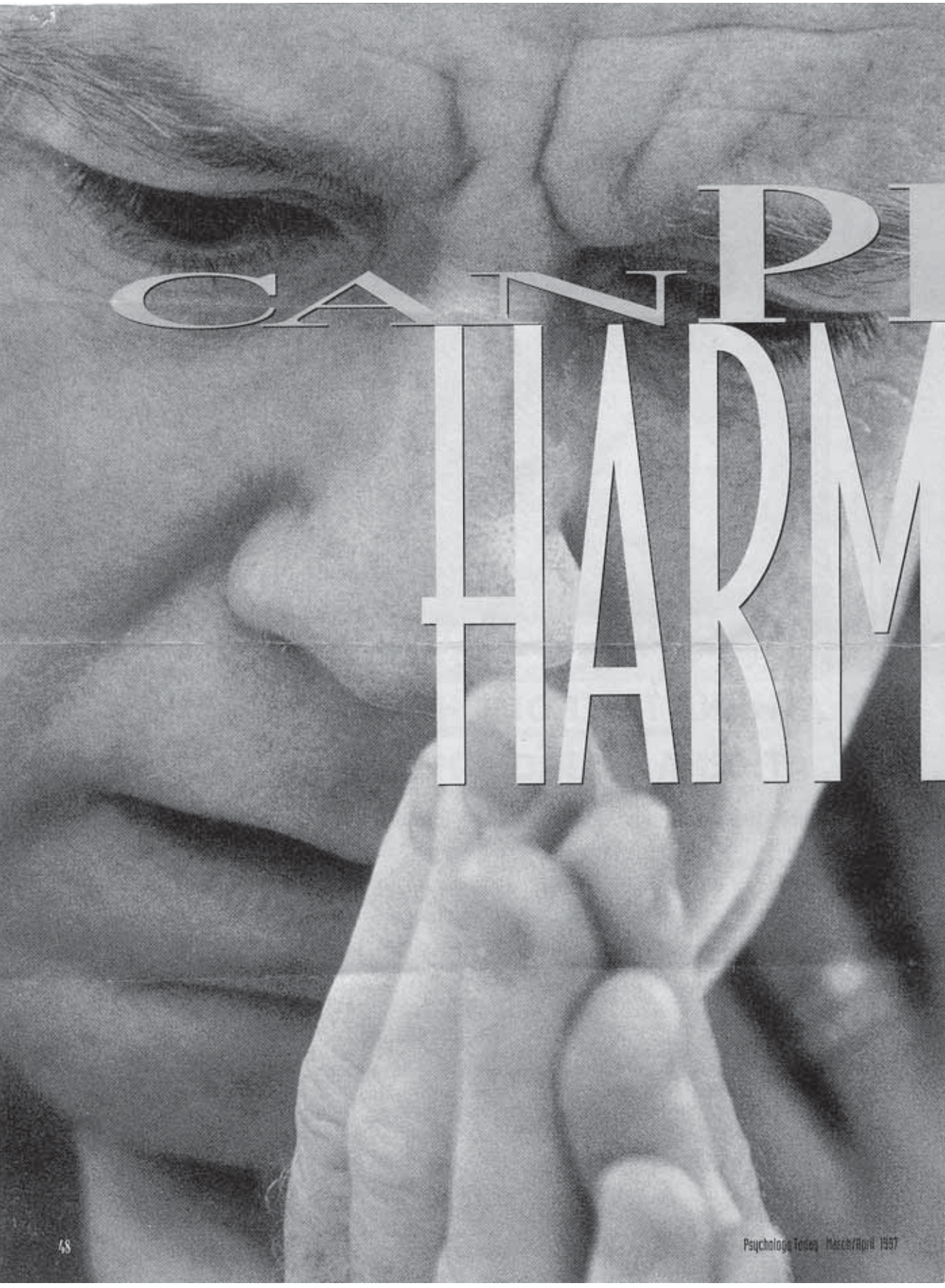

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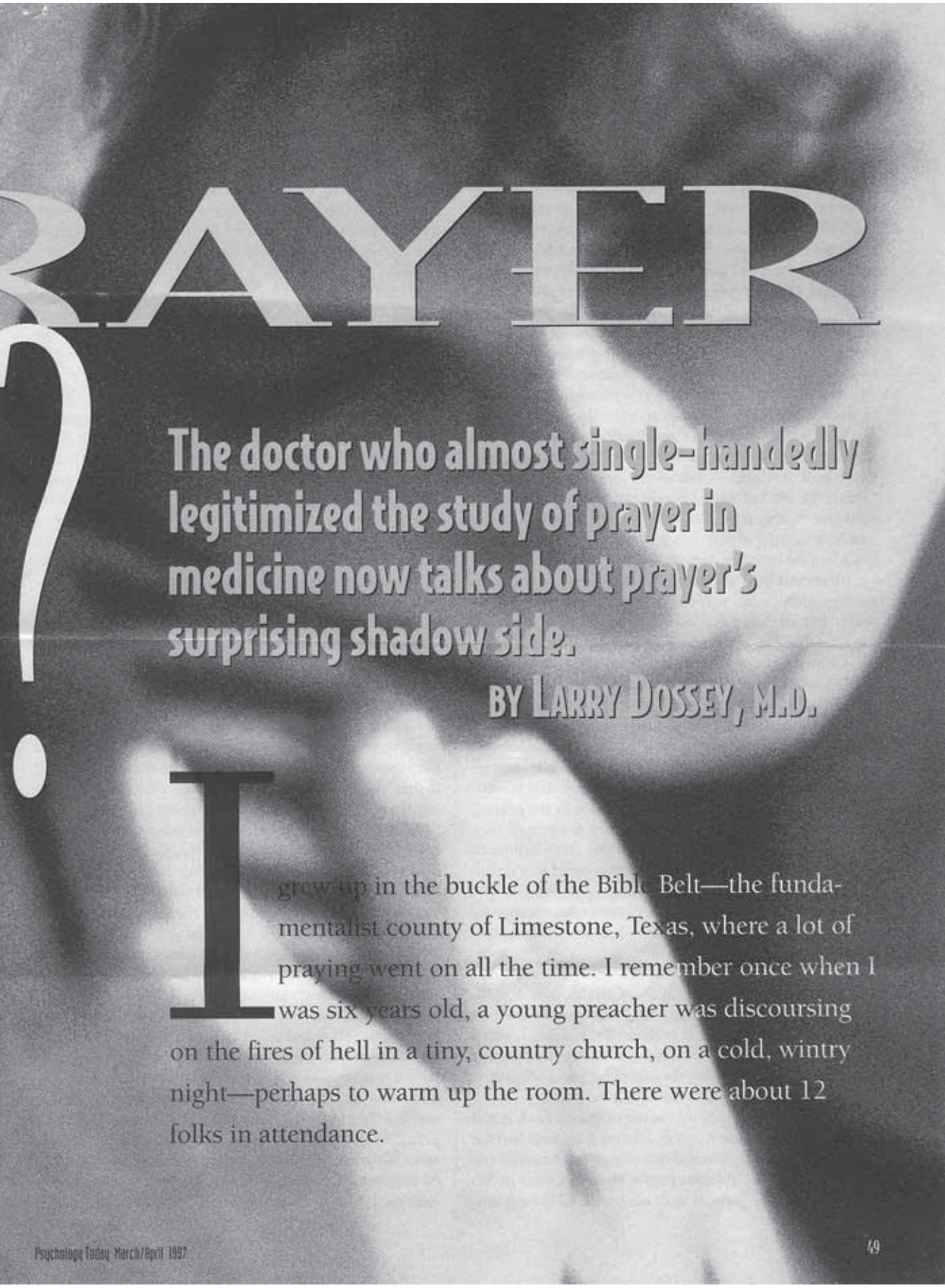


PRAYER?

The doctor who almost single-handedly legitimized the study of prayer in medicine now talks about prayer's surprising shadow side.

BY LARRY DOSSEY, M.D.

I grew up in the buckle of the Bible Belt—the fundamentalist county of Limestone, Texas, where a lot of praying went on all the time. I remember once when I was six years old, a young preacher was discoursing on the fires of hell in a tiny, country church, on a cold, wintry night—perhaps to warm up the room. There were about 12 folks in attendance.

For nearly 30 minutes he described Satan and the flames of eternal damnation, and began to beat on the pulpit to simulate the drums of hell. At the climax of his sermon he had someone turn off all the lights as he lapsed into prayer for lost sinners. My six-year-old mind was utterly hypnotized by fear, and when the invitation for salvation was offered, I numbly stumbled forward—only half-conscious—to be saved.

I learned early on that there could be a raw, brutal edge to religion and prayer. Even though I moved beyond this spiritual territory as I grew older, I carried with me a legacy I consider very important—an enduring interest in prayer. It's impossible to grow up in a fundamentalist environment and not be fascinated by the capacity of prayer to catalyze change in people's lives. For me, prayer remains one of the most effective methods of finding meaning, because it is a way of contacting a dimension of experience that seems wiser, deeper, and more real than an individual sense of self.

Claims that people can actually influence the health and well-being of others through prayer are often met with skepticism and derision. As one of my colleagues remarked, "This is the kind of thing I would not believe even if it existed." Yet it does exist. I've written at length about the astonishing capacity of prayer to heal, even over long distances and when the recipient does not know they are being prayed for. It's unclear how any form of energy currently known to modern physics can account for the distant influence of prayer, but abundant anecdotal and experimental evidence supports this phenomenon.

I stumbled onto the research about prayer and healing in 1988, when I read a study by Randolph Byrd, M.D., a cardiologist at the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine. Dr. Byrd tested the impact of distant prayer much like a new medication, recording its effects on 393 patients who all had severe chest pains and/or heart attacks; half were prayed for, and half were not. The prayed-for group required fewer antibiotics (three in the prayed-for group, compared to 17 in the group not prayed for), had less need for mechanical respirators (zero compared to 12), required fewer diuretics (five compared to 15), suffered less congestive heart failure (eight compared to 20), experienced less cardiopulmonary arrest (three compared to 14), and fell ill with pneumonia less often (three compared to 13).

This study does not stand alone. David Larson, M.D., formerly at the National Institutes of Health, and now director of the National Institute for Healthcare Research, a private research organization in Rockville, Maryland, which explores the role of religious practice in health, has reviewed over 200 studies examining the role of faith and religion on health. In the majority of cases, faith is beneficial.

In 1995, a pilot study on the use of distant healing and prayer for AIDS patients was initiated by psychiatrist Elisabeth Targ, M.D., clinical director of psychosocial oncology research at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. Twenty patients with advanced AIDS were randomly selected, and half received 10 weeks of distant healing from 20 professional healers across the country. Blood and psychological tests were administered before and after the study, as well as three months later. Results were encouraging, and Dr. Targ is now conducting a larger study involving 60 AIDS patients and healers. She's also seeking funds for a similar study with breast cancer. It is studies such as these that will shed light on the way that prayer can be used alongside conventional medicine.

SCIENCE AND SUPPLICATION

Prayer, when studied, usually has positive results. But what about prayer's capacity to harm? Most people choose to believe that thoughts and prayers work positively or not at all. But we cannot hide from the mind's power to harm. Everyone is aware of the placebo response—the impact of positive belief. But the flip side of this phenomenon is the nocebo effect, the ability of negative beliefs and expectations to cause harm. For example, in a provocative British study of patients with stomach cancer, patients thought they were taking a chemotherapy drug, but were actually receiving a placebo. One-third developed nausea, one-fifth developed vomiting, and almost one-third lost their hair. (This study was conducted with the patients' consent, and they were ultimately given the proper drugs.)

But can our thoughts affect events and peoples' actions? Various experiments suggest that they are capable of distorting the classic double-blind experimental design, influencing the outcome of medical studies. In several different studies on the effectiveness of vitamin E on angina, the results could be directly correlated with the researchers' positive or negative expectations. If researchers thought the vitamin would affect the disease positively, it did, and if they thought it wouldn't have any effect, it didn't. In another landmark study by parapsychologist Gerald Solfvin, Ph.D., professor at Rosebridge Graduate School of Integrative Psychology in Concord, California, experimenters who believed they were injecting mice with two different doses of malaria recorded differing degrees of illness in the mice—despite the fact there was no difference in the strength of the two injections.

Several studies suggest that people can use their minds to promote or inhibit the growth of bacteria and fungi at a distance of up to 15 miles. Jean Barry, M.D., a physician practicing in Bordeaux, France, chose a destructive fungus, *Rhizoctonia solani*, and asked 10 people to try and inhibit its growth merely through their intention. The growth of the fungus was significantly retarded in 151 of 194 cases. The possibility that these results could be explained by chance was less than one in a thousand. When the study was repeated by different researchers, individuals up to 15 miles away inhibited the growth. A third remarkable study tested 60 university volunteers' ability to alter a common strain of bacteria, *Escherichia coli*. The strain normally mutates from

the inability to metabolize milk sugar—lactose negative—to the ability to use it—lactose positive—at a known rate. Using nine test tubes of bacteria, subjects tried to influence three of them to become lactose positive, three to become lactose negative, and three to remain just as they were. Each group of test tubes mutated in the desired directions.

The implications of these and similar studies are sobering, to say the least. They suggest that we can use our minds to help or harm other living things, at a distance, and outside their awareness. These experiments may be relevant to humans. Even though we are far more complex, we share many identical biochemical processes with microorganisms, harbor billions of microbes within us. If we can harm bacteria and fungi with negative intention from a distance, might we be able to harm humans as well?

Studies of purposeful negative prayer have only taken place in lower organisms, because it's unethical and illegal to attempt experiments in humans that might intentionally cause harm. However, that doesn't mean we don't carry on such inadvertent experiments every day, outside scientific laboratories.

Indeed, even when our prayers are overwhelmingly positive and sincere, their results can be harmful. Consider some of our most common prayers for happiness, prosperity, and fertility. If all the prayers for prosperity were answered, the environment would probably not be able to survive the impact, simply because of our limited resources. This problem would be compounded by prayers for fertility, which, if answered, would make the problem of overpopulation incalculably worse; and in areas of the world where prayers for fertility focus solely on sons, answered prayers might have truly harmful consequences for the future of women.

THE PRAYER PARADOX

Today, negative prayer is all around us. It's not confined to sorcerers, dabblers in black magic, or occult religious traditions. By and large, it is a practice unconsciously engaged in by perfectly normal, well-meaning folk.

Growing up, I was always puzzled by that paradoxical high school football phenomenon, the pregame prayer, in which opposing teams gather in their respective locker rooms and pray to Almighty God that they will beat the daylights out of their rivals. I wondered how such prayers could possibly be answered. What was a god faced with competing prayers to do? In *The Future of the Body,* Michael Murphy, founder of the Esalen Institute, a center for consciousness research located in Big Sur, California, writes, "Many sports fans consciously or half-consciously feel that rooting has an effect that goes beyond mere encouragement....Witness the many hexes aimed at games via radios and television sets. If rooting channels or triggers powers of mind over matter, it is no wonder that during certain contests balls take funny bounces and athletes jump higher than ever or stumble inexplicably."

Prayers for victory—whether in sports or in any other of life's competitive situations—are often at another's expense. When grasshoppers invaded Mormon crops in Great Salt Lake Valley, Utah, in 1848, church leaders asked parishioners to pray to avert a disaster. Seagulls arrived in hoards, ate the grasshoppers, and the crops were saved. From the standpoint of the Mormons, the effects of prayer were positive. But what about the grasshoppers?

During World War II, the famous pilot Eddie Rickenbacker was forced to land in the Pacific Ocean and, with seven companions, drifted for 24 days in a lifeboat before being rescued by a navy plane. On the verge of perishing from lack of food and water, the men prayed for help. Out of nowhere, a bird landed on Rickenbacker, and he captured and killed it. From Rickenbacker's point of view, his prayer was positive. But what about the bird?

When the torturers of the Inquisition tightened the racks and twisted the thumbscrews on "heretics," they mumbled prayers that their victims repent and their souls be saved. The inquisitors' tears mingled with the blood of their victims on torture chamber floors throughout Europe. Unfortunately, the pattern endures. Prayer continues to be mixed with violence in the name of religion, as the recent orgies of ethnic cleansing by devout Christians and Muslims in Bosnia show.

We may insist that we're not religious nuts or killers, but all of us find ourselves in situations where we believe, at the end of day, that we're right and others are wrong. So, in our culture, where 80 percent of people pray regularly, the stage is set for prayers in which we ask God to defeat those who don't share our views.

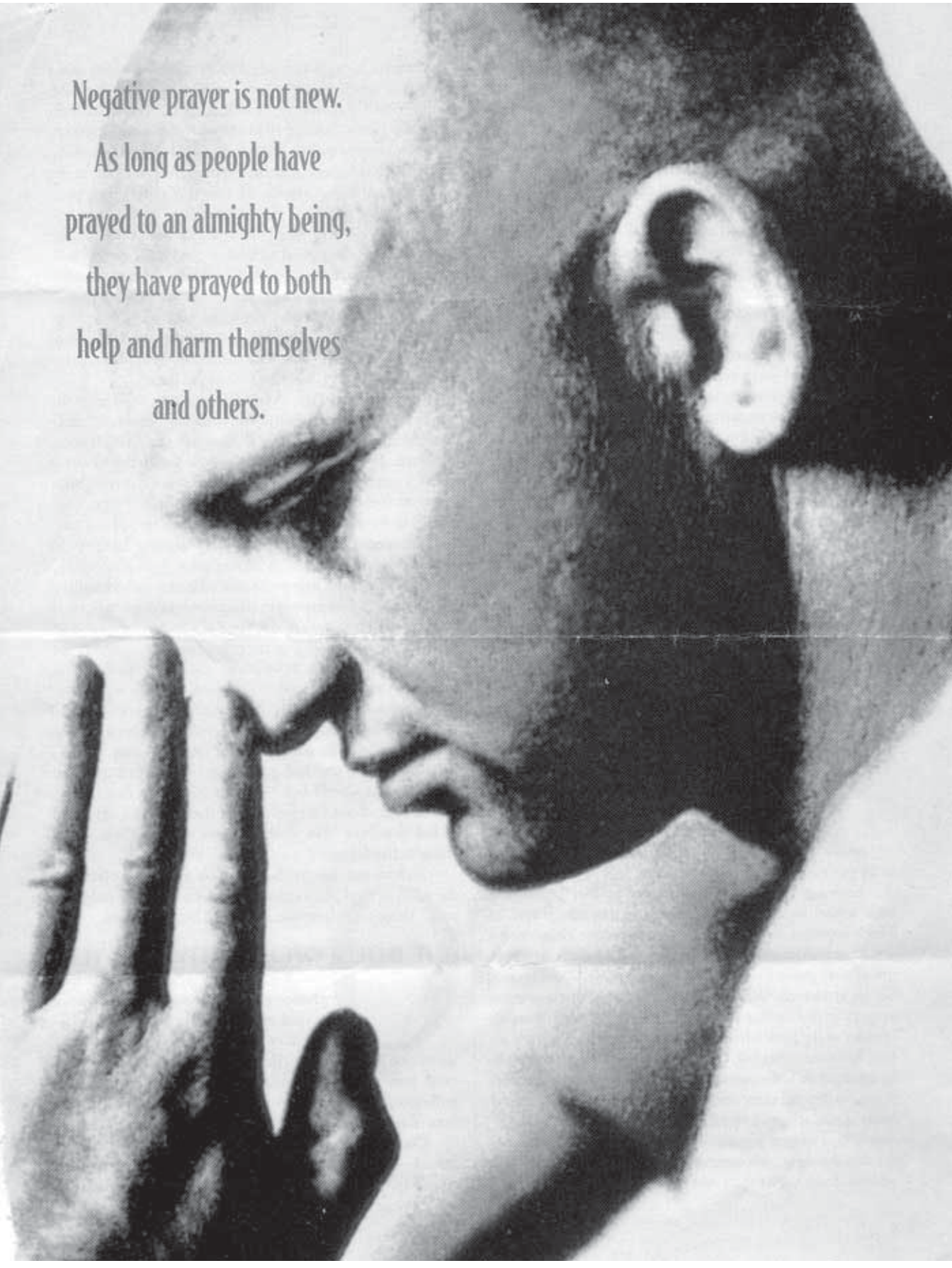
A woman named Melissa recently told me that for 10 years she had struggled unsuccessfully to be a writer. Finally her mother admitted that from the time Melissa was a teenager, she had prayed to God every night that her daughter would fail. "Writers tell things that should not be told, about themselves and their families," she said to her daughter. "I've always known that God had something better for you."

Melissa saw her mother's prayers as a curse offered in the name of God. She began to pray for protection and guidance. Three years later she published her first novel.

THE BOOK ON NEGATIVE PRAYER

Of course, negative prayer is not a new phenomenon. As long as people have prayed to an absolute and almighty being, they have prayed to both help themselves and harm others. The breadth of negative prayer can range from the mild to the deadly, from the simple prayer for individual gain to curses to an ancient death prayer that flourished earlier in this century among shamans in Hawaii.

Curses—which can be considered a form of negative prayer—are right at home in the Bible and have often been employed by the spiritual elite. The *(continued on page 75)*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Can Prayer Harm?

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prophet Elisha, for example, caused 42 children to be devoured by bears for making fun of his baldness. The apostle Paul struck a sorcerer blind. And even Christ blasted an apparently innocent fig tree for not bearing fruit.

In the Hispanic cultures of southern Texas and the Southwest, witchcraft *(brujeria)*, sorcery *(hechiceria)*, and the evil eye *(mal ojo)* are integral parts of folk culture. Vibrant traditions involving hexes, spells, and curses continue in the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The Vodoun tradition, with its famous voodoo practices, has spread from Africa to the Caribbean and the West Indies, and then to many major urban centers in the United States.

One of the most dramatic pieces of anthropological research suggesting the power of negative prayer is the custom of ana-ana, or the "death prayer," which originated in Polynesia and spread to the Hawaiian Islands. This practice was reported in great detail by American psychologist Max Freedom Long, who went to Hawaii in 1917, and from his position as a schoolteacher had the unique opportunity to investigate this custom. Quite simply, shamans would "pray to death" a person who was causing social unrest, who often lived on another island and did not even know he or she was the subject of harmful prayer.

One of the more remarkable features of the death prayer was that the victims often died in the same way—from what we now call ascending paralysis. First, the lower extremities became numb and then paralyzed, the paralysis gradually rising through the body until it reached the lungs, when the victim died of respiratory failure. Today, we would probably identify this kind of illness as Guillain-Barré syndrome, a disease that is virtually clinically identical to that induced by the death prayer. The illness sometimes follows a viral infection, but half the cases arise spontaneously, and their cause is unknown. Patients are kept alive on ventilators until the disease subsides, which can take weeks. Could this disease, and other illnesses of unknown origin, be due in part to the negative wishes or prayers of others? Unless we consider the possibility that prayer can harm, we will never know.

It's easy to think negative prayer practices are confined to only primitive cultures. But after years of study, I'm convinced that the malevolent use of prayer is quite common, woven into our society and our lives. In a 1994 Gallup poll on the prayer habits of Americans published in *Life* magazine, five percent of people confessed they'd prayed for harm to come to others. And that was only the number that admitted it.

Could illnesses like Guillain-Barré syndrome be due in part to negative wishes and prayers?

Giving God Orders

The temptation to manipulate other individuals and situations through prayer is very strong. Even when we voice the prayer, "Thy will be done," how many times are we really saying, "My will be done"? Are we really handing over the outcome of events to God, or are we prayer vigilantes trying to take matters into our own hands? Even if we fully believe we are praying for the good of ourselves or others, do we know the full impact of our prayers? As Beryl Statham, a British writer, notes, "There is an important difference in demanding a specific answer and an open-

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internal, or both, our task in confronting it is always the same: to transmute it, to learn to act with love and compassion. To make the unconscious conscious, as Jung put it; to be born again, as Jesus said; to awaken to wisdom, as Buddha urged.

When I began to explore negative prayer, I asked Native American shamans in northern New Mexico, where I live, whether they thought this phenomenon was real. They all said yes. I inquired about their favorite methods of protection. One shaman asked me jokingly if I'd ever heard of the Lord's Prayer. He urged me to read it again, focusing on the phrase, "Deliver us from evil." "You white people have one of the most powerful forms of protection, and you don't even know it," he smiled.

We need to be courageous enough to embark on the hero's journey, which involves an encounter with the dark aspects of who we are—not because it's romantic or heroic, but because therein lies our one hope of escaping the compulsions that prevent us from becoming fully human.

The mere fact that negative prayer exists and that we may wish to harm others challenges us to engage the totality of existence. Light and shadow are always irrevocably linked. Or, as Friedrich Nietzsche reassured us in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The supreme evil is part of the supreme good." ✉

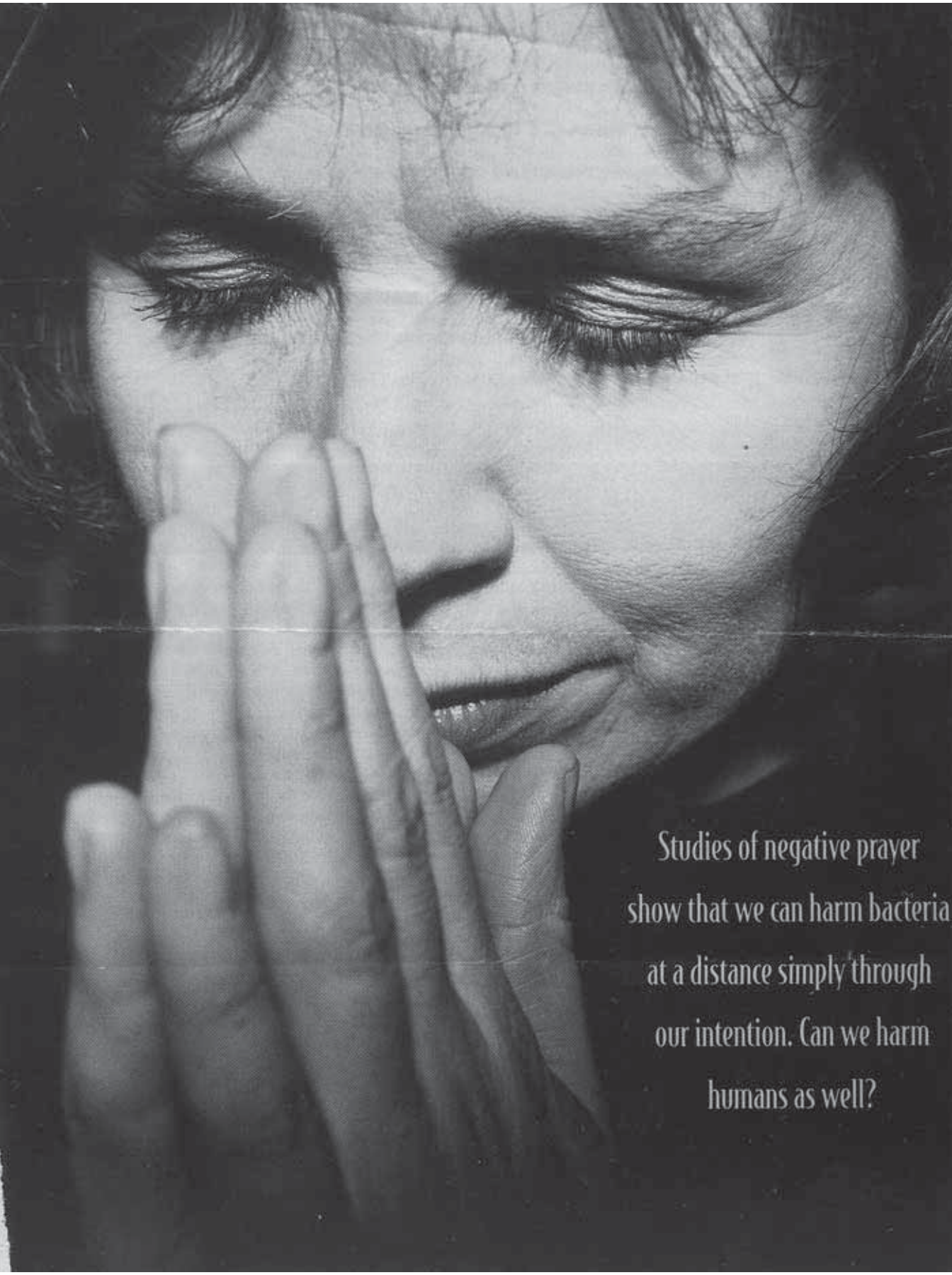
Larry Dossey, M.D., is the author of six books, including the bestseller Healing Words, *and* Prayer Is Good Medicine. *He is Executive Editor of the journal* Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine.

The Evil within Us All?

Few scholars have done more to illuminate the history of the struggle between good and evil than Elaine Pagels, Ph.D., a professor of religion at Princeton University, and author of *The Origin of Satan* and *The Gnostic Gospels*, a national bestseller. According to Pagels, there has "always been another side to invocation and prayer. Christian cosmology, in particular, is split between God's people and Satan's people." That split has profoundly influenced not only the way we envision the universe, but the way we look at other people.

Pagels began to ponder the shadow side after she lost her young son to a genetic illness in 1987, and her husband died in a hiking accident the following year. "I asked myself, 'What have I done to deserve this?' Our religious and cultural heritage suggests that nature follows a moral order, and so any catastrophe must be some kind of divine punishment. I found the idea that I could be at fault very enervating, and I felt I had to learn as much about that cultural legacy as possible, in order to move beyond it."

Pagels found an inspiring alternative to the cosmic war of good and evil in the *Gospel of Philip*, written between 70 and 100 C.E. Philip suggests that all opposites—light and dark, life and death, good and evil—are in reality interdependent. "Philip writes of *gnosis*, or spiritual understanding," says Pagels. "Essential to *gnosis* is to know one's own potential for evil. If we remain unaware of our own darker tendencies, they're powerful, but as soon as those tendencies are recognized, they can be destroyed," Pagels says. Philip's teachings, like those of Buddhism, suggest that a person acting out of an impulse to harm can actually transform the action midstream, simply through awareness. "It's harder to sustain the energy needed for rage, greed, or hatred when you see your own impulse rather than the other person's supposed deficiencies," she explains. "You lose the illusion that your action is justified." Without that illusion, she says, it's difficult to sustain the notion of evil as other, and easier to truly embrace a gospel of love.—*J.N.*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