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REMARKABLE RECOVERIES: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

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The destiny of man is not measured by material computation. When great forces are on the move in the world, we learn we are spirits - not animals.

- Winston Churchill

This issue of IJHC features reports of several people who have had remarkable recoveries from varieties of physical problems. This aspect of wholistic healing that is grossly neglected by conventional medicine will hopefully become a regular feature in IJHC.

This subject has held great interest for me for decades. My initial focus was on remarkable recoveries produced by spiritual healing. These often have been labeled 'miraculous' healings in the popular press. Healers with strong gifts of healing may find them occurring too regularly in their practices to label them as such (Benor, 2001).

I do not believe in miracles, at least not defined in the conventional religious manner as divine disruptions of the natural order. But if a miracle is defined as an infinitely improbable phenomenon, then our existence is a miracle, which no theory natural or supernatural will ever explain.

- John Horgan

I have also been interested in the vast potentials of human capacity for self-healing. To some extent, all healings, by any modality, must involve activation of self-healing potentials and abilities. I was excited to learn of an annotated bibliography of three thousand reports of spontaneous remissions, gathered from 3500 references in over 800 journals in 20 different languages (O'Regan and Hirshberg, 1993). I found this collection utterly fascinating. There were tantalizing medical notes on remarkable spontaneous recoveries from cancers, skeletal deformities, hormonal abnormalities, and hundreds of other types of physical problems. However, these reports almost never included considerations of psychological or spiritual issues that might have contributed to the unusual remissions from diseases that in many cases were expected to be fatal; and conversely, reports from psychological literature rarely included details of associated physical problems.

The situation has actually worsened in the last fifteen years since the publication of this bibliography. When I trained in medicine in the 1960s at the University of California, Los Angeles, we had a department of psychosomatic medicine. When people had complex physical

symptoms combined with psychological symptoms, or when physical symptoms could not be explained by physical or laboratory examinations, a consultation from this department would often uncover stresses and psychological mechanisms that could explain the unusual symptoms and psychotherapy could often relieve the problems.

'Tom,' a 40 year-old married factory worker, was admitted for evaluation of weakness in his right hand and arm that were making it impossible for him to perform at his usual level of competence on the assembly line. Neurological examination was normal, with the exception of weakness in the muscles of his right hand, arm and shoulder. Psychosomatic consultation revealed that the weakness in this very meek and mild-mannered man had started following an uncharacteristic, major argument with his wife. In short, this was found to be a psychological weakness produced by Tom's unconscious mind to help him control the angry impulses he had been feeling, with a wish to strike his wife, and also to punish himself for having had this impulse. Brief psychotherapy resolved the symptoms.

There are no longer any departments of psychosomatic medicine in the United States, although the subject is included in medical school curricula under headings such as *behavioral medicine* or *bio-psycho-social medicine* (Waldstein, et al. 2001). This is a measure of how much further we have distanced ourselves from awareness of the mind-body connection. A Google search turns up only references to European and Japanese listings.

Wholistic healing addresses body, emotions, mind, relationships (with each other and the environment) and spirit. Each and every one of these levels of our being can contribute to health and illness. Research in wholistic healing confirms that addressing these other levels can relieve many illnesses (Benor 2004; 2006). Remarkable recoveries can add much to our understanding about the relationships of each of these factors to our physical health as well as to every level of our being (Benor, internet reference).

Many factors have contributed to this over-focus on the physical body. The advances in high tech diagnostic procedures, and the enormous investments in pharmaceutical and surgical interventions have led to increasingly mechanistic approaches to assessing and treating illnesses. We have been sold on the 'quick fix' that chemical interventions can offer. Our successes in these areas have led to several generations of distancing ourselves from the other aspects of our being. This is particularly true in the light of increasing medical specialization in various parts of the physical body – to the increasing neglect of the person who inhabits that body. Few doctors have more than a cursory training in psychological issues contributing to health and illness. Even psychiatrists today are trained in programs where psychotherapy is an elective, and the trainees see little relevance of this subject to their prescription of psychoactive medications.

Subspecialization is another factor in the distancing of awareness of factors beyond the body that contribute to illnesses. Over several centuries, Western society has assigned care of the body to physicians; of the spirit to clergy; and in the past century, of the emotions, mind, and relationships to various subspecializing therapists in the mental health fields. Each specialty tends to work in varying degrees of isolation from the others. Within this system, careseekers have become used to thinking of physical problems as being only physical in their roots and causes.

My work with people who have physical pains of all sorts has taught me that the average person can reconnect with psychological and spiritual issues contributing to their symptoms. This is true even when the pains have been present for decades and even when the pains have clear

physical causes (Benor, 2008). The IJHC will also be featuring more reports from people who describe their own journeys from little awareness beyond their physical problems to releases of their symptoms through psychological interventions.

People who have remarkable recoveries often credit the spiritual dimensions of their awareness and beingness for providing strength, inspiration and transformative energies. In all my years of searching, I found only one publication that documents the medical evidence for remarkable recoveries through spiritual healing (of Kathryn Kuhlman). This is by a physician, Richard Casdorff (1976), documenting the evidence of amazing physical changes with medical examinations, laboratory tests and x-rays.

In an article in this issue of IJHC I share a brief overview on psychological processes that have led us to distance ourselves from awareness of some of the factors and issues beyond the physical body that may contribute to physical illness. In distancing ourselves from those aspects of ourselves that are not physical, we have reached a place where mind, emotions, relationships and spirit are increasingly unfamiliar to many of us – especially as they relate to physical symptoms and illnesses. Anything that is unfamiliar is easy to reject, especially if it were to require us to re-evaluate our basic beliefs about ourselves. For many people it is far easier to distance themselves from that which is unknown, and therefore beyond their understanding, than it is to explore a change of their beliefs and explanations for the world – within and outside themselves. I believe it is this distancing of oneself from the unknown that has led us to reject and ignore the challenges that remarkable recoveries pose to our understanding of mechanisms of health and illness.

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