one of my professions. I will assist where the person's own prayer falls short, or I will substitute their prayer entirely. While I may not be able to dedicate my entire life to this, I will 'really' keep

my fingers crossed during the paid hours (at €15 per hour, the same as my substitution work for livelihood), instead of waving a sacred Shinto staff with paper streamers.

Perhaps the living-earner side of me is encroaching on the artist side of me, or maybe the boundaries between the two are simply breaking down. In any case, this sparkling vocation was born from my search for my true calling.

As for my prayer method, it is based on the typical etiquette for Ohyakudo-mairi. So I will:

- Avoid being seen by others;
- Wear clean attire;
- Speak no words while praying;
- And never ever discuss the prayer with third parties.

To make a request, please fill out the application form available here at the venue or download the PDF from my Luciana Janaqui website.

While I basically maintain strict confidentiality regarding requests, in this exhibition you can see the application form filled by my special client Higashiyama Building, with their kind consent. Please check it out.

11 November 2023

Luciana Janaqui

President

The substitute prayer service

'I'll (really) keep my fingers
crossed *But it costs a bit'