

The experience of healing

Today will begin a series of articles on the process of healing. I have fifteen years of experience in medical practice and I can say that not all patients heal according to the textbooks I read while in training. During this time I have observed first hand an important distinction in the healing arts. That distinction is the difference between academic and clinical healing. This article will explore the difference between the two.

Advances in western medicine are unsurpassed in benefit. Diseases that ravaged mankind in the past have now been virtually eliminated with the advent of vaccines and technology. With all of the wonderful advances, however, some of the relationships between how the mind and psyche effect healing have been lost. The patient is often viewed as merely a biological unit rather than an integrated whole in which attitudes, emotions and psychology are critical factors. What the textbook says and what we observe can be vastly different because each patient has a unique emotional, physical and spiritual makeup. It is this mind/body connection that western medicine is just beginning to acknowledge as valid.

When I was a resident surgeon in podiatry many years ago, I was very academic. I read all of the journals and textbooks in my field and I substantiated my medical decisions on the evidence. I held the belief that if it wasn't scientifically proven via research it was not to be accepted. My academic attitude was solely focused on cause and effect. I viewed my patients only as bodies which would respond to the appropriate medicines and surgical techniques. I did not see how their psychology could impact their outcome. What has become crystal clear to me now is that the psychology of the patient is the most important factor in their ability to heal.

I can walk into a treatment room and meet a patient for the first time and tell in about 30 seconds whether or not I can help them. What I can sense in this short interval is their attitude about themselves and their life in general. This may sound hard to believe, but some people have no intention of getting better. For some patients, illness itself provides a psychological payoff. What the textbooks say in these cases will have no effect at all; the patient has already decided not to get better.

The converse situation also exists. I have met patients with serious medical problems including facing amputation of their leg, yet they completely recover. Their academic condition revealed a hopeless prognosis, yet they heal. Their psychological makeup was one of hardiness, trust, and faith. The attitude of the patient helps them cope with whatever the problem, including the incurable. The journalist Bill Moyer once said, "Healing is possible, even if a cure is not."

Essentially, this comes down to trust. When patients trust in what I recommend, they do well. If they are critical and untrusting, they typically do not do well. Amazingly, this has little to do with the method of treatment. It is the trust the patient has in the process that enables them to heal. Trust is not an academic field of study. What I am writing here can't be proven, but it has been experienced between me and my patients. This is the

clinical experience of healing. It is the intuitive aspect of medicine, the place where every doctor just senses in his/her gut what the solution is to the problem. This solution may not be academically sound, but it may be beneficial. When the patient trusts in our judgment and we implement our treatment, many times the patient responds.

Acupuncture comes to mind as an example. I am not trained in acupuncture and I don't do it. However, I have experience with its success as a valid alternative when I sense it may work for the patient. I don't have an academic answer for how or why it works, but for some medical conditions, it can achieve clinical resolution of the ailment.

The source of healing is within. I can help facilitate the process through trust, but the power to heal is in you, not me. I will end with a quote from Gladys Taylor McGarey's book, *The Physician Within You*. In this book Ms. McGarey relates a conversation with her son who had recently finished his surgical residency in orthopedic surgery. He told his mother that he had fear about having people's lives in his hands.

She told him, "Carl, as a surgeon you may pull an incision together and suture it well, but you cannot make it heal. If you think you are the one who does the healing, you have a right to be scared. But if you understand that you are a channel through which healing moves, and that you are contacting the healing force within your patients, you have nothing to fear. You will have awakened the physician within them and sent them on their way to heal themselves."

Please stay tuned for the next installment in this series scheduled for Saturday July 23rd. A quick announcement is that I will be speaking at the Woman's Cancer Support Group this Monday evening July 11th at 6:30 pm. Please call 263-5728 and ask for Lynn if you would like to attend.

Matthew McQuaid, DPM is a board certified foot surgeon practicing in Lakeport. He has a particular interest in Mind/Body medicine and its impact on healing. He is an award winning author and teacher. Please share this article with a friend. For more information please call 707-263-3727 and visit www.drmcquaid.com