

Integral Approaches to Mind-Body Medicine

CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE HEALING PROCESS

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The current movement toward integrative medicine, with its mutual respect and collaboration among Western, Eastern, and shamanic practitioners, is one I applaud. Indeed, I don't believe I would be alive today without having had the benefit of all these methods in my healing beyond metastatic ovarian cancer more than 14 years ago. However, I have a major concern regarding what seems to me to be missing in integrative medicine. We rarely hear anyone speak about consciousness as central to the healing process. The deep knowing in every cell of my body says that it is the changes and development of consciousness itself that is the direct link to our innate, universal, and powerful healing potential proposed in integral health and healing demonstrated throughout this book. In this culture, where we put greater emphasis on the external than the internal, I realize that going inside ourselves to find healing power is often unfamiliar and difficult. Instead, we tend to search frantically for the "right" practitioner and the "best" treatment. Everything in my experience, however, says that to miss the centrality and extraordinary power of consciousness in the healing process is to miss the most potent medicine we have. Further, the connections between illness, consciousness and the evolution of our potential High Selves may be of even more importance to realize. This is not intended as a philosophical discussion. Yet in good conscience I can ignore neither the truth of my own direct experiences of the healing process nor my observations with others of the patterns that connect and relate to our larger life process. In the early '70s I was invited to bring my background in psychology to an interdisciplinary team doing innovative work in sexuality with paraplegics at the University of Minnesota Medical School. I knew almost nothing about paraplegia and looked forward to attending a panel discussion by paraplegics and quadriplegics with their spouses or partners. They were to talk to medical students and faculty about the realities of sexual relationships when one lives with a wheelchair because of a spinal cord injury. The first person to speak was a good-looking man in his late 20s who had accidentally been shot in his lower spine when he was 12. After years of wheeling his chair, he had the arms, shoulders, and chest of a football player. His thin, undeveloped legs, however, dangled from the chair, limp and unresponsive. He seemed almost cocky as he surveyed the large audience in the amphitheater. Then in a voice that was both strong and confident, he said, "I want you to know that my accident was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me!" Stunned, I thought, "My God! They're not only crippled, but they're crazy as well!" How very, very much I had to learn! And how grateful I will always be to that remarkable group of people in wheelchairs and their partners. They taught me that healing may have little or nothing to do with curing physical problems. This helped me to define healing as "a new state of increased well-being that may be physical, emotional, and/or spiritual." Transformed through their responses to injury, they learned to live to their fullest potential. They showed me that our physical ability or inability does not determine who we truly are. Never again would I equate physical capacity with health or wholeness. Most important, they showed me that for healing to happen, a change of consciousness is more important than a physical cure.

A few years later, I became part of the university's new program in cross-cultural approaches to medicine and healing. As the only white person on a faculty of black, Native American, and Hispanic teachers, I saw again and again that diverse, and sometimes divergent, techniques are used cross-culturally for healing purposes. What they have in common is the ability to shift consciousness to a new state of awareness, providing access to individual and innate healing potential. After leaving Minneapolis, I moved to San Francisco and established a private psychotherapy practice primarily with people in recovery from addictions. Although I don't happen to be alcoholic, I loved working with this population. Recovery of addicts, like the healing of paraplegics, may not include cure. But when I first heard a man identify himself as a "grateful alcoholic," I understood what he meant. Without thinking he was crazy, I knew that he referred to the well-being that can occur as consciousness shifts with or without a cure present. When Bill Wilson, an alcoholic who had never been able to maintain sobriety, had a spiritual experience nearly 70 years ago, the treatment of alcoholism changed. Until then neither traditional medicine working with the body nor psychiatry or psychology working with the psyche had enough successes to offer any hope to alcoholics. When a spiritual component based on the concept of a Higher Power—an external God in some form—was combined with physical and psychological concepts in the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, recovery became possible for millions of people. The changes of consciousness that are essential to recovery may occur through replacing destructive behavior with constructive conduct, through conscious introspection and inner exploration, through service and other healing activities, through prayer and meditation, or sometimes simply through unexpected gifts of grace. Just as with variations in cross-cultural healing, I have seen that the ways in which consciousness changes in recovery may be personal and unique, but that such changes happen is fundamental to both. On a sparkling October morning in 1989, the experiences became personal. With minimal symptoms that were easy to ignore until I was taken to an emergency room after a bike accident, I was diagnosed with

aggressive, metastatic ovarian cancer. It was a morning so magnificent that such a diagnosis was almost too incongruous to believe. Because it was my own cells that had run amok for some reason, I couldn't conceive of this disease as an "enemy." That would have seemed like fighting against myself. In some, as yet unknown way, my response to this powerful illness would have to mimic an aikido master's ability to transform an attacker's power so that it would not be destructive. I would have to go toe to toe with cancer, come to know it intimately, discover what it asked of me and what it offered me. My healing would involve inner explorations of psyche and soul, as well as physical treatments for my body. Everything I'd learned in nearly 20 years of working with other people in their healing and recovery would be relevant for me now. Because Western, Eastern, and indigenous medical practices were not integrated at that time in health care, I assembled a diverse team from the wide range of practitioners here in the San Francisco Bay area.

Chemotherapy and surgery were complemented by acupuncture and Qigong. Imagery, art, poetry, music, movement, dance, dreams, time in nature, and personal journaling all became significant in my healing process. Although self-reflection and the creative arts have been recognized as having health benefits in recent years, a caveat seems important here: I believe we often confuse the map with the territory. These activities are all effective and efficient "languages of consciousness." As instruments of communication, they provide connection with consciousness, but they are not consciousness itself. Extraordinarily useful, they are means to

an end but are not the end in themselves. Experience tells me that it is the unfolding of consciousness itself that holds the potent healing power and is of unbounded worth in its own right, regardless of physical outcome. In the midst of my cancer treatment, a lumbar disk ruptured. I was hospitalized in traction, and back surgery was strongly recommended. However, I refused to have a second major operation so soon after cancer surgery. The alternative was being confined to bed for a month with regular visits from a physical therapist. Excruciating pain was constant and almost unbearable. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced previously. Adding to the physical anguish was the emotional distress of wondering whether I'd ever walk normally again, much less ski, hike, bike, skate or dance—all the things that defined my sense of self. Despair replaced optimism, and tears became my only expression. It was grief over the loss of the only "I" that I knew. I'd been seeing a physician for medical psychotherapy during this illness. Now when I couldn't walk, she very kindly came to my houseboat for our sessions. One day she sat quietly at my bedside, as I sobbed in hopelessness. The sun seemed to mock me as it created dancing patterns on the ceiling from reflections of the rippling water outside. Softly, she asked, "What happens if you just invite an image?" Immediately, a vision of an androgynous face, smiling slightly, appeared to me and said gently, "Oh, you of little faith, have you forgotten to trust?" It wasn't a reprimand but simply a reminder of another possibility, of what was being asked of me through this crisis and challenge. It was an invitation to make a leap of faith, to trust in something much greater than myself without holding on to an old self-identification. Somehow, my consciousness shifted. I made the leap in that instant. I realized and accepted that whether or not I would regain my previous physical ability was simply beyond my control. I could want that outcome with every fiber of my being, but I could not will it to happen. A strong-willed, egoic "I" died in that moment, and with that consciousness shifted; tears of despair and deep grieving became tears of joy and trust. My medical psychotherapist then quoted a few lines from a poem: "I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things. I am among all people, most richly blessed." To my great surprise, the entire poem was enclosed in a card from a cousin 2 weeks later. It was called "Anonymous," but I took the liberty of changing its title to "Terrible Gifts and Savage Grace."

After the month in bed, I graduated to a wheelchair for 2 months and finally to walking with a cane for a year. Other treatments and hospitalizations followed, but my faith and trust in a healing power beyond myself continued to deepen. By the end of the year of allopathic and Eastern treatments, plus my own ongoing explorations with an inner healer, there were no further signs of active cancer. I came to understand that the egoic "I" had to die for something else to be born. On the day I was scheduled for my final chemotherapy treatment, I awoke feeling distressed. I felt compelled to stay home and listen to what was trying to come into consciousness. As I stayed quiet, I began to write effortlessly. To my surprise, what emerged were guidelines that represented the healing process that I underwent the previous year. A couple of years later, these "Guidelines for a Healing Process" became the basis for "Voices of Healing,"

a new nonprofit organization with a mission of "sharing the healing, hope, and possibilities that we come to know personally through conscious exploration of the challenges and opportunities within serious illness." "Story Circles" became the primary means for carrying out that mission. They began in San Francisco in 1995 and since then have spread to other parts of this country, as well as France and the Netherlands. Facilitated without charge by individuals with personal healing experience, they are self-organized and are open to people with all types of life-challenging illness and their caregivers.

The Voices of Healing Guidelines refer to an inner healer, which I believe speaks to the innate and universal inner wisdom that we know as consciousness. The process of working with the guidelines brings us to a new integrity with the

evolving high self-to an integration of psyche, soma, spirit, and soul. Just as Alcoholics Anonymous brought new possibilities for recovery to alcoholics, I believe that Voices of Healing brings unrecognized possibilities to people facing serious illness by making consciousness central to the healing process. Not only is new healing possible individually, but also, perhaps even more important, consciousness itself expands collectively. Last year three of us from Voices of Healing who have had Stage III or IV metastatic cancer swam, ran, or biked in the Tiburon Triathlon. Our intent was not to break any race records but to hearten others by exemplifying the possibilities beyond serious illness. I was the oldest and slowest female swimmer that day. As I came out of the bay, I heard that still small inner voice clearly; it said, "Some of us are gifted with a return to health after serious illness so that others may be seeded with healing possibilities that they have not yet experienced and may not know as possible, for this is the way we evolve beyond the limitations of our present beliefs and fears." Voices of Healing has been referred to as a social change movement similar to the early women's consciousness groups. There is great power in the Story Circles, as people talk about their healing experiences with allopathic medicine, Eastern practices, and indigenous traditions. Sharing these personal experiences helps to shape and reshape cultural consciousness and healing. The Voices of Healing video beautifully illustrates such transformation and the paradoxical Chinese concept, "Crisis is opportunity riding on dangerous winds." We see a man who had been told he wouldn't live for 3 months preparing to run in a marathon 13 years later. He tells us that he decided "to live like a samurai-as if each day were my last." We see another participant, a physician facing his own severe chronic pain. He tells us that explorations of who he is and why he is here brought him to new tolerance of his pain, as well as to "greater joy and peace of mind than anything else in life." His patients now call him a "healer" as well as a doctor. Finally, we hear a woman who is preparing for her death from long-term breast cancer say joyfully, "I'm healthier now than I've ever been in my life!" Our understanding of "health" expands as we hear the deep truth she expresses. Through these stories we hear how consciousness has transformed for each of these people, and we understand the profound, paradoxical truth that healing is much larger-and different from simply living beyond illness.

Wouldn't it be ironic and terribly sad if cancer and other illnesses that we commonly perceive as "enemies" were really remarkable opportunities for manifesting extraordinary human capacities? I know through experience that serious illness offers us the opportunity-indeed, asks us both individually and collectively-to live and die within the integrity of the unfolding entelechy of our high selves. More immediately, Voices of Healing, its Story Circles, and its web site provide a means for people to share their personal experiences of the healing process in a spirit of love and service. I am humbly grateful and awed simply to be alive and to have been cancer free for more than 13 years. The changes so badly needed in our health-care system itself are not my primary concern today. But perhaps the education of our medical practitioners needs to be in accord with a gathering stream of personal experiences and stories of the healing process, not the other way around. I hope and pray for the day when the pivotal role of consciousness itself is recognized as central to our natural, innate, and universal potential for healing and for living life fully. Nothing more, but nothing less either.

Fifteen years have passed since I was first diagnosed with cancer. Currently, I am writing a book about the healing process. A couple years ago I turned 70; on that day, tears of gratitude and joy ran down my face as I skied the mountains of Utah with my children and grandchildren-remembering the day the water moved, the sun danced, and I could do neither- until consciousness shifted and healing happened.

End Notes:

Terrible Gifts and Savage Grace

I asked God for strength,
that I might achieve. . .
I was made weak,
that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health,
that I might do greater things. . .
I was given infirmity,
that I might do better things.
I asked for riches,
that I might be happy. . .
I was given poverty,
that I might be wise.
I asked for power,
that I might have the praise of men. . .
I was given weakness,
that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things,
that I might enjoy life. . .

I was given life,
that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for,
but everything I had hoped for.
Almost despite myself,
my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all people, most richly blessed.
Anonymous