

The Calibration of Belief

Can prayer really heal?
An unorthodox new study tests the question,
but prayer's greatest power
may lie in the patient's hope that it can.

By HAMPTON SIDES

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he rheumatoid arthritis started 21 years ago in Earl D.'s left hand, a hot, relentless ache that bounced from joint to joint. His fingers twisted like bonsai trees; he underwent surgery on his left wrist, had both knees replaced. A towering, heavyset man in his mid-50's, Earl experimented with the whole dreary palette of therapies for the disease — a degenerative, incurable affliction of the connective tissues and joints — but with only marginal results. Then in June 1996 he heard about an unusual study getting under way near his home in Tampa, Fla. It was designed by Dr. Dale Matthews, a professor and internist at Georgetown University School of Medicine who was seeking volunteers for a look at a very controversial form of treatment: prayer.

Earl, a devout Baptist, signed up immediately. "In the back of my mind, I always nursed this hope that I could become dramatically cured," he says. "This disease eats you alive. Anyone who has it is looking for a miracle."

In setting up his study, Matthews tried to employ the same controls that any scientist uses to evaluate a new drug, but his premise clearly crossed the boundary into metaphysics. At the outset, 40 arthritis patients would be "treated" with prayer during an intensive, hands-on faith-healing session. The patients would then be split into two groups. Half would receive booster doses of long-distance prayer, without their knowledge, every day for six months, while the other half would not.

Hampton Sides, an editor of Outside magazine, is the author of "Stomping Grounds," a book about American subcultures.

A control group would receive no prayer at all, from start to finish. The patients would be monitored for signs of progress by a trained clinician relying on standardized diagnostic measurements, like grip-strength tests and blood analysis to measure the presence of chemical factors present in inflamed tissue.

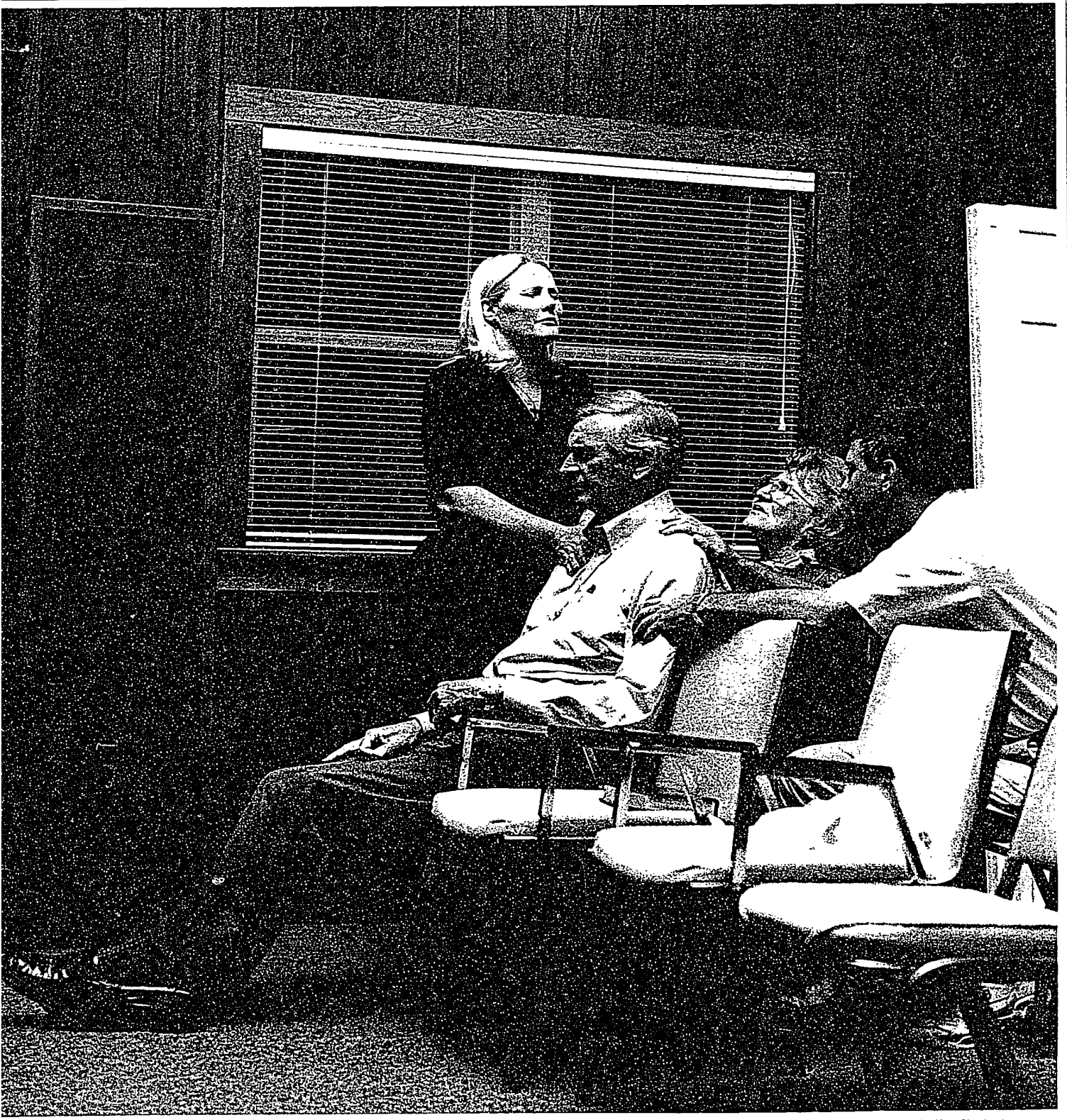
All the same, there was no denying the study's oddity. "This is the deep end of the pool," Matthews admits. "From the standpoint of medical science, it's a strange and fascinating and disturbing field."

Matthews isn't the only person looking at faith through a microscope. In recent years, dozens of studies have examined possible links between religious practices and beneficial medical outcomes. Most look at fairly mundane questions: Do churchgoers have healthier life-style habits than nonchurchgoers? Does prayerful meditation reduce stress? But others have studied the altogether more astonishing notion that praying on behalf of patients (called "intercessory" prayer) has quantifiable healing power. Needless to say, most medical professionals have problems with this hypothesis, arguing that it's both fantastic and untestable.

Even so, the fact that such studies exist at all is a measure of faith's remarkable malleability. In an age when mysticism of any sort is under perpetual siege from the efficiently deterministic findings of science, a project like Matthews's advances a theologically bold proposition: that religious believers can and should attempt to turn the tables, using the methods of science to prove that science is wrong about faith.

Viewed in this context, some questionable aspects of Mat-

Is God in the touch? The faithful demonstrate the application of "soaking prayer" on Francis MacNutt, prayer missionary.



Photographs by Dana Laxenberg

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thews's study might be more charitably viewed as zealous exuberance. For one thing, Matthews is an evangelical Christian who speaks often about his belief that prayer can heal, and the study was carried out with an openly Christian style. Matthews was not content to let just anyone do his spiritual heavy lifting — “For this operation,” he says, “I needed a senior soul surgeon” — so he called on Francis MacNutt, a former Dominican priest who runs Christian Healing Ministries, a sort of MASH unit for the soul based in Jacksonville, Fla.

A mild-mannered Catholic who has spent the past 30 years devising an intensive healing technique he calls “soaking prayer,” MacNutt, 72, claims that his ecumenical Christian staff of “prayer warriors” has helped bring about cures for hundreds of people, of everything from depression to cancer, using prayer sessions that can last for hours or even days.

Last April, Earl D. showed up with other patients at a Holiday Inn in Clearwater, Fla. For three days, a man whom Earl knew only as Dr. Tom prayed for him, concentrating on his inflamed right ankle, which had recently swollen and turned black from the bursting of surface blood vessels. While he prayed, Dr. Tom held the ankle for hours at a time, often in silence. “It was as if we were in a bubble,” Earl recalls. “There was this strength, a vibration almost, passing between us. It was not his or mine, but something external.”

That first night, Earl says, was the start of a remarkable recovery in his ankle, which has lasted for eight months now. “I’m not one of these people who says, ‘Throw away the crutches — I’m cured!’” he says. “I still have rheumatoid arthritis. But the swelling in my ankle went down and it’s never returned. I walk on it every day.”

Matthews and Sally Marlowe, the clinical director, wrapped

up their study last month and plans to submit his findings for publication in a peer-reviewed journal next spring. Matthews is keeping mum, but he will say, with a cagey smile, that his results are “extremely, extremely promising.” Speaking recently to a slightly bewildered crowd of future doctors at St. Louis University School of Medicine, he could scarcely contain his excitement.

“The medicine of the future is going to be prayer *and* Prozac,” he declared. “If we can prove the medical benefits of intercessory prayer, it’s going to be page 1 news. You’re going to see a revolution. The world of medicine will be turned upside down.”

IT WAS HIPPOCRATES WHO FIRST BANISHED SPIRITS FROM the healing arts, and for the past 2,500 years the faithful have struggled to force them back in. These days, religious believers and doctors have carved out a small but significant demilitarized zone where such topics can at least be openly discussed. Next week, for example, more than a thousand doctors, nurses, H.M.O. executives and theologians will convene in Boston for the Spirituality and Healing in Medicine Conference, a semiannual conclave that focuses on topics like “Spirituality and Healing at the Bedside” and “Jewish Spiritual Healing Practices.”

Plenty of taboos remain, however, and a study like Matthews’s violates many of them. Critics argue that even if his project weren’t riddled with flaws — like his small sample of patients — prayer could never be calibrated in the lab.

“Prayer is too fuzzy a variable,” says Lewis Vaughn, executive editor of *The Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*, a new journal that skeptically evaluates various areas of nontraditional medical practice. “You may have a control group that’s not supposed to be prayed for. Well, how do you know there’s not someone out there praying for the well-being of everyone on earth? How do you isolate the one wavelength of prayer that’s relevant? You can’t do it.”

Skeptics add that even if science could prove prayer has an effect, researchers would still need to answer the essential question: How? Does prayer trigger a psychological or biochemical palliative in a patient? Or do believers actually suggest that prayer prompts God to step in and heal?

Matthews admits he has no idea. “We have a lot to learn about the mechanisms,” he says, comparing the situation to the early days of germ theory. “Maybe at some point we’ll discover that there’s some sort of energy field at work here, like radio waves. But I don’t think we’re ever going to figure it all out — and I’m not sure we want to.”

Despite the topic’s obvious murkiness, interest in faith-based healing has been running high in recent years. Dr. Herbert Benson, the controversial Harvard cardiologist who is well known for his studies exploring the healing benefits of what he calls “the relaxation response” — his term for the body’s reaction to meditative practices like yoga — has done much to popularize it. Last year, Benson went a step further with the publication of “*Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*,” a book, widely criticized by colleagues, in which he argued that belief in God has tangible health benefits that seem to be triggered by faith itself. Indeed, Benson declared in a now-famous line, humans are “wired for God.”

While a claim like that still falls shy of the prayer-can-heal hypothesis, other studies have directly addressed it. The most widely discussed of them was published several years back by Dr. Randolph Byrd, a cardiologist. In a random, double-blind experiment involving some 400 cardiac patients at a large

county hospital in San Francisco, Byrd concluded that patients who were prayed for (without their awareness, always at a distance) had fewer cases of congestive heart failure, cardiac arrest and other life-threatening conditions than patients who weren't. As one can imagine, the Byrd study became the subject of much derision in the medical establishment. A number of critics have called its methodology into question, arguing, among other things, that the patients were suffering too wide a range of cardiac problems to represent a meaningful sample.

Consequently, among what might be called "the scientific faithful," replicating the Byrd study has become something of a grail. Aside from Matthews's project, several other prayer studies are in the works, one under the direction of Benson. Just now getting started, it will be a two-year, \$1 million project that will look at the effects of prayer on hundreds of cardiac patients at three medical centers.

Who's paying for all this? Faithful philanthropists, mainly, who are quite open about their biases. The Matthews and Benson studies are both being financed by the John Templeton Foundation, a curious Pennsylvania-based outfit devoted to what its literature opaquely calls "progress in religion." Drawing on the fortune of John Templeton, a retired mutual-fund millionaire who lives in the Bahamas, the Templeton Foundation spent \$6 million last year on faith-oriented research projects.

"We're not interested in putting God on trial," says John Templeton Jr., a retired pediatric surgeon and the founda-

tion's president. "We're simply interested in seeing whether the techniques of science can be used to shed light on different aspects of spirituality."

And should a Templeton-financed project fail to yield the anticipated results, its backers can find comfort in an explanation that secular scientists can't. "Of course, God is the sovereign," Templeton says, "and if He chooses not to cooperate with us, that's His prerogative."

BELIEVERS AND DOUBTFUL SCIENTISTS WILL PROBABLY squabble forever over the clinical value of prayer. What's interesting is to hear what recipients of prayer say about it. With few exceptions, the patients in Matthews's project believe they realized something from the experience — at times something tangible, at times something ineffable, but usually something.

Early last month, the Matthews arthritis study held a reunion in Clearwater to celebrate the project's culmination. Matthews was there, as was Francis MacNutt and his "soul surgeons" and about 30 participants and their spouses. Over dinners of chicken marinara, Matthews showed a video depicting dramatic recoveries. A woman named Marsha claims she was "cured" of rheumatoid arthritis; the video shows her dexterously shooting pool. A man named Bill also claims a near-total reversal.

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"I went into the study barely hobbling on two canes, with pain and heat in 46 separate joints," he says. "Now, I have no symptoms whatsoever. I've completely stopped taking medications. Well, I'd have to call that a miraculous recovery."

Other patients weren't so lucky. Linda, a certified nurse's aide, says she's had "a run of bad luck" since her prayer session. "My knees are actually worse now," she says. "I need to have both of them replaced. I almost feel like a failure to the study."

Most fell in the middle — reporting no miracles but voicing a common, if clinically useless, refrain: *I feel better*. Prayer's beneficence, for them, is explainable only through a fragile tautology: belief is powerful if one believes that belief is powerful.

Vince, another participant, experienced what he views as "remarkable" improvements in his hips, which prior to the study had been so painful that he'd consulted with three physicians about having surgical replacements. Vince attributes his about-face to the supreme trust and confidence his prayer team inspired, a kind of envelope of optimism that surrounded him for those three days — and, one way or another, affected him.

"MacNutt's people come at you with complete faith," Vince says. "You get this great sense of belief from them, and that belief is infectious. You feel this tremendous warmth. They say, 'We know this works, and it will work for you.' And it *did* work. My hips haven't bothered me since." ■

MacNutt
and a fellow
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an arthritis
patient.