

**Reflection Paper: Five Profound Points**

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In 2020 alone, my social media accounts witnessed five engagements, with two of those culminating in Zoom weddings before the end of the year. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has led to an acceleration of proposals and weddings in my personal network, consistent with recent findings indicating that “[t]he additional time together encouraged couples to think more about their futures pre-engagement, including their wedding” (The Knot, 2020).

It has been a timely moment to equip my professional marital and family therapy training with pre-marital counseling. The Nyack curriculum provides a Christian worldview to pre-marital counseling, a spiritual perspective that enhances secular pre-marital research and counseling by developing one’s professional language to encompass the Christian principles of covenant, faithfulness, and holiness. In this paper, I will reflect on five points that have impacted my appreciation of pre-marital counseling, touching upon what each point brings to both my learning and application toward relationships and relational therapy.

#### **Personal Prayer**

I was reminded of the power of the individual in a relationship. So often, pre-marital counseling and its concepts emphasize dual-participation through the design of its exercises, and naturally so given the dyadic nature of a marriage. However, Stanley et al. (2001) make clear that each individual holds immeasurable agency through the power of their own prayers. This was a refreshing reminder, as I have been witness to many couples who embark on their life together as an enmeshed unit, leading to unexpected challenges in the later stages of their relationship. I appreciated the placement of this principle in the beginning of the book, as well, which once again highlights the transformative power of personal prayer in all our circumstances and relationships (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 34).

The profound point of prayer reminds me to not dismiss this aspect in any of our relationships. Prayer allows us to slow down and invite God into the process, bring acceptance of mystery into the nature of relationship, and cultivate true gratitude for the other person. We must remember that our partner should always be viewed as a beloved child of God. The power of prayer carries a personal application within all of my relationships with family, friends, and dating partners. I pray often for circumstances, but I don't often enough place my relationships at the feet of God, with full surrender and a starting point of thankfulness.

### **Make "I" Statements, Not "You" Statements**

Through a culmination of learning resources, including an impactful class with Dr. Mercurio, I began utilizing "I" statements in critical argumentative moments with my mother. At a profound turning point in one recent exchange, I exclaimed to her, "I feel hurt by your statement!" With that remark, something shifted in our conversation. Both our volumes were reduced, and I was able to better express why I felt hurt.

"'I' statements dispense information to be understood rather than accusations to be defended" (Parrott & Parrott, 2015, p. 99). This powerful summary affirms the power of explanatory communication and also aligned with my personal experience of using an "I" statement in the mother-daughter disagreement mentioned previously. Using "I" statements is slowly helping me shift from defending, accusing, and attacking particular statements or phrases made by others; it instead places the burden on me to communicate my internal world better. Professionally, I can see this technique becoming a strong coaching point in communication workshops of a variety of contexts (individuals, couples, families, and even business settings), beginning with a simple explanation, followed by breakout groups reinforcing the skill through repetition and exercise.

### **Time-Outs**

The image of two or more adults, in any disagreement, taking a “time-out” initially seems both juvenile and laughable. In truth, this technique, as explained by Parrott & Parrott (2015), is a vitally useful tactic in moments of heated escalation. By establishing “Ground Rules,” such as understanding that time-outs are not an alternative to avoidance, and protecting the good things in a relationship with conflict-free time, Parrot & Parrot explain how powerful it is to pause, take a few calming breaths, and engage in more productive communication at a later time.

I chose this as a profound point because I believe time-outs can be immensely useful when combined with “I” statements, as discussed in the section before. By agreeing on a time to re-engage in what might be a touchy conversation for both parties, one can use the time-out to carefully craft “I” statements, instead of falling back on inflammatory “You” statements. This skill is particularly impactful for me, as I know I have misused the concept of “time-outs” before. In one particular burst of temperament with my father, I disengaged completely and unwittingly reinforced both our tendencies to avoid working through relational conflict. We abided by a longstanding family rule to not discuss our difficult emotions. In the future, I hope to watch for these moments of voluntary disengagement and proactively work to agree on a later time to discuss difficult subjects.

### **Reflective Listening**

The power of reflective listening seemed incredibly necessary during the heightened political atmosphere of 2020 and 2021. As I sat in my living room watching more C-SPAN than ever before, I realized with abundant clarity that active listening is not a tactic used on the Congress debate floor, much less the skill of empathetic reflection. This skill is not exemplified

in public political discourse, and I was left wondering how much understanding would increase if every Congressional representative was required to first reflect a brief summary of the prior speaker's statement before jumping into their own attack-response.

Embarking upon my second full semester of the Marriage and Family Therapy program, one small skill I have begun practicing in regular conversations with friends is reflecting the content and feeling of the speaker. I quickly discovered that my mind doesn't default to active listening, which is a shame for the arts of empathy, genuine curiosity, and compassion. In a recent exchange with a woman in my Bible study, I made it a point to quickly reflect what she had just shared with me, and I was met with an enthusiastic, "Yes!" It was a verbal affirmation of my use of the skill, but more importantly, it was confirmation that she felt heard. In just a few short moments, I was required to suspend my automatic response to her information, in order to carefully listen to her and step into her shoes. How often do we sit, wondering "What do I say?" in response to difficult content? The answer is simpler than I thought: just reflect what other people say. This exercise, which initially feels robotic, is helping me grow my capacity to empathize and actively suspends my desire to respond prematurely. Stanley et al (2014) provide clear guidelines for this activity in a marital context, aptly naming it the "Speaker-Listener Technique". Ground rules are given for both the speaker and the listener, with the first requirement for the listener to respectfully paraphrase what one hears before switching roles (Stanley et al., 2014, p. 78). I'm excited to grow in this skill and also teach others in a pre-marital context about it.

### **Technology**

The internet was ubiquitous in my adolescence: I first logged on to AOL in 1995, I witnessed my parents navigate the dot-com bubble of 2001, and up until a few years ago, I was

categorized as an early-adopting, digital native. I am adept at navigating the web and have worked at a few tech companies. However, it doesn't take a digital native to notice the significant attention being stolen from real life and personal interactions all around us. My father would use his work email as a way to further disengage from the family; now, in his retirement, his preference of disengagement is YouTube. It is not unlike watching a child with a screen glued to their eyes: a bit depressing, and confounding to the observer what the best action steps may be in order to protect and maintain a loved one's well being. To make it a step more personal, we should be applying these concerns to ourselves. A growing body of research is now tracking how our use of addiction-exploiting social media tools impacts a person's neurobiology, anxiety and depression levels, and productivity levels in the school and workplace (Newport, 2019).

To read the discussion by Stanley et al (2014) about the impact of technology on marriages has brought my reckoning with social media into a new sphere. The holistic approach by which they not only warn of the dangers, but also how technology can be used to benefit a marriage, is encouraging; although it is clear that the current dangers and distractions are far more problematic than the lighter examples they provide. The trap of always being available to an "outside network" is a mental tax to building intimacy with a life partner, and the blockade must be dealt with in order to place a marriage bond as priority (Stanley et al, 2004, p. 173). As a personal application, I have begun weaning myself from social media after noticing a significant inability to remain focused for long periods of time. It has made schoolwork less efficient and punctured my learning, a long-term tradeoff which I cannot allow to continue. In early 2021, I intend to completely remove myself from Instagram.

## **Conclusion**

Pre-marital counseling is a skill within the broader field of marriage and family therapy which requires competency development, training, and perhaps even standalone marketing. By reflecting on specific topical areas which can be addressed in clinical and educational settings, I am growing in my creativity and professionalism as I think through how I can structure effective premarital counseling in both secular and ministerial contexts. The profound points of Prayer, “I” Statements, Time-Outs, Reflective Listening, and Technology will shape my future practice and help me synthesize practical ways to approach my counseling style. Moreover, and perhaps most important, these points will enrich my personal relationships and my future marriage to come.

## References

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