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July 1999

A Revolution in Health Care

Integrative Medicine offers the promise of living a good life, even though it may not be an easy life, or even a long life.

For the past hundred years the goal of health care has been the curing of the body. Restoring the concept of healing to the heart of health care is no small thing. It requires rethinking the assumptions on which medical relationships are based, rethinking the goals of every health care interaction. It will require a revolution.

This is what the newest movement in medicine, Integrative Medicine, is about. This field, which hopes to synthesize the best from alternative and conventional approaches, actually goes far beyond these techniques to recognize the potential for wholeness in everyone. Integrative Medicine is a call for all health professionals to commit to strengthening the wholeness in their patients by all means possible.

Curing happens at the level of the body, and it requires expertise. Healing is what happens at the level of the whole person, and it requires collaboration with the innate movement towards wholeness which is constant and present in everyone.

Healing is not the outcome of an interaction between an expert and a problem; it requires a relationship between two whole human beings who bring to a situation of suffering the full power of their combined humanity and all of its potential. When this happens many things that cannot be cured can still heal.

The hope of healing is always present. Even faced by an incurable disease, a person may still grow in such a way that, over time, the wound of their illness becomes a smaller and smaller part of the sum of their lives.

As both a physician and a patient I have come to accept that not everything is capable of cure. Some time ago I wrote a poem about my own forty-five year experience of chronic illness:

*O body!
For 40 years
1327 experts
with the combined 16,787 years of training
have failed to cure your wounds.
Deep inside,
I am whole.*

Because wholeness exists even in the presence of disease, Integrative Medicine has a power which may elude even the most potent of scientific approaches. It can open a door of hope in what otherwise might be an impenetrable wall of disease and suffering. Collaborating with people in furthering their wholeness offers them a place to stand from which a life may be reclaimed even in the absence of cure. It offers the promise of living a good life, even though it may not be an easy life or even a long life.

Integrative Medicine also offers the hope of healing for medicine itself, a chance for health care to reclaim its original meaning and purpose, and by doing so, restore its integrity. The original meaning of medicine is not science, it is service, and this ancient meaning has not changed in three thousand years.

But in recent generations, health professionals have fixed life, outwitted life, manipulated life, controlled life, and attempted to gain mastery over it. We have been taught to view life as broken.

This is not really what serving life is about. That which is broken is not worthy of our service and the dedication of our lives. We can only serve that which is holy and whole. When we serve, we recognize the wholeness, the buddha seed, in everyone.

The healing of medicine will require the reform of medical education. For a hundred years we have been educating our young people to be fixers; we will need to educate them to become healers.

Healers are whole people, but many physicians were not educated to be whole people. We were trained to be professionals and experts, and as such we were encouraged to repress certain essential aspects of our own humanity in the belief that this would make us more useful to others. Touring an historic cemetery many years ago, I saw a tombstone with this epitaph: "Here lies George Brown, born a man, died a Gastroenterologist." Surely, this is not a step up.

As physicians, we have been trained to value and develop the intellect, but the parts we have sacrificed to our expertise - the heart, the emotions, the soul and the intuition - are basic human strengths. We will need to find ways to respect and develop these strengths in our students so that they can nurture them in their patients.

Without such basic strengths, no one can heal. In the central courtyard of the Temples of Aesculapius, the Father of Medicine, was a statue of Venus, the Goddess of Love. Perhaps the heart is just a way of seeing. Despite external appearances, it enables us to see things whole. This commitment to seeing and furthering the innate wholeness and integrity in every suffering human being is the true lineage of medicine.

Integrative Medicine has become a meeting place for a truly bewildering array of holistic and conventional techniques. But all these techniques and approaches, from acupuncture to neurosurgery, are only the branches of a very old tree whose trunk is healing and whose root is service. This new field offers the hope that in the new millennium medicine may return to its lineage and make as great a commitment to the buddha seed as to the body.

Reprinted from *Shambhala Sun*, July 1999