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A MONTH-LONG STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS FOR A 68-YEAR-OLD WIDOWER COPING WITH CANCER

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative single case study explores the impact of a month-long program of holistic interventions, including self-massage, toning, meditation, painting, creative writing, dreamwork, visualization and prayer, for a 68-year-old widower with cancer. Other elements included semi-structured interviews and viewing of videos on psychic awareness, life after death and family systems therapy.

The research question was whether holistic practices would help the participant manage the challenges of his illness, clarify and deal with any unresolved issues, and envision new paths to self-actualization.

The participant responded positively and stated that he was interested in continuing some of the practices – especially toning, creative writing and meditation – in the future. A significant finding was that the use of different reference points helped reveal key elements in the participant's life, primarily supporting work with unresolved issues, and creating a memoir for family members. In addition, the research design provided structure and a sense of proactivity for both participant and caregiver.

OVERVIEW

This case study report covers a 4-week period of time in the life of a 68-year-old widower dealing with an aggressive form of non-Hodgkins lymphoma. In this study, he is called *Nathan*. At the time of the study, he had had cancer for 5 years and his disease was in remission for 3 months following a second course of chemotherapy. A week after the study was nearly concluded, his cancer returned.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While the causes of cancer remain unknown, this study considers the possibility of the influence of psychological factors, taking into consideration the research linking negative emotions and their effect on the immune system (Pert, et al, 1998). The primary interest in considering this question is to offer support for a holistic approach in dealing with the disease.

Certain kinds of cancer have been specifically linked with emotional states such as loneliness and depression (Achte, 1971; Kissen, 1967; Penninx et al, 1998; Schmale & Iker, 1971). Other studies reinforce the belief that one population particularly vulnerable to illness or early death is the bereaved (Bowling, 1994; Creed, 1985; Fredrick, 1977, Martikainen, 1996; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1983). Men handle the stress of bereavement more poorly than women (Brabert et al, 1992; Bennett, 1998; Doka & Martin, 1998; Gilbar & Dagan, 1995; Jacobs, 1977; Wolfelt, 1990). Additional stressful life changes such as retirement, change in body image, change in residence, and loss of social support due to the deaths of friends and family members often leads to depression in the elderly (Hendrickson, 2001), and can cause illness, even in healthy older adults (Lutgendorf et al, 2001).

By contrast, cultivation of positive emotions through love (Siegel, 1986), laughter (Berk et al., 1989; Cousins, 1979), prayer (Byrd, 1988, Dossey, 1993; Rosch, 2001), social support (Classen et al, 2001; Spiegel et al, 1994), spirituality and religion (Cole, 1999; Horrigan & Lukoff, 2000); and creative self-expression (Dacey et al, 1998; Dossey, 2000) can be important factors in stimulating and strengthening the body's healing response, both in cases of cancer and in other life-threatening situations. Stress-reduction through meditation (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992), and through exercise (Ardies, 2002), has also been beneficial.

In their discussion of systems theory and personal creativity, Montuori et al (2003, p. 7) point to Barron's 1960s research indicating that ego-strength (an ego that is "capable of becoming disorganized and then re-organized without falling apart"), is a factor in recovering from illness. This research suggests to me that healing protocols should directed towards helping the patient achieve "systemic coherence" (Montuori et al, 2003), through discovering and addressing those issues that contribute to disequilibrium and the inability to engage fully with life.

The model I created for my study attempted to provide Nathan with numerous opportunities for enhancing physical wellbeing, relieving stress, discovering and making peace with unresolved issues in the past, cultivating a positive outlook, and affirming inner strength. Sources for this model included in particular the work of Taylor (2001) and Klinghardt (1998), as well as the family systems therapy of Hellinger (2001), the personal mythology and dreamwork of Feinstein and Krippner (1997), and writings on creativity (May, 1975).

I focused my approach as follows:

1. Physical body: including the material body as well as the "energy body" as proposed by Klinghardt (1998);

2. Psychology: including the mental, emotional and social aspects of the human being. Personal creativity is the major force that creates identity and meaning (May, 1975). Issues of choice and behavior are also on this level.

3. Spirituality: including the unconscious, mythic and transpersonal aspects of the human being. Also in this category are relationship to ancestral identity, the dead that have gone before, and the meaning of death (Hellinger, 2001).

RESEARCH DESIGN

I chose a single case study design, suited as a method for investigating and generating findings in the complex, unorganized field of holistic healing, which thus far has been primarily validated through anecdotal evidence (Lukoff et al, 1998).

The participant

Nathan is a 68-year-old wealthy Jewish heterosexual widower. We became casually acquainted through his wife "Mary," whom I knew as a friend and who died in 1996. Nathan contacted me for support in the fall of 2002, so that he would not be living alone during his chemotherapy treatment. Four months later, he became interested in my studies in bereavement and holistic healing and offered to be a participant for my thesis. He was given a comprehensive overview of the scope of the study and signed a consent form, which was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco, California.

Instruments

There were three semi-structured interviews, which I designed to create a context for Nathan's reactions to the intervention part of the study. These were audio taped, transcribed and checked with Nathan for accuracy. They included:

1. A comprehensive interview exploring perceived strengths and challenges in relation to physical self and environment, mental/emotional self, and relationship to spirituality or traditional religious beliefs;
2. A 1/2-hour interview designed to evaluate experiences of the different interventions. This was limited in scope because Nathan was hospitalized at the time;
3. A review of the first interview to check for revisions and inaccuracies. Due to the return of Nathan's cancer; it was not conducted.

There were also three 15-minute reviews at the end of each week.

Interventions

Nathan was invited to participate in a series of holistic healing practices on a daily or weekly basis as follows:

Physical body and "energy body":

1. A daily whole body rubdown, performed on himself when waking – two to three minutes daily over 23 days
2. Vocal toning (I participated) – five minutes daily over 23 days

3. Meditation (I participated) – five to ten minutes daily over 23 days
4. Fifteen to thirty minutes of wet-on-wet meditative watercolor – 1/2 hour or more over 2 days.

Psychology

1. Visualization exercise from Feinstein and Krippner (1997, pp. 28-31) work in personal mythology - one hour for 1 day
2. Creative writing exercises to enhance self-awareness – half an hour for 2 days
3. Painting and writing using symbology from dreams to facilitate self-expression – half an hour for 6 days
4. An empowerment visualization to use in case of emotional upset – half an hour for 1 day
5. Viewing and discussion of Hellinger (2002) video about relationships and sense of self.

Spirituality

1. Daily practice (after meditation) in taking a moment to center himself and experience gratitude (giving blessing out of a sense of heightened well-being), followed by a few moments of being open to receive blessings from an unnamed source of power – five minutes for 23 days;

Nathan also explored his dreams in the following exercise, based on the work of Feinstein and Krippner (1997, pp. 71-73):

2. Nightly dreamwork exercise - five minutes over 12 days.
3. Viewing and discussion of the Sheldrake (1996) video about psychic interconnection – 1 hour;
4. Viewing and discussion of excerpts of Home Box Office video “Life Afterlife” (1999) concerning the question of life after death – 1 hour;
5. Viewing and discussion of excerpts of the Hellinger (2000) video concerning life and death – 1 hour;
6. Viewing and discussion of excerpts of Hellinger (2002) video concerning relationships – 1 hour.

Total time involved for this study was designed to be approximately 40 hours. It ended up lasting about 35 hours.

Data collection and analysis

Nearly 100 pages of transcript were collected from the interviews, reviews and discussions. Nathan also created seven works of creative writing and 11 paintings. I kept a daily journal.

The first interview was condensed into the three general themes: physical, psychological/ social, and spiritual. Further analysis of the content, however, showed that there were cross-references from one category to another. I therefore created the following subgroups: perception of physical body and needs in environment; perceived mental capacity; perceived emotional capacity; family background and parental support; educational experiences; career choices and identity; social,

family, and romantic relationships; creativity and self-expression; regrets; the impact of the illness; spiritual beliefs, and questions of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment.

Additional analysis of the different subgroups was based on looking for links between the different areas, in order to see if there were any underlying patterns, particularly in areas where there were unresolved issues that might be positively affected by the interventions. For example, Nathan stated that he had a need for a spacious living environment; this was later reflected in another statement about a need for independence and freedom.

With this interview as a basis, the different interventions were also analyzed in terms of how they related to the key issues. For example, the issue of freedom showed up again in one painting Nathan did that had a bird shape in it, and also in a dream about flying.

Ethics and personal bias

It seems important to note the special qualifications and potential biases brought to this project. I lost my spouse to melanoma cancer three years before the death of Nathan's wife, and my mother to cervical cancer three years ago. I have been researching bereavement and holistic healing since 1994, have worked as a hospice volunteer in the bereavement program, and recently became certified in the phenomenological family systems therapy of the German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger (Hellinger, 2001). Part of my research included exposing Nathan to this approach through viewing of excerpts from two videocassette recordings of Hellinger's training workshops.

Because I am not a professional health caregiver or psychologist, I primarily chose the sorts of activities that the average person can be exposed to from books, other media and workshops available on the market. I have also had nearly two decades of experience working in communities teaching holistic healing and spirituality and I am familiar with the field from a layperson's perspective. I drew on this background and my own practices to act as a guide, participant, and facilitator of Nathan's process.

RESULTS

Participant profile prior to study

Nathan presents as a sensitive, courteous person with a good sense of humor, who can also be impatient, volatile, defensive and scattered. He became ill with chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) in 1996, six months after his wife "Mary," died of cancer of the mouth. CLL is a serious, but not necessarily lethal blood cancer for which there is no known cure. He was treated with chemotherapy and the disease went into remission.

In late 2002, a blood test revealed that the cancer had returned and the CLL had gone through a "Richter's transformation" (Giles et al, 1998), and became large-cell lymphoma, a much more deadly manifestation of the disease. The prognosis for individuals with this illness has been poor, with survival for many only around 5 months, and conventional chemotherapy has not been very successful. Up to the time of the study, Nathan had worked almost exclusively with one oncologist, a traditional doctor in his late thirties who, according to Nathan, discounts the usefulness of complementary/ alternative cancer therapies and does not even offer the more standard advice about helpful dietary changes or exercise.

The study was initiated at the end of May 2003 and concluded 4 weeks later, at the end of June. I had been a caregiver for Nathan for 7 months and he had sustained another treatment of chemotherapy, which had put his disease again into remission during the study.

The first interview

Perception of physical body and needs in environment

"I've always trusted my body," said Nathan, "I've always felt pretty good in my body, until this illness." He points to his prowess as an award-winning athlete as an important part of his identity, calling his gift "a door-opener, the equivalent of being a beautiful woman."

Even though he knows he tends to be disorganized, Nathan affirmed the importance of having his environment neat and attractive. Above all, he said the perfect environment is "space, ample space," relating this to his "deep need for independence and freedom."

Perceived Mental Capacity

"I've always thought I was smart, could figure things out," said Nathan. He thinks he may have a learning disability, because "I tend to want to get information verbally, not literally. I don't know if that is because of dyslexia." He calls this difficulty of processing written information, "laziness." He feels at his intellectual best "discussing contemporary events."

Perceived Emotional Capacity

Nathan affirmed that he, "like everyone," can feel emotions and expresses them today more than he used to. Alluding to his occasional outbursts of temper, he said, "When I really feel something and I express what I feel, I've never once felt bad. However, "when I have said something stupid in a public environment, then I toss and turn and I feel bad."

Nathan is most comfortable being himself "with two or three people around a table, and also in teaching." Although he said "there are very few environments where I have difficulty expressing myself," he also admitted "there are many environments where "actually I really don't say much, because I'm uncomfortable . . . maybe because I think that no one is terribly interested in what I have to say anyway."

Laughter comes most easily to Nathan when it concerns "mockery of the human condition, because the essence of Jewish humor is self-ridicule." He said, "over the years I've cried mostly when I've anguished about my kids, and obviously loss of Mary. Occasionally when I think about me dying."

Nathan said he has felt love often in life, but thinks, "sometimes it was lust." Today, he defines love more as "companionship, a strong support system, strong friendship. It's to some extent a kind of elegant dependence."

Nathan mentioned more than once in the interview that he has "always had a fear of loneliness."

Compared to a hermit, Nathan said he "needs people," although they usually make the effort to see him:

You see, I don't make phone calls. I don't call people up, [possibly because of] fear of rejection. That's probably the most logical one. Who would want to see me?

Later on, Nathan corrected himself and said he had no problem calling women on the phone:

I guess what I'm saying is that it wasn't terribly important that I saw [my male friends]; it was important that I had someone to have dinner with Saturday night.

Family Background and Support

Nathan spoke of his parents with high regard, and said he had a "very, very lucky childhood."

Later in the interview, Nathan added to the picture:

They weren't paying attention. I was kicked out of schools because I was a difficult kid. I wasn't very good at obeying the rules and that's not a credential, because I think it was about getting attention.

Nathan said his big mistake was his choice of career, made he believes now, to please his father:

I was an engineer in college. . . I had no interest in engineering. I don't know why I did it; it was a mistake. [If I had done it differently], I think probably I might have studied acting [something in the arts]. I was exposed to painting as a kid and I didn't pursue it.

Career and Identity in Work

Nathan said he went into business "because it was the easiest way for me to make a living." I think I'm a B minus, B businessman. I don't know exactly, but I think I could have been A+ in something. What I am [now] is an A+ dilettante."

Relationships

In general, Nathan said that he makes friends easily and is very easy to get along with: "I don't have demands; and I don't think that's good or bad. You don't get up and decide to make demands; it's just how you are."

Nathan spoke of "screwing up" two of his romantic relationships because he did not want any more children. He also said he thinks he missed out on "learning from what the person had to offer" in some of his relationships, and mentioned Mary's gift for foreign languages as a missed learning opportunity.

Nathan said he had "never taken the fidelity part of marriage or in a relationship terribly seriously," and he has been very wary of being manipulated and judged by the women he is with: He thinks need and partnership are really a defense against loneliness, and points to elderly people who die after their partner dies, saying "there's a reason why that happens," and it is about "a silent support system, the strength and girth of which you don't notice until it's gone."

The Impact of the Illness

Nathan said the biggest physical challenge he has ever dealt with has been the cancer, and the worst emotional challenge of the illness was when he was told he was out of remission. He summed up his approach to dealing with these challenges by saying, "Tough it out, it's going to pass. Kind of grasp the optimistic responses around you."

Spirituality

Nathan has not thought about drawing on his Judaism for spiritual strength in a crisis, but considers he might in the future. He expressed ambivalence about prayer; in one part of the interview he said he had not; in another he said he thinks he has, in fact, “mumbled prayers at times,” maybe during the illness.

Nathan expressed an interest in his dreams, believing “they do reflect who you are.” He also described times he felt he could transmit healing power to others. He is curious about the afterlife, “one of the biggest adventures of living.” He is “hard pressed to think that there is nothing afterwards” and sometimes says aloud to Mary “Tell me what it’s like.” He “fully expects to see her somewhere” after he dies.

Regrets

Nathan says he has few regrets because he has tried “not to live a compromised life.” His greatest regrets concern his personal relationships and missed opportunities: “I didn’t put a big value on love that I should have. . . .”

Questions of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment

Nathan said he had always thought there was some meaning and purpose in his life, but could not define it:

That’s why I’m here. I’m here to do something. And I don’t know what that something is. I’ve occasionally said to myself, “Is there a master task, is there a larger task for me to complete before I die?”

THE INTERVENTIONS

Overview of mood during the practices

Despite his willingness to be a subject in my study, Nathan seemed in the beginning to be tense and resistant. This could have been the result of negative experiences in the past with learning new skills, suggested by his comments concerning problems in school. There was also his concern, mentioned in the interview, about being manipulated. While pondering the source of the tension, I remembered a note he wrote for me to read in the early days of my time at his home last winter: “I must be strong and find my own way. I can rely on no one else for this task, Miss Rondie” (1/7/03).

Descriptions and results of the Interventions

The different practices, along with Nathan’s responses to the aforementioned evaluation interview, were as follows:

Four powers exercise

The purpose of this exercise was to ground and center Nathan by affirming his strengths. After choosing words, symbols, images, or colors for his powers, Nathan was to imagine standing in the center of his “ring of power.” He was invited to use this visualization at times when he felt disoriented and off-center. Nathan chose to use words; his four powers were:

I run fast;

I support the underdog;

I teach well;

I debate well.

Nathan’s assessment: When we discussed his positive reaction to this exercise, Nathan said, “It was like going into a closet and closing the door and finding on the wall, photographs.”

Body rub

The purpose of this intervention was to enhance Nathan’s awareness of his body and to stimulate his circulation and promote a sense of wellbeing. It consisted of a 5-minute self-massage, beginning at the top of the head and ending up with the feet, followed by some deep breathing and stretching.

Nathan’s assessment: “I found it a pleasant exercise. But I didn’t feel any different. I might continue.”

Vocal toning

The purpose of this intervention was to expand the chest, introduce vibration into the body, exercise the lungs, and increase the ability to produce and hear overtones in a tone.

Nathan’s assessment: The toning I like. I’ve done it alone since. I think the biggest benefit was that it made my voice stronger and I’ve heard people who sing live longer, so I would continue. At times it did feel like a release of tension.

Meditation

The purpose of this exercise was for stress reduction and to increase awareness of inner resources. In general, Nathan only wanted to meditate about 5 minutes, although near the end of the study, we were sitting for about 7 or 8 minutes.

His review of the practice showed his ambivalence and ways in which the practice touched on some painful issues:

Nathan’s assessment: “I don’t know. I didn’t wildly look forward to it and I didn’t not look forward to it. It’s almost neutral. It’s about emptying yourself of thought. Where it helped me the most was [when I was in the hospital]. It is probably something I would like to pursue.”

When I asked if the practice helped with anxiety, Nathan responded:

No, no. I think it might help me get better. Half the time, Rondi, I don’t know whether I’m afraid of living or dying. I don’t know which it is. But maybe when all is said and done, like before, the problem that I had with anxiety after the chemo and I was in remission, I said, “wait a second, I don’t have a mission.” That of course makes you feel like someone who has no idea how to

wander into the woods and find a path. And I don't like that, and I fear loneliness. I've always feared loneliness. So there are things that I think I should try that I think would be helpful.

Prayer exercise

The purpose of this intervention was to acquaint Nathan with an exercise akin to prayer, enhancing a sense of connection to transpersonal dimensions of experience, but not requiring the naming of a deity or adherence to a specific religion. It was based on a visualization that began with inviting healing energy into your body, as in the concept of feeling the presence of the Divine (Paloma, 1993). This exercise was to be done at night, just before he went to sleep.

Nathan's assessment: "I couldn't wrap my arms around it." At the end of the second week I could see that the exercise was not working for him. I therefore invited him to draw on his memories of doing healing practices with his children, as described in the initial interview. I suggested that he imagine sending healing energy to someone before he went to sleep. He reported later that he visualized sending it to himself and in the assessment said:

It could make some sense to do, almost like a feeling of a great something that would start at the top of my head, pierce my body, and push all of the cancer cells out through my feet.

Creative writing

These exercises were based on the work of the poet Paul Matthews (1994), who writes, "The laws of grammar are an outward manifestation of the laws at work in the human soul, and that same 'Logos' is involved in the shaping of the world around us" (p. 3). Nathan has a history of writing humorous poems, all of which rhyme, so this approach was new to him and he was tense and unsure in the beginning. I hoped that Matthews' writing exercises would stimulate Nathan's imagination and to help him develop a sense of different voices within him: the affirmative, the inquisitive, the enthusiastic, and the determined. There were 7 sessions with this focus; I present two here:

Session III (6/6/03): In this exercise, I asked Nathan to focus on his body and write using a poem using the four voices: statement, question, exclamation, and command (as in Matthews, 1994, pp. 8-11). Nathan ended the exercises with his own verse that summed up how he felt about the subject of his writing:

Creative writing: Focus on body

Statement

My legs are leaden
 I've always trusted my body
 I don't miss my spleen
 It ain't bad not having hair

Question

What is happening inside?
 Why is it happening?
 Where will it go?
 Will my strength return?

Exclamation

Boy, this is a drag!
 Make the best of it!
 Other things open up!
 Life is okay!

Command

Stop complaining
 Start creating
 Use your time
 Appreciate what you have

Free writing

A fear my friend I must confide
 is what perhaps goes on inside
 while my legs are leaden
 where am I heading
 I'll stop complaining
 during years remaining.

Session IV (6/7/03): Writing about a dream.

I asked Nathan to do a 5-minute stream-of-consciousness writing (Matthews, 1994, pp. 70-71) about one of his dreams, then to choose his 10 favorite sentences and to write them with the words "I remember" at the beginning of each sentence (pp. 26-27), while turning the second half of the

sentence into a simile (pp. 45-46). Next, he was to write, "I am" (pp. 55-56) at the beginning of the same sentence while turning the simile into a metaphor (pp. 49-50).

Creative writing: Three approaches to a dream

Exercise 1.

Driving north on Lumber to Scuttlehole, left turn feel good sunny day come to Sag turnpike, take left. Road unrecognizable trees branches covering road. Careful. Road starts twisting. Where am I? Road veers left becomes narrow brook. Road becomes stream. I ride on edge, dangerous. Afraid that I will topple into stream. I ask some girls to help me push bike up incline. They are unable to help. Wonder how I'm getting home. Finally I'm able to move bike. where am I? I think if I travel south I will get to Rte 27. How did I get to the North Shore? I am surprised I am able to move bike but relieved. I feel okay not worried not fearful of being lost.

Exercise 2.

I remember driving north on Lumber to Scuttlehole Road like emerging from an underground tunnel to the sunlight.

I remember the canopy was like a warm quilt on a cold winter morn.

I remember the unrecognizable road was like going to a dinner party and forgetting everyone's name.

I remember the road veering like the staggered path of an inebriated partygoer.

I remember the road became a stream like the leaves of summer turning to Tuscan red.

I remember thinking where am I like a blinded man groping for a telephone receiver.

I remember feeling ok like a weight has evaporated from my shoulders.

I remember traveling south like the migratory sunseekers do in the frosty north.

Exercise 3.

I am emerging from an underground tunnel to the sunlight.

I am a warm quilt on a cold winter morn.

I am a dinner party, forgetting everyone's name.

I am the staggered path of a drunken partygoer.

I am the blinded man groping for a telephone in a strange room.

I am the weight removed from my shoulders.

I am the migratory sunseeker traveling south to seek escape from the frosty north.

Nathan was very pleased with the results of this exercise, and especially liked the third verse. I was fascinated by the way his writing leads one from outer to inner experience, each time becoming deeper and more rich. Nathan commented on "I am the weight removed from my shoulders," saying, "It's like you are your own worst enemy."

Nathan's overall assessment of the creative writing:

It had real benefit. All of the exercises were interesting in one way or another. I like some of the images and the surprise endings like, “I am a dinner party, forgetting everyone’s name.” They were unpredictable, but worked, almost were like double talk. I could build on some of those, write more. The exercises opened doors into a room I’ve never been and I’m curious to explore the contents of that room, so the benefit is really in the future.

Painting

This exercise had two related goals. The first was to provide Nathan with a relaxing, fun experience and to stimulate his senses with color. The second was to allow him to explore some of his dreams in a rather “dreamy” medium. The exercise was done with a one-inch soft brush on a wet piece of watercolor paper that was laid on a flat surface. The only colors used initially were red, yellow and blue. In later sessions, green, orange and black were added to the palette. The color mixing was done on the wet paper. The exercises were inspired by the watercolor painting approach taught in schools based on the work of the Austrian philosopher/mystic Rudolf Steiner (Alexander, 2000).

Nathan painted 11 paintings over the four weeks; the last one was in acrylics. Of all of the paintings he created, Nathan’s favorite was the first, an experience of the color blue. I believe this exercise worked well because the color limitation reduced the desire to “make something,” and allowed for pure experience. His second favorite painting was of a dream he had of a winding road on which he was lost. I asked him to sit quietly before beginning, to fully review the dream and “not to think!” Then I asked him to begin by painting the emotional content in the dream, and then the details, using wet on wet watercolor and, if desired, watercolor pencils. Nathan became very excited by the different elements in the work and how they related to one another, finding them both threatening and also comforting.

Nathan’s final painting was done in acrylics, a medium with which he was more familiar. I invited him to choose one of his earlier dream paintings and do it over again. He chose the road painting. This time, however, the road became a hill-like form, consisting of many stripes of different colors, at the bottom of the canvas. Above and behind the hill loom large circular forms in different colors, suggesting clouds or balloons. In the center of each circle he painted a black blot, some of which suggest the shapes of birds (See Figure 1).

Nathan was dissatisfied with the results, feeling that the acrylic paint did not flow as easily as the watercolor. When we talked further about this painting, I had the inspiration – based on the writing exercises we had been doing – to ask where he thought the “noun,” “verb” and “adjective” energies were in the painting. He decided that the static aspects were the noun, the gesture of the hill was the verb, and he described the bird shape in the center of one of the round shapes as the adjective and said it could not get out of the circle. When I asked him, therefore, what the sentence for the painting might be, he replied, his voice husky with emotion, “It’s always about freedom for me.”

FIGURE 1: Nathan’s Final Painting



Nathan's Overall Assessment of the Painting Practices:

Yes, there was definitely benefit and it was interesting. I've never tried to paint a dream. It was frustrating also. I don't know why. This one is mixed metaphor; that one is muddy. [As far as working with the unconscious], I actually think doing some of these things may have been the genesis for the frustration in [the painting I have been doing on my own]. There, I'm tracing, in a funny way. This may have made my other work not as satisfying.

I was moved to see how the issue of freedom arose as a result of doing this painting; I also wondered, having read of Siegel's (1986) work with painting and cancer patients, whether the black blots inside the round shapes came from Nathan's intuition that his cancer was returning. In fact, at the end of the study, this was confirmed.

Personal Mythology Visualization Exercise

The purpose of this exercise, done one time only, was to stimulate a sense of how one's ancestry has contributed to one's identity and to discover what, if any, buried assumptions and misperceptions were created by the influences of parents and grandparents that contribute to a negative personal mythology. It was based on the personal mythology work of Feinstein and Krippner (1997, pp. 28-31). After imagining himself in the body and consciousness of his parents and grandparents, Nathan was to focus on his own body and formulate a core statement for his life, based on what he had discovered about his past influences.

He found the exercise very difficult and could not really connect with it. When it came to the core statement of his life, he said, "He lived." I pointed out this statement was past tense. He said he thought he said this because he was summing up, up to this point. He also said that he meant the words to be spoken with emphasis, as in, "He lived fully." He continued by saying,

"He tried, he succeeded in some places, he failed in some places, he was heroic in some places, he was a coward in some places, you know. He was Everyman. On the

balance, probably there are more positive things about him than negative. But he lived.”

Nathan seemed down and shortly after the exercise, ended up on the phone yelling at his stockbroker. He had also heard from a friend today that a mutual acquaintance with lymphoma had died. This made him realize that, even in remission, he was still “on the razor’s edge.” He thanked me when I reminded him that he could focus on being one of those who lives, rather than dies. “The glass is half-full,” he said, “not half-empty; say it that way, it’s like saying ‘fully.’ He really lived.”

Dreamwork Exercise

The purpose of this exercise was to learn how to pay attention to images from the unconscious arising in sleep. It was based on my own studies and the dreamwork exercises in Feinstein and Krippner (1997, pp. 71-73). During a preliminary discussion about the exercise, Nathan shared some of the dreams that he had had about Mary. Although I stressed that programming oneself to have certain dreams and to remember them is not necessarily successful, nevertheless it seemed that Nathan became quite goal-oriented, with the result that he hardly dreamt at all. The strongest dreams that he had during the study occurred before I taught him about dreamwork.

Viewing and Discussion of Videos

In addition to the different practices, Nathan was shown excerpts from four different videos. The excerpts were chosen in order to inspire a discussion about different ways of knowing, death and the afterlife, and buried issues in relationships.

1. *Viewing of video excerpt from Sheldrake’s (Hitzig & Roche, 1996) “Seven Experiments that Could Change the World.”* Nathan watched an excerpt showing research into the possibility of a psychic connection between humans and dogs, and another excerpt researching the sense of being stared at. Nathan’s response was positive and he said, “There’s so much we can’t explain.”

2. *Viewing of video excerpt from the HBO television program “Life Afterlife,”* produced by the journalist Linda Ellerbee (1999). This video is an exploration of the possibility of life after death and includes stories of people who have had visions of loved ones and Schwartz’s 1998 experiment with mediumship at the University of Arizona. It inspired a number of different reactions from Nathan: reminiscences about his life with Mary, dreams that he had had of her, and thoughts about death and his cancer.

3 & 4. *Viewing of video excerpts from the Hellinger (Ulfelder, 2002) video called “Love at Second Sight” and from the (Höhnert et al, 2000) video “Trusting the Soul.”* The last two video sessions focused on the family systems work of the German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger, who studies the hidden connections between family members across several generations, maintaining that unresolved or buried issues in the past will surface in the behavior of later generations. Representatives for family members and other dynamics are used to create a visible pattern – called a constellation – of the issue at hand. I explained Hellinger’s (2001, 1999) work to Nathan and in two different sessions, showed him interactions between Hellinger and his clients. There were 2 sessions; each session consisting of the watching of two video excerpts.

The first two video excerpts focused on relationships and the second on death and grief. I summarize the second session:

The first excerpt, titled “A couple: We want to round things up,” concerns a man and wife who want to get a divorce and who are worried about the effects on the daughter. Hellinger correctly divines

that the real issue is the terminal illness of the husband and helps bring this to light so that the family can make the appropriate emotional adjustment. The second excerpt, titled “Father and son: Who wanted to die?” concerns a father whose son died several years before and who is still mourning the loss. Using representatives for the father and the son, Hellinger helps make clear the pattern of unresolved grief and moves the father towards acceptance.

Nathan’s assessment: In the discussion after the first viewing, Nathan voiced an intense dislike for Hellinger, saying the man “gave him the creeps.” He felt more receptive towards Hellinger’s work in the second session. In the final review, Nathan initially said that he felt there were no benefits to the viewing. Later in the interview, he agreed that understanding about hidden connections in families was valuable.

Participant’s Assessment of the Entire Study

It was a very positive experience, like going into a room I’ve not been in before. Even without your [Rondi Lightmark’s] presence, I would have found it positive. I find it more so because I think it exposes paths that are opportunities for me, at a time when I need paths, because I think places I’ve been in my past are now closed to me.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to discover whether certain holistic practices would: help a 68-year-old widower named Nathan (a) better manage the challenges of his illness; (b) clarify and deal with any unresolved issues in his life, and; (c) envision new paths to creative expression and self-actualization. It is clear from Nathan’s statements that he felt positively about the experience and, despite any reluctance or discomfort with the novelty of some of the practices, he also believed that the activities he engaged in were geared towards facilitating growth and hopefully, the recovery of his health.

General Effects of the Study

Because the model I used was directed towards affecting the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of Nathan’s life, I would like to briefly examine the specific impact of each category. For example, one might ask whether he felt any different physically, or whether he gained new coping skills or spiritual beliefs. At the same time, it is difficult to speak of any of the components of the study in isolation, because, from a holistic perspective, each was connected and influential in terms of the whole. Even though a self-massage focuses on the physical body, if a sense of wellbeing follows from such a practice, it inevitably affects one’s psychological outlook and ability to cope. Bearing this in mind, a brief overview of some of the key effects of the study resulting from the interview and the interventions showed the following:

Physical Effects and Influences

As reported in the narrative, Nathan responded positively to the effects of the body rub and to the toning, reporting that the self-massage felt good and the toning strengthened his voice and helped to release tension.

Psychological Effects

The design of the first interview offered Nathan many opportunities for self-disclosure and he seemed to be open to this exercise. He made a number of statements of disappointment and regret concerning his choice of career, his conduct in relationships with women, inattentive parents, a father who suggested that his son had intellectual limitations, a potential learning disability, a rocky educational history prior to graduation from high school, lack of skills that could have aided his development as an artist, and the sense that he had never found his true passion. While describing these choices and circumstances, he voiced fears of rejection, a lifelong fear of loneliness and a fear of being confined, held back and judged.

It was through the painting and the writing that a need for freedom and independence also expressed in the interview appeared. In his final assessment of the creative work, he expressed impatience with his creative efforts prior to the study, which now seemed superficial by comparison.

In the empowerment exercise, Nathan's choice of four powers – running fast, supporting the underdog, teaching well and debating well – indicate that he perceives himself to be a restless, independent spirit with much to share, and with a desire both to be understood and to champion those who are excluded. This particular exercise seemed to be an important revelation to Nathan. The personal mythology exercises were difficult for him and did not seem to help clarify ways in which past influences had contributed to his present outlook.

Retirement and the lack of a life partner may contribute to Nathan's lack of clear goals for the future: "I don't know if I am more afraid of living or of dying." At the same time, in reviewing his life and in drawing on his own resourcefulness, he reconnected with his creative self which, had he chosen a different career, would perhaps been the generator of a strong, more centered individuality, one who would not have felt confined because it would have been a fuller expression of his true nature.

Effects on Spiritual Beliefs

Although Nathan seemed least comfortable with practices like meditation, visualization and prayer, he also said that he felt that meditation was relaxing and possibly healing. Whether because of the study or simply because he had thought such issues through before, Nathan was able to talk openly about death, the possibility of an afterlife and seeing Mary again, and affirmed that psychic awareness made sense to him. He did not have a strong sense of ancestral identity, but identified with Judaism from the perspective of creative endeavor, perseverance and intellectual acumen.

I do not believe that the study had any significant effect on Nathan's spiritual belief system, but I do believe it was a valuable opportunity for him to discuss important issues concerning his loss of Mary and the possibility that his disease will be terminal.

Overall, the various interventions seemed to both inspire and challenge Nathan, providing new creative outlets – particularly in the toning, writing, and painting – while provoking negative reactions possibly related to unresolved issues, especially in areas of personal mythology, prayer, and in relationships. Although explorations of spiritual practices seemed to be of the least interest to Nathan, his longstanding belief that he could heal with his hands suggests an intimation of untapped potential.

Additional Goals and Findings

In addition to exploring whether holistic practices would help Nathan better manage the multifaceted challenges of his illness, I also hoped that this kind of focus in a single case study might make a contribution to research in the following areas:

1. Enhance the discussion of a connection between negative emotions and the onset of cancer in an older man dealing with bereavement, retirement and unresolved personal issues from across a life span;
2. Elucidate the problem of choice of healing protocol for the cancer patient, especially one who is new to holistic and spiritual healing practices;
3. Emphasize the role of creativity in healing; and
4. Reveal the benefits of an individualized, multifaceted approach for discovering buried issues and key sources of inspiration for self-motivation.

One significant finding concerned this last goal: addressing the individual from different points of reference can serve to build a comprehensive picture of those issues that carry the most weight in that person's life; such a picture could then be used to help develop a strategy for healing.

Another finding was the importance of the length of time in the study, where an initial wariness or resistance Nathan had to a specific holistic intervention, such as toning or massage, was shown to transform into interest and appreciation as the days went by. This would indicate that the power of holistic practices lies in the obvious: practicing. In fact, I would have preferred that the study had a time frame of at least 3 months or longer in order to allow Nathan more opportunities to reflect on, discuss, and become comfortable with the different exercises. Whether an individual with cancer is able to regain physical health or not, it seems that a multifaceted approach like this study offers numerous ways to support the ongoing tasks of developing coping skills and optimizing the opportunities for personal growth in the midst of the stresses of the illness.

One unexpected finding was the discovery that the design of the study, with its daily practices that sometimes included the researcher created: (a) a sense for both individuals of being proactive about the illness; (b) a helpful structure during times of depression and exhaustion, and; (c) a focus of conversation for Nathan's visitors – he was enthusiastic and open about sharing some of his practices and the results of the interview.

The question remains whether a comprehensive holistic model, addressing unresolved issues in the body, the mind and emotions, as well as in the spirit, is the best approach to dealing with illness, or whether one intervention alone, like creative expression or meditation, can create a "domino effect" and accomplish the same goal. What the study did show is that it was important to meet Nathan first in those places where he could be most successful, because success created trust and the willingness to experiment further. Thus a holistic model, while it may prove ultimately to offer the widest variety of options for optimizing healing, should be designed for the individual.

It also occurred to me that Nathan has undiagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder, which symptoms include: impulsivity; disorganization; a sense of underachievement; not meeting one's goals; explosive temper; impatience; tendency to worry; intolerance of boredom; acting out in school; trouble going through established channels; and evidence of being creative, intuitive, and highly intelligent (Hallowell & Ratey, 1992. p. 201). If so, this suggests an important area of study in the relationship between negative emotions and cancer in some cancer patients.

Limitations

This study was limited in the following ways:

1. The recurrence of illness inhibited the completion of the final two interviews;
2. My presence in Nathan's home; constantly switching hats between researcher and caregiver created emotional challenges for me, even while the close living situation increased my knowledge of his ups and downs;

3. A lack of clear structure in terms of the times during the day when the work was conducted meant that often Nathan was tired or distracted when we began.

SUMMARY

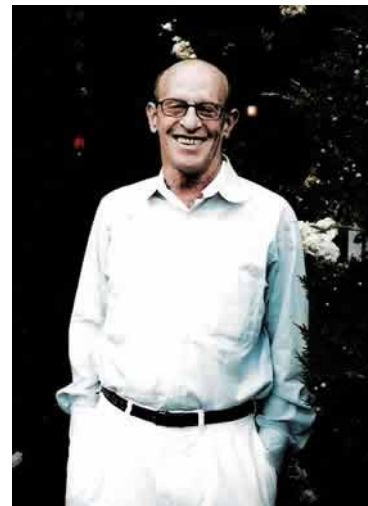
I believe that Nathan, with his inherent creativity, his maverick character, and his introspective, philosophical nature, will take whatever benefits he found in this study and use them on his own terms. At the same time I believe, even if the study itself ultimately means little to Nathan, the fact that someone spent hours thinking and writing about him and his life may have been psychologically beneficial in its own right.

Recently, Nathan indicated that he felt more at peace with the course of his disease, despite several setbacks, a feeling of increased exhaustion and an inability to spend any significant time out of bed. He has begun a practice of Buddhist chanting, still exercises every day using a self-designed form of meditation, and has shown interest in improving his nutrition. In contrast to earlier expressions of impatience and fear, he seems calm and at peace: "Whatever happens," he said recently, "it will be right" (9/9/03).

EPILOGUE

Nathan entered the hospital and died peacefully three months after the study was completed. Once he had made the decision to cease treatment, he stopped eating and focused on dying "as soon as possible." He did not seem to be afraid and at one point, observing the progressive breakdown of his body systems, he commented to me, "things are moving along quite well." In the two and a half weeks before his death, he was able to say goodbye to his closest friends and to have important and loving conversations with his children.

About a week before he died Nathan asked me to give a copy of the study to each of his children so that they would "truly know their father."



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