

Healing, Wellness, and the Life of the Spirit January 21, 2018

Do you remember a time when you felt as if everything was in sync? You felt healthy and centered, whole and at peace?

I do – barely. I know that such a way of being in the world existed – once upon a time... when the word “health” meant “whole.” There was a unity that existed between body and soul that spoke of an “original wholeness.” We might think of it as the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

I believe we human beings are born with “integrity: -- “an original wholeness from which no part can be taken away” as one medical ethicist puts it (Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*). This “wholeness” exists in more than the physical sense. Our “original wholeness” makes us who we are, no matter what our limitations or particular conditions. And it is that “original wholeness” to which all can lay claim.

Healing means “to make whole.” Ancient Greeks practiced the art of healing. Their treatment of sick people emphasized diet and hygiene of body and soul. With greater understanding of anatomy, medicine became the treatment of “sick organs.” Gradually, treating the whole person became a lost art. And, the practice of medicine became the realm of science and technology.

The unity that once existed between body and soul – what some call the “life force” – was divided as more was learned about human anatomy. The emphasis shifted from health as wholeness, to one in which the parts of the human body could be fixed “without affecting the whole.” (Paul Tillich)

Stefan Zweig described that shift very well, I think:

The physician puts himself beside the priest, and very soon against him....

Disease is no longer something which concerns the whole (person), but something which hits one of the organs.... The laboratory keeps the doctor from a practical insight into the personality of the patient; the hospital keeps (the doctor) from personal contact with the patient... The expert in every section of body and soul replaces (the family doctor) ... (people) mind that the healer has become a scientist, (and) they feel instinctively that disease is not localized but concerns the whole constitution, the body as well as psyche and spirit.

Zweig wrote that in 1931 – before the days of managed health care. With advances in technology and medicine, the body as machine is no longer

simply a “metaphor.” Body parts are kept alive – or replaced – by actual machines, sometimes without regard for the integrity of the whole person.

I believe that we all have the capacity to be healers. There is a memory in us that calls us back to our essential unity – to our unique wholeness. That memory is grounded in our beliefs and in our hopes. We carry within us what physician Herbert Benson calls a “remembered wellness,” that is at least as important as the medical treatment we receive. It reminds us that we are more than the sum of our body parts.

When I worked as a spiritual care counselor for hospice, I witnessed the “healing” that could take place in patients who were dying. Hospice is not about curing an illness. It is intended to provide comfort care for the whole person, often after he or she has exhausted all other avenues of medical treatment. Hospice or palliative care may be a patient’s first experience with the notion of healing, as opposed to “curing.” Cure means to recover from a disease. “Healing” is possible even if a body is not cured of disease. Hospice employs techniques grounded in the belief that the whole person suffers when one part is diseased. That is why hospice teams include a chaplain or spiritual care counselor in addition to a physician, a registered nurse, and a social worker. Hospice patients are also usually offered “alternative” treatments such as acupuncture, massage, and Reiki.

Like the rest of the hospice team, Spiritual Care Counselors are present to families as well as to patients. I was invited in to offer spiritual support and guide them as they recalled memories and reflected on their lives. Patients (and families) were often able to reconcile relationships, and imbue each day with hope and meaning.

It doesn’t always work that way. In our many conversations, Mary recalled family relationships and the “highlights” of her life. I will never forget our last conversation when she concluded: “on the whole, it’s been a pretty crummy life.” She died the next day.

When I’m having a bad day, and my attitude is in need of adjustment, I remember Mary. And I think: “what if this is the last day of my life? Do I really want my last memory to be of a crummy life?” Would any of you?

I believe there is a reason we experience pain and illness. I agree with feminist educator, Margo Adair, who suggests that “Health problems are simply the body’s healthy response to a situation that is not healthy.” We have become

conditioned... to view our bodies as ... separate functioning parts that are prone to break down, and to believe that only specialists can do

the repair work. (According to Adair, we have come to) believe that we are powerless victims unable to take care of ourselves in the midst of hazards, or else to blame ourselves for our health problems. (Margo Adair)

There are cultures that treat illness differently. In Islam, for instance, "illness is understood to be a great blessing." (Gray Henry, Parabola, Spring 1993) This "blessing" offers the opportunity to those suffering to become closer to God. When one asks a Muslim, "How are you?" the response is always the same: "Al hamdulillah!" ("All praise belongs to God!") No matter what suffering has been endured, it is not the pain that is mentioned... (instead) Muslims ... praise God for their state of Being, whatever that might be. (Gray Henry)

For the Kung people, healing is more than simply curing through the application of medicine. It is "a fundamental and integrating... force" that takes the whole person into account, in all aspects and situations. It involves work on the individual, the group and the surrounding environment and cosmos.... The (Kung emphasize)... sharing and egalitarianism; its vital life (is in) the spirit and strong community, (all)... expressed... and supported by the healing tradition... Healing is directed as much toward alleviating physical illness in an individual as toward enhancing the healer's understanding; as much toward resolving conflict in the village as toward establishing a proper relationship with the gods and the cosmos. A healing may be specifically directed toward one of these focuses, but the healing in fact affects them all.

According to poet Audre Lorde, "African tradition deals with life as an experience to be lived... as part of a life force ... (Africans believe they) are joined... to the air (and) to the earth.... As "part of the whole-life process, (they) live in accordance with... the rest of the world as a whole." For Africans "living becomes an experience, rather than a problem, no matter how bad or how painful it may be." (Audre Lorde)

Audre Lorde was a self-described "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." She died of breast cancer more than twenty years ago. But she died, only after she had learned how to live with breast cancer. And to let it teach her and others what it meant to be whole, even as she watched her body deteriorate. Part of her journey toward wellness is recorded in *The Cancer Journals*. She wrote early on about the impact of the illness on her life, and how it affected everyone around her. For years Audre Lorde had been an outsider in her own culture. "Sister Outsider," she called herself. And yet,

her memorial service was held at St. John of the Divine in New York City, so that thousands of mourners could pay tribute to her life. By her living, and by her dying, her part in the “whole-life process” was complete.]

Restoring a spiritual balance to our lives, and to our culture, can be seen as a way of healing the whole. How can we do that? We can start by quieting the many voices – both interior and exterior – that are directing our lives. Then we can invite Spirit, the God of our understanding, to guide us as we ask ourselves these questions:

What is my deepest hunger?
 What is it I long for that is currently missing from my life?
 What is it the world needs from me?

After you have identified your deepest hunger, and what the world needs most from you, ask yourself:

What is my deepest gladness?
 What is it that makes me feel joyful, free, and whole?

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet,” says one theologian. (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC)

Healing ourselves and our culture would reclaim “all that has been denied in ourselves...” (according to Margo Adair) Instead of defining “health as the absence of disease,” healing our culture would restore health to its original intention: the well-being of the whole person.

There are health practitioners who treat the whole person and not just the diseased parts of a person. I first encountered one when I injured my back more than 25 years ago. The healer asked me, “When was the last time you concentrated on centering yourself?” I hate questions like that. They make me stop and take inventory of myself. That was the whole point. I needed to stop. I needed to focus on centering myself, and grounding myself, rather than in scattering myself in so many directions. With her question, the healer was honoring my whole person.

I learned many things in the year-and-a half it took for the pain to disappear. I learned about accepting – and asking for – help. I learned about honesty and trust. And, I learned about my relationship with God.

In my journal I wrote:
I ask God to help me be honest, to be open to the experiences of the day, to trust that I am safe. But the prayer has yet to reach my heart. It remains stuck in my craw, a hard, immovable lump. (April 18, 1990)

During the months of my recovery, I learned about “letting go.” And, I learned about my own anger. I was angry at God for “making” me give up the things I loved most – like running and dancing and bicycling. “If God really loved me, then I wouldn’t be in such pain,” I thought. What I learned was that the anger had settled in my back. And it had thrown my well-being “off-center.”

Part of the healing process was grieving the losses in my life. I learned that grieving and healing were part of the same whole. And that both were necessary parts of learning to love myself. Gradually my anger at God became an awareness of my desire to be loved and held and comforted – by a God in which I no longer believed. My “center” had shifted. And with it my beliefs.

The pain in my back was a symptom of what was out of balance in my life. The pain was a blessing, because it forced me to review how I was living. I made many changes in order to heal my back. The pain still acts as a barometer that activates when I’m in overdrive. The pain forces me to pause, take stock, and then regroup.

I believe our bodies are always giving us information. For example, ailing body parts may indicate underlying life practices that bear consideration. Tightness in the throat or chest suggest that we are not living life as fully and authentically as we would like. Back problems can reflect fear or lack of trust in life. Cancer manifests toxic negative emotions that we harbor, primarily anger, hate, resentment and grief. A link has been found between acute psycho-emotional trauma and the onset of cancer 18-24 months later.

I learned this the hard way when two years (to the month) after moving from Ohio back to New York I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The move was difficult on many levels, and I still think of it as one of the most regrettable choices of my life. I am much more suited for a “Midwest” quality of life than a city where being angry and short-tempered are a way of life. After “sitting” with a diagnosis of breast cancer, I recognized that all the anger, grief, resentment, and regret I was carrying had taken its toll. Because the impact of the move on my well-being had not been addressed

adequately, the built up negative emotions needed to be excised surgically from my body.

When choosing treatment for breast cancer, I settled on a combination of western and eastern practices. Yes, I opted for surgery followed by chemotherapy and radiation. But the side effects from the treatment were relieved by weekly acupuncture, massage, daily meditation, and special teas and foods recommended by the Integrative physician I consulted. Once again I was given an opportunity to make changes that restored me to wellness. (One of them was to leave my job as hospice chaplain and return to parish ministry.) I'd like to tell you that I "got it" this time, but I suspect that I will be relearning this lesson several more times in my life.

In *Care of the Soul*, Thomas More suggests that we can view the body as art or as machine. If we view the body as art, we can learn from what it expresses to us. If we view the body as a machine, then we will continue to treat its malfunctions as something outside ourselves. As a machine, the body lends itself to a cure. As art, the body invites healing. As healers, I believe we have the potential of healing ourselves, and healing the whole web of which we are a part, once again restoring harmony to creation.

Wellness is more than simply the absence of sickness. Wellness grows out of an (inner awareness of our longings and gladness) that recall us to our purpose for being – our "original wholeness." That "original wholeness" – our integrity – guides us toward wellness – of body, mind, and spirit. When we allow ourselves to "re-member" what it means to be whole and at peace.

Let us begin with ourselves as we are now.