

September, 2006

Volume 6, No. 3

FINDING THE COURAGE TO HEAL

Steven E. Hodes, MD

*It takes courage to admit our imperfections and our need for healing.
 - S.E.Hodes*

According to the way I was taught to practice medicine, treating and curing the patient was considered the ultimate goal. The sick individual was viewed as a machine in need of repair. Making a diagnosis using advanced technology, then prescribing the appropriate pharmaceuticals or invasive procedures were commonplace practices. Healing was a concept considered quaint if not poetic. And certainly, the notion of courage was never even considered. And why would it? Only when the patient is understood to be a multi-dimensional, complex amalgam of mind, body and spirit could such a concept of courage make any sense.

In the real lives of patients, it requires that physicians acknowledge that healing is always a mutual experience. A true healing encounter requires an act of mutual courage: each must be willing to dissolve the barriers that exist between individuals. Fear must be allowed to dissipate if true healing is to occur.

As a physician, a gastroenterologist with over 25 years of clinical experience of caring for patients, I have pondered the difference between how I was trained to practice my profession and my present understanding of healing. As a product of the traditional approach to medicine, I viewed the patient as a machine who was suffering from some undisclosed mechanical failure. Why else would they be sitting before me in my office? Certainly I was aware that anxiety or depression could exacerbate the symptoms of disease, but the extent to which the mind, body and spirit were united was unappreciated.

Gradually, as my own understanding evolved, it became crystal clear that all three elements co-existed, interacted and inter-related in a dynamic flow. Since the term 'healing' referred to 'making whole,' all aspects of the patient needed to be understood and addressed if true healing was to be accomplished.

Awareness of self is the first step

I also came to appreciate, to a far greater degree than I could have imagined, that my role as physician was to facilitate the body's intrinsic and phenomenal ability to heal itself. But before I could educate my patients I needed a dose of awareness myself. I began to ponder the nature of the human body: an amalgam of cells, organs and systems which flow and interact in a dynamic dance of unimaginable complexity and beauty. This realization arrived in my consciousness as an epiphany. I recalled the molecular pathways that I studied in medical school which described how the body recognized injury or invasion and then addressed these occurrences with remarkable success. Although these mechanisms

were not infallible, the truth that no one alive today could possibly reach adulthood without them was a powerful affirmation of their miraculous nature. My previous mechanical knowledge gave way to a deep gratitude for the miraculous nature of the body to heal itself and a deep appreciation for the metaphysical aspects of this phenomenon.

Gradually, I began educating my patients to this truth. As products of our culture's mechanistic paradigm of disease, they would enter my examining room as if they were bringing their car to a mechanic. Whether expressed explicitly or not, the attitude was, "Fix me, you're the doctor." I had to help transform that attitude and challenge them to participate in their own healing.

For some it became a rather frightening concept to ponder. It meant taking charge of their own mental/emotional/ spiritual state of being. It meant facing their own demons. It required the courage to see that their symptoms might be the tip of a deeper iceberg of discontent and disequilibrium; that their symptoms might very well reflect a deeper dis-ease of mind and spirit; that they would have to listen to what their body was telling them and come to terms with feelings and thoughts that had been previously denied or even repressed below conscious awareness.

Understanding the nature of healing

Before one can understand the nature of healing one must become aware of the spiritual nature of human beings. While for some patients this means faith, religion and a belief in God, for others it may simply be a sense of connection to the 'Universe' or to 'Spirit.'

The nature of the universal human attraction to religion and spirituality cannot be analyzed here. Suffice it to note that it cannot be ignored in any discussion of healing. There are great insights to be found in all the world's traditions as well as many schools of metaphysics. Oftentimes, it is the search for relief from illness or imbalance that leads people to find their true spiritual path.

Protestant theologian Paul Tillich wrote about the courage all of us need in the face of life's enormous existential challenges. Fear is the primal human state of being. We experience it as children as we confront the cold reality that we are unique, vulnerable and sensitive beings. Thereafter, our lives seem to require a constant struggle against the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.' We become defensive and over-reactive to] real and perceived threats from others. We fear intimacy and the expression of love for this exposes our inner vulnerability. For many this becomes an attitude that ranges from sadness and depression to hostility and outrage.

Such feelings form the substrate for disease itself. There is ample scientific evidence that peptide receptors reside on the vast majority of our body's cell membranes. These 'molecules of emotion,' as psychoneuroimmunologist Candace Pert (1997) reveals, explain how our feelings impact upon all aspects of cellular and immunologic function. Healing often requires the courage to face that perception and the courage to choose to transform that feeling/attitude/belief into a mechanism for growth and equanimity. How we cope with these ever-present challenges helps determine the quality of our lives.

There are powerful strategies which can unquestionably help us in our own internal struggles. We need to learn, and really 'get,' that our minds do create our own realities and that courage is needed to face the challenge, to own up to that truth. It is not easy, but ultimately it is the only path to internal peace and, yes, healing.

History

I began my metaphysical quest during my undergraduate years as a religious studies major. How I managed to abruptly shift gears and plunge into the pre-medical track is still a bit of a

mystery even to me. When asked why an avowed agnostic/atheist would devote such time and effort in metaphysical study, my response was: because the religious impulse and its ramifications on human history and behavior are ubiquitous and, therefore, fascinating.

My ninety-degree turn into the womb of science should have put to rest any consideration of a spiritual exploration. Yet as I approached and passed my fiftieth birthday, something interrupted my straight-line atheism – my exploration of Kabbalah.

It was not the study of this material itself which began to chip away at my shell of disbelief. But coincident with this undertaking I began to meet individuals of a sober and indisputably honest nature who began to reveal to me highly personal experiences of a paranormal and spiritual nature. There was something so compelling and convincing in these personal anecdotes that I could not help but leap into examining them.

One quite dramatic example occurred after 9/11. I was discussing my interest in spiritual and paranormal experiences with several nurses. Afterwards, one of them, Marie pulled me aside. She revealed a fantastically realistic dream she had had of her Uncle Johnny, a Port Authority worker who had died during the 9/11 attack. They had been particularly close throughout her life. In the dream, Johnny is present at one of their family's typical Sunday Italian dinners. He appeared happy and looked healthy. He expressed his love for her. What was particularly strange was his attire. In life, Johnny, had worn Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren type shirts exclusively. In her dream he was wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt, black with yellow, orange and pink flowers. The next morning she discussed the dream with her father, Johnny's brother. He started to choke up. He explained that the day before, they had found Johnny's car. Only her father knew that he was planning a trip to Hawaii. That exact shirt was in the trunk.

Another of my long-standing patients, Pat, had lost her husband Mike a few years before. I would ask her whether she ever felt his presence, and she several times acknowledged that she had. On one visit, however, she revealed something much more interesting. "I've been waiting to tell you this one," she said. "My daughter and I were driving in the car and we were speaking about Mike. I started to feel my crucifix get warm and said out loud, 'Mike, cut it out!' You remember how he liked to kid me. When I got out of the car my daughter noted that there was a red mark on my chest, under the cross. It slowly faded.

This diversion from my orthodox practice of gastroenterology seemed, at first, to offer me some amusing, curious pieces of unexplained and unexplainable reality. It stimulated me, however, to explore vast quantities of metaphysical, mystical and spiritual literature. I recognized in the mystical traditions of all religions, also known as the 'perennial philosophies,' a common thread. I also found kindred spirits in the rational explorations of William James MD, Lawrence LeShan PhD, Ian Stevenson MD, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, MD, Raymond Moody PhD, MD, Brian Weiss MD and many others. (See some of my favorite references, below.) It was not their 'doctorates' that so impressed me as their rational attempts at elucidating metaphysical reality from their own scientific skepticism.

At the same time, I began to revisit contemporary science: quantum theory, molecular biology, origin of life, mind and consciousness studies. To my amazement, I began to see correspondences between all my studies. Science was not capable of debunking what I had 'heard on the street.' Rather, science was deeply mired in its own metaphysical conundrum. It was unable to put back the pieces of the mechanical universe it had so vigorously dissected, nor to consider modifying, much less relinquishing the mechanistic theories it had developed over the past four hundred years. Yet I could clearly sense that the presence of spirit was hovering over the waters of humanity's exploration of the unknown.

My metaphysical quest began to turn, as if by its own will, back to my practice of medicine. Healing became the ultimate reason for my own journey and I began to see myself as a healer and not as a physician. For the first time I came to understand what [w]holism meant.

Putting it into practice

I began to see each patient who sat in my examining room as a complex being with unique physical, psychological and spiritual needs. This epiphany was almost overwhelming at first. How could I possibly address all aspects of this individual? How could I justify my claim to be a healer?

I found, however, that I did not need to be a perfect seer. My efforts to engage their mind and spirit seemed to open up more opportunities for their own healing. I soon realized that it was not what I was doing that was helping them, it was my being there, willing to share my own knowledge, participating in a process of healing rather than dictating to them from a position of absolute authority or wisdom.

Patient reports

A.N.

I have suffered with ulcerative colitis for more than 15 years. It's a chronic, often debilitating inflammatory disease of the colon and no one really knows the cause. From the medical prospective, the disease remains a mystery.

My situation had been in remission for 10 years and I had almost come to believe it was 'cured' when, boom, right in the middle of a busy time, it started acting up. There were some personal upsets going on in my life at that time, but I never even thought that they could affect my health until my doctor showed me how emotional turmoil can exacerbate my condition.

The flair-up devastated me. It is a horrible experience to feel so out of control, (with frequent diarrhea). I see myself as such a high-powered, in-control kind of woman. It affected my work and my social life. I blamed myself for letting it get so bad.

When I saw Dr. Steve he asked A LOT of questions about the extent and severity of my symptoms. He kind of shocked me when he also asked about any personal stress factors. I felt defensive. I even denied there was anything stressing me.

He followed all the medical protocol ordered blood tests, scheduled a colonoscopy to assess the extent of my condition and prescribe oral anti-inflammatory medication. But when I returned to his office and did not seem to be responding to the therapy, he began to dive in a little deeper with his questions.

He told me that many of the conditions he treats have an enormous mind/body/spirit aspect which cannot be ignored and urged me to at least be honest with myself about any emotional turmoil going on in my life at the time.

His reassurance helped me realize that in many ways I felt my world was crashing in on me. I had recently broken-up from a long-term relationship with a man I had truly hoped to marry. And my widowed mother was in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease. On top of

it all, I desperately wanted to fulfill my career ambitions and perform my job well. I was so afraid my illness would ruin my career.

Dr. Steve's approach was to support me in verbalizing and naming my fears and challenges, putting them out on the table so that I could confront them openly. I really looked deeply into my soul, into what was disturbing me. I also realized that my web searching was making me crazy as well. I read about the association between ulcerative colitis and colon cancer and began to believe that I must have developed it.

My father had died of colon cancer. So underneath all the other issues was my fear of dying. I was having a pity party. I had come so far and now I was dying.

Dr. Steve was able to explain to me that although there was an association with cancer, my father's type was not related to colitis and that the incidence of colitis associated cancer could be reduced with treatment. He showed me ways that all these emotional situations were linked to my body's reaction with an exacerbation of my ulcerative colitis and how my worrying about it only worsened the vicious cycle.

I think one of the most amazing things he did for me was acknowledge that I was a woman who prided herself in controlling her life and her reactions to life. And that at times it takes more courage to admit that you need help, that you are not invincible.

Over time, with medication and reflection, I made terrific progress and I realized that venting and speaking the truth was very much a part of my healing. I became super conscious of my own multiple stress factors, began keeping a food diary, and followed the doctor's order to try things like stress reduction – including meditation, Yoga, aerobic exercise and journal writing.

I stopped blaming myself for being 'weak' and got used to embracing my humanity. Over time I lightened up the stress in my life and got closer to balance. I still have occasional flare-ups but I have been given an array of coping skills and helpful ways to release stress. I have come to appreciate that healing is a process of putting all aspects of myself into some kind of balance and harmony. Dr. Hodes helped me come to that realization.

S.R.

I am 66 years old and was born in Bombay, India. I came to see Dr. Hodes because I was afraid that I had colon cancer. I have been losing weight, have much diarrhea and some rectal bleeding. I kept putting off having a colonoscopy because of so many stresses in my life. My wife died one year ago of breast cancer. I had just retired as an engineer from AT&T and we were about to enjoy our lives.

Since her death I have been to many doctors. I have had chest pains, palpitations, headaches, tingling in my fingers. My cardiologist and neurologist have found nothing. I think they don't believe me at all. That is so frustrating because I am a strong person who can take a lot of stress.

Dr. Hodes listened to my complaints and agreed that I was due for a colonoscopy. He made a point of trying to reassure me that my symptoms did not mean that I had colon cancer. But he could see that I didn't want to wait much longer and arranged for me to

have the procedure the next day. Fortunately everything was OK. But I continued to lose weight, have a poor appetite and not feel well.

When he followed up with me, he asked me about any further stress. I mentioned that my son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren had just announced that they were moving to Florida for a better job opportunity.

Dr. Hodes immediately made a connection for me that I guess I hadn't wanted to think about. I began to tear-up. In our culture, the daughter-in-law takes care of us when we get older. I had also become even closer to my grandchildren after my wife died. He reassured me that everything I was experiencing was real and even understandable. He gave me permission to feel sad and lonely—something I had tried to suppress. He prescribed some medication to relax my intestines but spoke of the connection between the mind, body and spirit. It reminded me of some of the readings I had done on Hindu philosophy in my youth and it all began to make sense to me.

I returned to his office a month later. I felt so much better. I had gained weight, my appetite was back to normal and my bowel movements were fine. I told him that I had spoken to my children about moving to Florida as well. They were delighted to hear this, as were my grandchildren. I guess I had been afraid that they didn't want me to move. They thought that I wanted to stay with the Indian community here. We all laughed about the misunderstanding.

I felt so much better. Even though I have always been a man of science and believed in rationality, I now understand how powerful our emotional and spiritual life really is.

C.H.

I heard about Dr. Hodes from one of my best friends who took his class on metaphysics at our county college. She felt he could really help me. I had swallowing difficulties and had lost weight after my son died. He was a freshman in college and had committed suicide. It was a shock to my husband and me in so many ways. He was brilliant, hard-working and a great kid. Everyone loved him and he had been happy before he went away. I think he missed us and his friends and felt overwhelmed at his Ivy League college. He felt that he couldn't compete with the other students. We tried to reassure him, even visit him but never saw the depth of his depression.

After he committed suicide, I went into a horrible tailspin. I thought of suicide myself. I couldn't eat, lost weight. I went to see a gastroenterologist and ENT doctors. They did scopes, ran tests, CT scans etc. It was all my nerves they agreed. Still, I wasn't getting any better. I was filled with guilt.

I went to see Dr. Hodes and he reviewed all my tests. He agreed that I didn't need any more which greatly relieved me. He began to speak about his readings, teachings, and discussions with individuals he had met regarding issues of life after death, after-death communications, karma, reincarnation.

I confided in him that I feared my son was in limbo and heading for hell because he took his own life. I described realistic dreams in which my son seemed so sad and seemed to be reaching out to me. I tried to comfort him in these dreams but we always seemed to be pulling away from each other. I felt guilty about not seeing the signs of his depression. I

shared with Dr. Hodes that my marriage was falling apart, that I could not even pay attention to my other children's pain. I admitted that there were times when I wanted to kill myself.

He asked if I felt that way now and I said no. He proceeded to speak about his opinions based not on religious belief or even faith but from his work on these issues. He said that in his readings, although suicide is never in anyone's life contract, the soul does not go to hell but rather is supported and assisted in healing after death. The person who commits suicide faces the reality that they did not escape from their pain and they see the pain they inflicted on those they loved and who loved them.

He also recommended certain readings from medium George Anderson who was also a devout Catholic but who recognized that reincarnation was a spiritual truth. Dr. Hodes allowed me to reinterpret my dreams of my son. He was not in distress for himself, but was worried about my reaction and guilt. He wanted to connect with me and tried to do so through dreams but my own pain was blocking this effort.

Dr. Hodes even recommended that I see a local medium. I did and the results were amazing. I realized that my son was going to be OK, that he was always with me and that I would be with him when my time was up. Until then I had 'work' to do here – possibly in helping other parents with their bereavement issues.

Although I still feel the pain of his loss, I am getting better. My swallowing issues are less frequent. My relationship with my husband and my other children has improved. I am no longer depressed and have a better outlook on my life.

My personal transformation through healing

Healing became a mutually beneficial encounter. Although physicians are trained to remain objective and dispassionate in their patient encounters, I came to realize that the opposite was more effective. The more I allowed myself to become empathic, the more quickly the patient responded to my treatment. The more I opened myself to the healing encounter, the more I learned -- and the more I healed as well.

There was a long period of time in which the profound changes in the practice of medicine (HMO and government cutbacks, malpractice premium rises, red-tape issues) were slowly but inexorably affecting my attitude towards the profession and unwittingly also influencing my approach to my patients. I found that my sessions with them were exhausting me physically and emotionally. I found it difficult to listen to their complaints and was unaware of how my unrecognized anger at the system might be impacting my openness to their problems. But as my metaphysical awareness slowly transformed me, I began to understand that my role in the healing process was a spiritual gift to me. I began to see my patients as honored participants in this process. Without their appearing in my office, I could not realize my own spiritual growth. As my heart softened to their suffering, I became aware that my own energy levels increased. The more I approached their problems from the perspective of mind and spirit as well as body, the more I was able to dissociate my frustration with the system from my role as facilitator for their healing process. As I slowly began to open myself to the power of my role in the healing process, my own joy and satisfaction increased immeasurably.

In my practice, I realized that mind/body/spirit could no longer be separated. Each needed to be addressed in order to accomplish the role that humans were here to do — help each other overcome fear through the connecting power of love — to heal one another.

What had been my profession alone now became much more. Healing was not only for those designated by society to do so — it became each soul's desire. How did I validate this for myself? Simply put, when I would attempt to truly reach out to another being I felt a joy that cannot be put in words. It made terms like compassion, ecology, kindness, tolerance, and love seem almost trivial.

Healing became more than an occupation. It became my attitude, a perspective, my underlying paradigm for living.

References

- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Modern Library 1999.
 LeShan, Lawrence. *The Medium, The Mystic and the Physicist*, New York: Helio Press 2003.
 Stevenson, Ian. *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*, Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia 1987.
 Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Life After Death*, Berkeley, CA: Berkley Press 1991.
 Moody, Raymond. *Life After Life*, New York: Bantam 1975.
 Pert, Candace B. *Molecules Of Emotion*, New York: Schribner 1997.
 Weiss, Brian. *Many Lives, Many Masters* New York: Fireside 1988.

© **Steven E. Hodes, MD., 2006**

Steven E. Hodes, MD is a board certified gastroenterologist with over 25 years private practice based in Edison and Old Bridge New Jersey. He also has a degree in Religious Studies and teaches Contemporary Metaphysics at Brookdale College as well as lecturing and writing on Kabbalah and Healing, the Jewish View of Afterlife and on Near-Death Experience. Visit him at his daily Blog, Physician to Meta-Physician at www.meta-md.com

TERMS OF USE

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading.

We encourage you to share this article with friends and colleagues.

The International Journal of Healing and Caring – On Line

P.O. Box 502, Medford, NJ 08055

Phone (866) 823-4214 (609) 714-1885

Email: center@ijhc.org Website: <http://www.ijhc.org>

Copyright © 2006 IJHC. All rights reserved.