

## **PRAYER AND MARITAL INTERVENTION: TOWARD AN OPEN, EMPIRICALLY-GROUNDED DIALOGUE**

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In the lead article for this special section, we offered a framework to allow integration of prayer into marital interventions *when culturally appropriate*. Mindful of potential pitfalls, we concluded that effective skill based family intervention and prevention could benefit from integration of spiritual practices. In the commentaries, several additional issues were articulated and have prompted us to address the interrelated issues of doubt regarding efficacy, distrust of transformative processes, and the complexity of incorporating spiritual practices into marital interventions. Likewise, we discuss the ethics of integrating spiritual practices and acknowledge that the discussion is just beginning. We conclude that continued healthy debate regarding the potential benefits of spiritual interventions in the marital arena is desirable, but that there is no substitute for data.

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We offered a proposal regarding the potential role of prayer in marital invention with some trepidation and were delighted by the thoughtful and engaging comments it elicited. Each one has helped us think about the way forward from a different perspective. As a consequence, rather than a “rejoinder” to the views offered in the commentaries, with one or two exceptions, our response may be seen as “lessons and reactions” or “agreement with elaboration.”

### RESPONSE TO SHARED COMMENTATOR OBSERVATIONS

Perhaps the most striking consistency across the comments was skepticism that “prayer” could be a powerful marital intervention. We agree with the underlying assumption that more research is needed and, like the commentators, we look forward to seeing spiritual activities addressed more fully and more explicitly in the literature on marital and family interventions as well in the context of psychological and health-related interventions and prevention strategies. A second overarching commonality in the commentaries is the view, presented explicitly or implicitly, that transformation of relationships is an unlikely “long shot.” The possibility of non-linear or transformative positive change in marital relationships (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007) regardless of its origin, remains controversial, and we appreciate the willingness of the commentators to contemplate it as a possibility. However, none of the proposals we put forward depend on change being discontinuous rather than incremental. Third, along with the commentators, we agree that the domain of religion and spirituality is full of snares for the unwary and a source of many conceptual challenges for the future. At the same time, we believe research in this area has potential to energize the field and lead to conceptual developments that go beyond the immediate context of discussion.

It seems likely, based on the commentaries, that it is easier to see prayer as a potentially powerful *individual* protective factor than it is to see prayer as a potentially powerful marital intervention. Of course, a powerful individual protective factor could influence the marital relationship through change of the individual, so prayer might still have an influence on marital outcomes. However, to the extent that effects are all mediated through individual factors, the argument for strong marital impact seems diminished. The image of an

individual, perhaps a hermit or a monk in voluntary seclusion from the world, praying unceasingly, and ultimately receiving enlightenment, is deeply engrained in many religious traditions. This is a pivotal critique of our proposed approach, because skepticism about prayer as a “couple intervention” follows very quickly from this perspective. Further supporting such skepticism, the effects of spirituality in family contexts are often modest (e.g., Booth, Branaman, & Sica, 1995), and so do not inspire confidence in the power of prayer. On the other hand, some small changes, such as taking a longer-term perspective on the relationship, may change dyadic behavior to a greater degree than expected. Regardless, the point is well taken, and lies at the heart of any understanding of change in couples intervention. We suggest that those advocating use of spiritual practices in marriage must show the relevance of spirituality for dyadic relations and provide compelling data. These interesting and important challenges will prompt and focus future empirical work in the area.

Also highlighted in each of the comments is a concern regarding imposition of therapist’s values and the practicality (impracticality) of changing couples’ patterns of prayer. We argued in the lead article that it would make little sense for a therapist or group leader to suggest prayer to a couple who are not already praying regularly. But, even if a couple is already praying for each other, one may wonder whether suggestions about prayer will have more than ephemeral and short-lived impact. Indeed, even if the initial effects are strong, one may wonder if spouses will eventually forget to pray for each other as they sometimes forget other suggestions provided by therapists. It is also possible to worry that our suggestions to pray could produce unintended negative consequences, perhaps making some conflicts more intractable rather than helping the couple find a way forward together.

We are gratified by the view in the commentaries that these are “Empirical Questions” best addressed by research. Hopefully, in line with Sullivan and Karney’s call, we are at the start of an open, empirically grounded investigation of the boundary between spirituality and psychological science. Our hypothesis is that much that can be learned about the potential utility of including prayer in marital interventions. Using rigorous, open-minded and empirically focused methodologies should help provide a basis for greater consensus regarding optimal formats and content.

*Can Prayer Behavior Change?: Brief Anecdote.* In the spirit of grounding our discussion of prayer, we offer some brief anecdotal data. As one of the authors was shopping at the grocery store a friend stopped in the aisle to comment about recent university news coverage of the project on “prayer in marriage.” She said “You know, I read that story about your program and it occurred to me that every night I pray for many things but I never pray for good things for George [her spouse]. I think I am going to start doing that now.” Even though she was praying for many things every day, and even though it made sense to her to pray for good things for her spouse, that particular behavior was not part of her routine. This experience has occurred repeatedly for the authors. The “moral of the story” is that prayer behavior, like other forms of behavior may be more malleable than we think. Indeed, it is routine to hear from participants in our community-based prevention program that prior to their participation in the program they prayed regularly, but did not systematically pray for their spouse. If prayer is as malleable as the anecdotal evidence suggests, then there may be some reason to expect an impact of intervention on prayer for spouses.

*Is Prayer an Individual Behavior? Another Anecdote.* Not all descriptions of prayer are individualistic. Martin Buber (1958), for example, described prayer in terms of the “I–Thou” relationship. This highly influential portrayal of prayer has much to offer marital therapists. However, for our current purposes, the importance of this conceptualization of prayer is that Buber portrays the dialogue with God as fundamentally dyadic rather than individualistic, as fundamentally concerned with love rather than with mystical awareness, and as providing a (or perhaps the) wellspring of caring, respect, commitment, and responsibility in all relationships. Indeed, in Buber’s view, the “I–Thou” relationship between the individual and God, reflected in prayer, is the foundation for all other relationships. This dyadic rather than individualistic characterization highlights prayer as an intrinsically relational behavior, with profound implications for deep human relationships, and one that may be especially well suited to the marital context.

We would also argue that working on marital relationships can change spiritual practices, even in the absence of direct attention. To illustrate, we offer the following anecdote. One of the authors was working with a couple in standard marital therapy a number of years

ago, using Behavioral Marital Therapy. The wife in the couple mentioned quite unprompted and unexpectedly that one result of our focus on “listening” in marital therapy had been that her prayer life had changed as well. She said that in the past her prayers had been a long litany of her telling God the things she wanted, or was missing, or was concerned about. She reported that after working on listening in therapy, she had changed the tempo and nature of her prayers. She now waited and listened for God’s response, in whatever form it might take, and felt more connected. As a consequence, she reported that the impact of her prayers on her sense of wellbeing was profoundly more positive. As this anecdote suggests, prayer and marital intervention may be more closely and more naturally linked than is often thought to be the case. The anecdote also suggests that highly religious people may readily, even spontaneously, incorporate innovations into their prayer life if they are consistent with their own core religious commitments, if they make sense, and if they seem to help. In addition, when the inherently relational nature of prayer is highlighted, it may be clearer how spirituality and marital intervention may be combined effectively.

*Our Current Program.* In our current work, we provide examples of prayers for participants and invite them to use these as templates to create their own prayers. The prayers are intended to highlight and reinforce important relational processes, but often center on God’s love and its relevance for couples. The prayer in appendix A is one of many we offer to couples. It is longer than most, and we encourage spouses to be relatively brief, colloquial rather than formal, and to speak from the heart. The sample prayer in Appendix A is probably a fair illustration of both what is good and potentially limiting about our approach of adding prayer to existing, skill based programs like PREP. So, we offer it to provide a more concrete target for both criticism and response.

## RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC COMMENTARIES

Each of the commentaries highlighted important areas in which the original paper may have been unclear. In each case they have helped open the discussion to broader circles of commentary, raising the possibility of true dialogue across boundaries that have previously

seemed quite impermeable. Although not exhaustive in our responses, we attempt to be relatively thorough.

#### SULLIVAN AND KARNEY COMMENTARY

Sullivan and Karney ask a number of important questions regarding the applicability of our suggestions to contexts outside the realm of pastoral counseling. Before responding, however, we should note that even if the field ultimately concluded that incorporation of prayer can be accomplished only by pastoral counselors, it would still be worth having the current discussion. Religious officials (e.g., rabbis, ministers, priests) are the most utilized source of marital counseling and so enhancing the effectiveness of pastoral counseling is a reasonable goal, and most likely would have positive public health consequences. This suggests that one possible response to the concerns raised by Sullivan and Karney would be to agree with them and to focus future research on provision of a solid underpinning for the work of pastoral counselors working in explicitly religious contexts. However, we think this conclusion is premature.

It seems unlikely to us that spouses can work effectively only with a marital therapist who shares their denomination (or perhaps more restrictively still, all the particular theological commitments they espouse). Our own experience suggests a broader range of interaction is possible for therapists and group leaders. Many couples with deep religious commitments will not insist on complete alignment on all theological issues prior to embarking on a course of marital intervention. In fact, we have a hunch that while some religious couples would choose, if possible, a therapist of similar faith background, other religious couples might prefer a therapist who was respectful of their tradition, but not of the same tradition. This could happen either because of issues of shame, confidentiality, or because of disagreement between the spouses, among other possibilities.

An important question posed by Sullivan and Karney is, "Which religious teachings should we include and which should we ignore?" As we note in the lead article, we agree that content matters. In some cases, couples will use scripture to support their side of a conflict, and encouraging couples to focus on the very scripture that they may have been using to justify their own problematic behavior is clearly a potential concern. In the prayer we include in Appendix

A, it is possible to see in a concrete way how we approach this problem by focusing on God's love for each spouse and for the couple as a unit. In addition, we often supplement suggested prayers with particular verses that resonate with key aspects of the prayer. Often these are Agape-related verses (i.e., those reflecting selfless love) such as "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." (1st Corinthians 13:4–5). But they also include many other verses dealing with relationships that encourage perseverance, kindness, and the value of marriage.

One of the texts that Sullivan and Karney highlight for particular consideration is the text, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:22–23). This is mentioned again in the comment by Worthington. Because it has become a cultural dividing line in some parts of the country, and because it is important to many couples, this is an excellent example to consider, and it nicely illustrates a potential misunderstanding of our proposed approach. In our view, meditation on sacred texts should be tailored in an idiographic manner to support the objectives of the therapeutic intervention and to fit the beliefs the couple. A therapist who tells a couple that their religious beliefs are incorrect should expect a less than optimal response from the couple. As Sullivan and Karney imply, telling a couple they should "ignore" scripture on the therapists say-so should be seen as unethical. As Worthington's comments suggest, it should also be anticipated that directing couples to ignore scripture will be ineffective. In our view, the therapist's role is not to decide what beliefs, or scripture, or activities to accept and what to ignore, it is to help the couple identify resources that are already in their repertoire that may be helpful as they move forward together in the development of a more fulfilling marital relationship. To be clear, we suggest that therapists stay focused on enhancing marital relationships and not try to introduce new beliefs or make religious choices for the couple.

At the same time, the text from Ephesians (5:22–23; also echoed in the first letter of Peter) helps clarify and underscore our position about the importance of being able to work with religious couples. The text strikes a chord with some marital therapists. If a therapist or group leader is strongly committed to an egalitarian model of mar-

riage and finds this text a source of concern, he or she may try to impose his/her own views on the couple. Working with couples who endorse a conservative interpretation of this passage may be impossible for such therapists. If so, and they feel the need to "evangelize" for secular values, we suggest they are ethically bound to be aware of their limitations in working with the couple and provide appropriate referral. As Sullivan and Karney suggest, to tell the couple they have to change their religious values would be to adopt a dual relationship and to establish the therapist as arbiter of the couple's religious life. For marital therapists who are comfortable working with couples like the one identified by Worthington (those who endorse a conservative interpretation of the text from Ephesians), the key role of the therapist is not to dispute (or ignore) scripture, rather, it is to help the couple find and highlight God's love (Agape) in the context of the text (for an example of a non-religious therapist working effectively with a conservative, religious couple see Stewart & Gale, 1994).

In our own work, it has been the construct of Agape that has proven most useful and versatile in facilitating marital interactions. This is the "content" that we emphasize and that often guides our choice of text. In the sample prayers we give to couples, the focus is on living an "Agape" filled life with one's partner. The purpose of inviting the deity into one's relationship is to promote "Agape" and be a vehicle of "Agape." The use of scripture is often similarly motivated by the search for inspiration related to Agape. As this example illustrates, however, it may be necessary for a therapist encouraging the use of scripture to read the entire passage and not merely a single sentence. For example, couples who work together in reading Ephesians or Peter will find exhortations to sacrifice, forgiveness, and working jointly to share in God's grace. They are unlikely to draw the conclusion that either Peter or Paul intended to encourage husbands to be exploitative, subjugate their spouses, or be abusive of them.

The most important point of convergence between our view of using sacred texts and the view presented in the commentary is that we agree that a therapist's focus must necessarily be narrow and centered on enhancing the marital relationship and the well-being of the spouses. In contrast to the position espoused by Sullivan and Karney, we propose that material focused on "love" and themes clearly related to acceptance, forgiveness, and constructive engage-

ment, or material that reinforces key elements of efficacious marital intervention, can be identified by well trained marital therapists and that it is well within their expertise as marital therapists. In fact, it may be that no one is better suited to identify material consistent with a particular program of marital intervention than those who are well trained to deliver the program. Consistent with the Sullivan and Karney perspective, we argue that if a therapist is sure that his/her approach will contradict a couple's religious convictions, s/he should decline to work with the couple and find an appropriate referral. To impose a secular intervention, devoid of spirituality, on a religious couple may often be counterproductive and may represent an unethical imposition of secular values (i.e., a rigid imposition of the secular priesthood) of the very sort that Sullivan and Karney warn against.

Sullivan and Karney also raise the important question of whether praying with one's clients creates a "dual relationship." Indeed, they suggest that praying with clients may violate both APA ethical guidelines and the practical advice of generations of marital therapists. On this particular point, our position obviously differs rather sharply. In our view, to the extent that incorporation of prayer and religious values are done in a manner consistent with the client's value system, and offered in the service of enhancing the delivery of services in one's role as therapist, utilization of prayer neither creates a dual relationship nor violates clinical wisdom about neutrality in marital therapy. Briefly, APA ethical guidelines are concerned with allowing one's own agenda to influence or override the needs of one's client. Our suggestions are predicated on the exact opposite as we note in several places in the lead article. Likewise, clinical wisdom in the marital area is predicated on maintaining neutrality between spouses and not acting as "judge" between them. We agree with this stance and the incorporation of prayer in the service of empowering couples does not require, or even allow, therapists to take on the role of moral arbiter or judge.

Finally, Sullivan and Karney discuss several interrelated issues having to do with the practical application of prayer in marital intervention: Can it be guided by careful assessment? Can it be applied in a manner that is even handed to both spouses? Are there particular problem areas in which forgiveness (and so perhaps prayer) would be contraindicated? These are important topics that again raise the

familiar conclusion of all psychological work that more research is needed. We could not agree more.

#### MARKS' COMMENTARY

The approach taken by Marks is rather different than that by Sullivan and Karney, but was as instructive and challenging for us. First, Marks highlights the potential value of a framework inclusive of prayer for helping marital therapists work more effectively with pastoral counselors. As we noted above, we also view this as an important issue. However, Marks takes the issue in a different direction than we would have—namely, the issue is raised as an important and interesting *systemic issue*, and one that we did not highlight sufficiently in the lead article. As Marks points out, patterns of referral are such that having a clinical framework that is inclusive of prayer may have positive systemic consequences that go well beyond the immediate effect on the effectiveness of a particular therapist. As Marks suggests, if marital intervention programs were more faith-friendly in general, it might be easier for pastoral counselors to work with clinicians providing marital interventions for more difficult or complex cases. This systems level hypothesis is also one that seems worthy of, and amenable to, future investigation. It is a hypothesis that can be examined at the level of engaging couples in marital programs: Will faith friendly programs have a better record of promoting couple involvement at the community level than do secular programs? In a recent book detailing extensive analyses of how marriages have changed in the past 20 years, Amato and colleagues find that married couples are increasingly isolated and uninvolved with others, as couples (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). These trends are associated with declining marital quality, and the only context where they found this trend not to hold was among those religiously involved.

A related point is Marks' observation that psychologists have a range of views regarding faith that puts many marital therapists out of the mainstream of American culture. Indeed, the data on differences between psychologists and the general population are so striking as to raise the question of whether it is possible for some psychologists and marital therapists to be faith-neutral, much less utilize particular faith-friendly, spiritual approaches like prayer in their

work. This is a very important point on which we need to clarify our stance. We do not wish to argue that all marital therapists or clinical and counseling psychologists can adopt a faith-friendly stance or effectively utilize prayer. Rather, we argue that all practitioners are called upon to know and respect their own limitations. Those psychologists who cannot effectively utilize prayer should refrain from doing so. Likewise, at another point on the continuum, psychologists who feel an overwhelming need to use marital intervention as a vehicle to evangelize should recognize this as a limitation on their role as therapist and be clear from the outset that they are evangelizing, not doing marital intervention.

We appreciate as well the additional hypotheses highlighted by Marks that will help stimulate experimental research as well as research on therapy process in the context of therapy outcome research. These hypotheses include broadening the conceptualization of the goals of prayer in marital therapy contexts (e.g., to include provision of an alternative to a disruptive behavior), and broadening the range of targets (e.g., enabling the community to provide help). These are excellent mechanisms to explore and may well be found to account for variance in the efficacy of prayer-based intervention. Perhaps more importantly, they may suggest additional ways to incorporate prayer into efficacious marital programs. We are particularly open to the suggestion that prayer may help soften negative behaviors and see this as conceptually aligned with our hypothesis that prayer may help spouses cope with problematic emergent goals in the context of arguments or conflict.

In discussing the importance of couples' reasons for engaging in constructive behavior, Marks cites Nietzsche as saying "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*." This extends our own discussion of emergent goals in an important direction. In our discussion we focused primarily on the role of prayer in providing motivation for using marital skills. As Marks notes, praying and considering the abundance of God's love for one's partner also provides a valuable reason to work on one's marital relationship even when one has been flooded with negative emotion and is no longer able to generate good answers to the question "why." That is, prayer or meditation upon Agape or themes that highlight God's abundant love can provide a "why" for many acts of forgiveness or relationship repair.

Absent this “why” some activities related to relationship repair may falter over relatively minor issues having to do with the “how.”

Finally, the Marks commentary illustrates a limitation in our earlier presentation of iterative processes in marriage and the way they may lead to transformative change (Fincham et al., 2007). It is extremely difficult to describe the complex ways in which individual behavior and systemic characteristics may change in iterative, interconnected, dynamic systems such as marriage. We suspect that our lack of clarity in articulating change process may have contributed to the perceived implausibility of hypotheses related to marital transformation. As Marks notes, it is easier to talk about and think about relatively subtle changes in utilization of existing skills that may “compound” over time to effect long-term couple functioning, resulting in the couple being in a different “state” than they were before. However, our intuitions about the behavior of non-linear dynamic systems are as yet both untested and in some respects untestable except through computer simulation (e.g., Gottman, Swanson, & Swanson, 2002). It may be that, at least for the time being, the best evidence to confirm or disconfirm specific hypotheses regarding non-linear change will be derived from experimental studies and well controlled outcome research. In both cases, the evidence is likely to be indirect rather than direct, leaving the jury out on whether “transformation” is the appropriate way to describe the change processes initiated by prayer in the context of marriage.

#### WORTHINGTON COMMENTARY

In many respects this commentary poses the greatest challenge. We agree that couples can be difficult to please and that tailoring interventions to suit distressed couples, in particular, can be a challenge. However, we are somewhat optimistic in our assessment of the likely ability of therapists to create faith-friendly activities that do not engender negative reactions from the community. In our own work, self-reported religious orientation has included Baptist, Methodist, AME, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Seventh Day Adventist, among many others. We only required that partners be comfortable praying and being prayed for. In our experience, that requirement excluded very few couples. Note that we did not require or push for couples to pray out loud together because some people

may feel comfortable praying for their spouse who do not feel comfortable praying out loud with their spouse. Further, perhaps because it was a group format, we found couples very willing to accept our prayers as they were offered, i.e., illustrative samples rather than strict prescriptions, and found them ready to rise to the challenge of making the prayers their own by utilizing them to guide and inform the creation of their own prayers for each other.

We also worked with our group leaders to stay “in role” as marital intervention specialists and not to engage in theological discussion or evangelizing in the context of the intervention. It may be that a similar strategy could work in the context of work with a single couple, although in that context it is likely that additional issues might surface. We suspect, consistent with our response to Sullivan and Karney, that it is particularly important that the therapist or group leader *not* present him or herself as “the expert” in the domain of religious belief. It may be more important for marital therapists working with religious clients to be “knowledgeable,” “respectful,” and “sensitive” than to be “expert.” To the extent that the therapist is merely offering a template that the couple may find useful as they incorporate their own religious resources into strengthening their relationship, we hope that many of the potential problems suggested by Worthington’s analysis may be sidestepped.

We also agree with Worthington’s warning against using statements that reflect a “nebulous” spirituality. Statements of nebulous or generic spirituality are likely to be viewed as non-genuine (or something worse) by many individuals. In our own work we have presented specific examples that draw upon a particular religious tradition rather than using generic examples. We would suggest that therapists imagine, for a moment, what it would feel like to see a suggested prayer that had a blank at some point with “insert name of your particular deity or other object of veneration here.” If you do not find this image jarring you may be among a small minority of individuals. In a pre-launch version of our program we attempted to create generic versions of prayers that highlighted only the abstract structure of the prayer without including any particular content. The idea was to manifest the full diversity of possibilities for those who might take part in the program. However, we were unable to create anything that evoked a positive response from our own staff, much less from community-based focus groups. Our current view is that

specific, concrete examples of prayers are superior to abstract examples, even if the example is drawn from a religious tradition other than one's own. Of key importance is that the example be presented *as an illustrative example* and that it be combined with the invitation to change the content as necessary.

Likewise, we wholeheartedly agree with Worthington's concern about justifying prayer on the grounds of psychological benefit. Emphasizing psychological or tangible benefits may be problematic for many aspects of marital therapy (e.g., should we encourage people to justify working on their marriage because they will be financially better off if they do?). The general issue appears to be that most people do not like an overemphasis on the psychological benefits of love or spirituality. In fact, such an emphasis has the likely consequence of fostering an exchange orientation spiritually or maritally, which in turn may have negative effects (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). On the other hand, asking for good things for the partner or for oneself appears to be quite compatible with the practices of many religious couples. Likewise, encouraging couples to "build their marriage on the firm foundation provided by God's love," "anchor their love for each other in something more solid and enduring, something less volatile and subject to the decay of this world," and "tap into the limitless reservoir of God's love," is quite familiar imagery for most religious couples and leads naturally to a discussion of the potential benefits of Agape-filled prayer focused on one's spouse.

It is also quite true, as Worthington notes, that spouses do not commonly pray for each other in the midst of arguments. Accordingly, regular, Agape filled prayer for the partner would need to exert much of its effect through chronic priming of "implemental intentions" (i.e., plans to engage in prayer when necessary) or through priming of prayer as a chronically available alternative response (as suggested in the Marks' commentary). Otherwise there would be little reason to expect couples to use prayer as an alternative response to arguments. Of course, most couples have some difficulty using any form of "time out," making prayer as a strategy unremarkable in this respect. It is our hope, however, that prayer will prove somewhat better utilized than other "time out" strategies. With Worthington, we call for more research on this issue.

As is suggested in the commentary, most spouses tell us that they do not characteristically pray for each other, and if they do, that they

do not pray in the way we suggest in the program. That is, it appears that Agape-filled prayer, using God's love as an example and a support for the marital relationship, or using prayer to anchor spouses' love for each other to a solid foundation while motivating loving behavior, is not a naturally occurring behavior (or at least does not occur at a high frequency), even among highly religious couples. One may view this as a problem, however, if things taught in interventions occurred naturally it is possible they would not have as powerful an effect. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the type of prayers we recommend may not be maintained over time, and to the extent that offering prayer for the partner falters or disappears after the end of therapy, our expectation for continuing therapeutic gains could also suffer. Again, this would seem to be an important area for future examination.

Likewise, we agree that clients will likely ask about, or at least wonder about, the therapist's religious beliefs when prayer and spirituality are incorporated into intervention. This has not proven problematic in our current work. It our view that "respect" is more important than "agreement." That is, it may be more important to be comfortable with one's own spiritual commitments than it is to be an exact match for the client couples' beliefs. In keeping with the Sullivan and Karney comment, the therapist should not be engaged in teaching religion to the religious—that is someone else's job. The therapist's job is the simpler task of teaching about marriage in an open minded, faith-friendly manner. Of course, as Worthington suggests, there may be limits to this strategy and it is quite likely that the boundary between "respect" and "agreement" is fluid.

Perhaps the only point with which we disagree in Worthington's analysis is the relative importance placed on internal, individual change rather than relational change. Worthington's perspective on solitary prayer filtering into enhanced relationship behavior over a very long time frame is well accepted in many religious contexts. However, as we noted above, there are hints and more than hints of relational processes linked to spirituality. The relational aspects of spirituality are particularly deep in the Abrahamic traditions and it may be that spiritual growth in the context of marriage can be more rapidly transformative than solitary prayer. Certainly, this is our hope, and as with all the other issues that are unresolved and unexplored in this area, more research is needed.

We would be remiss if we did not briefly comment on two other issues raised in the Worthington comment. First, it is asserted that we fail to sharply distinguish between religion and spirituality. Our current view is that organized religious involvement, reflected in engagement in a faith community and the activities of that community, is different than, and empirically distinct from, spirituality, reflected in one's orientation to the deity and the experience of the divine. Our focus to date has been on spirituality, because that seems more amenable to therapeutic intervention. However, Worthington's comment (and a similar comment by Marks) is a good reminder that we should not forget about the potentially valuable role of faith communities and involvement in a faith community. Worthington also raises the issue of *Miracles in Marriage*. As he suggests, this topic was not included in our lead article for several reasons, the foremost being the intended audience for the article, for whom discussions of the miraculous tend to be problematic. As a therapeutic stance, however, we are quite willing to affirm the miraculous in marriage, and to suggest that the invitation of Agape into one's marriage is an invitation to miracles. The most problematic potential aspect of a couple's focus on the miraculous would be the potential tendency to focus the change process on the other rather than on the self. Again, this is not unique to the discussion of miracles. We all seem better at seeing the speck in someone else's eye.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We are grateful to the commentators for helping prepare the way for future discussions that we suspect will be somewhat less warm and genuine. With luck, however, this discussion will set the tone for future discussions as well. We take some comfort in the view that the issues we are discussing are important, and as noted by Marks, may be particularly important for those committed to addressing health disparities and health care delivery disparities. Discussions like the current one may help us expand the range of our programs (i.e., deal with issues of effectiveness) while maintaining our focus on what works (i.e., documented, efficacious strategies).

**APPENDIX A**

DEAR LORD,

We come to you because you love us. We know you care deeply about the two of us and our relationship to each other. We look to you for a perspective that can let us see with new eyes and hear with new ears. We understand that if we see each other from your perspective we will make better choices and cement our relationship to a foundation that will not be shaken. We know that you are the rightful ruler of life and we pledge to treat each other with love in accordance with your will and your example.

When opportunities arise for us to express our love for each other we will be ready to make that opportunity a reality, not a missed chance. We will set our intentions so that we identify ahead of time the different ways we can be the vehicle of your love. We will practice your deep acceptance and perfect it in our actions toward each other.

We will engage in prayer for each other on a regular basis and each will ask for good things for the other. We will also ask for the strength, patience, forgiveness, and love we need to be good to each other—now and in the long run.

We know we are not perfect. Our flaws are often all too painfully clear. Help us forgive and be forgiven. We know there is no power greater than the power of repentance followed by forgiveness.

We will seek your strength as a shield against temptations large and small. We ask you to protect and watch over the trust in our relationship so that it can grow as we work to support and sustain each other.

When difficult times come, please help us listen and support each other. With your help we can be delivered from impulses that might lead us to harm. Help us reach out and touch each other in love—never in anger.

We know it is in your power to make each of us a source of your love. We know that you can help us show love more fully than we have before.

Let our marriage be a testament to your love and power to transform the world. Forever.

AMEN

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