



Spirituality... In Sickness and in Health

Grasping the promise
of human wholeness
by connecting
physical health and
spiritual practice.

| By Albert H. Keller, DMin

In the ordinary course of events, we may not be aware that we are both physical and spiritual in nature. It is in sickness that we are forced to face the truth. How we respond to this awareness determines how closely to normal we can return. We stand before the mirror, naked but not defenseless, for God has provided a way for us to heal ourselves.

Spirituality

I believe strongly that the personal and emotional problems faced by individuals and families are spiritual in nature and require a spiritual response. Many might agree, particularly those who know that “spiritual” does not necessarily mean adherence to a religious tradition, such as Catholic or Jewish, but rather refers to the human quest to satisfy our need to live with meaning, connection with others, and with the transcendent. Spirituality is a satisfying response to beauty, mystery, value, and loss in the fabric of experience. Most, if not all, our emotional problems are likely to result from some failure in meaning, relationships, or other deep, symbolic matters that we associate with the soul.

I further believe that the physical, clinical problems that affect people are also spiritual in nature and require a spiritual response.

This is a step that requires more explanation. Physical problems can be a disease, such as hypertension or diabetes, affecting biological organs such as the heart or kidney, or they can be a wound or disability caused by trauma or some genetic factor. How such things as acute or chronic illness or an accident are spiritual matters is not so apparent. Yet, in exploring the connections between the domain of physical maladies and crises and the domain of the spiritual, described above, we find ourselves in a new territory that may lead to breakthroughs in understanding the human being as a whole person—or as a broken person with a vision of attaining wholeness.

Wholeness

Wholeness, “holiness”—we must be careful not to trivialize a complex concept of such depth and magnitude. Etymologically wholeness and holiness belong together, and this may conduct us to the realization that in actual life the two concepts are integrally related. This tells us that the “spiritual” we seek out to deal with real and serious problems had better be tough and substantial, or we will not find healing but only the illusion. I can’t be easy when I talk with students or others excited about their religious faith, yet

who are full of tell-tale signs of insecurity, depression, and loss of meaning, and are turning to spiritualities that appear to have little grounding and are outrageously sentimental, coddling their adherents with easy answers and simplistic ideas.

Jesus, for those responsive to the Christian tradition, does not coddle. In the healing stories of the New Testament, one finds no “sweetness” and no evasion of the battle that is ordinary life. Instead, one finds untamed spiritual power and a kind of harshness mixed with comfort, a burning intelligence joined with the empathy of love. Are the healings that result borne out of Jesus’ holiness? In a way, says Stephen Levine, they are no big deal. The miracle is plainly the restoration of the ordinary—seeing, walking, not being convulsed by seizures, not hemorrhaging, feeling good! The extraordinary thing is not the healing itself but the depth of the pain, confusion, and alienation before. Miracle, says Levine, intensifies the normal.

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Through television, billboards, magazines, and the Internet, we are urged to self-diagnose and bombard our doctors to supply the most suitable medications to avoid all symptoms or signs of disease. Perhaps our “dys” ease is yet another way to avoid the miracle of the normal!

The Spiritual Response

The wholeness we seek in any kind of sickness or disjunction is who we really are. To get there, however, often requires of us difficult decisions, steady resolution, abandoning attachments to hurtful habits, and embracing new practices or disciplines. And in this conclusion lies the substance of the claim that physical, clinical problems are spiritual in nature and require spiritual solutions. Sickness, disease, and disability affect the whole person and require a holistic response. I see that response as the most promising frontier of research and teaching in healthcare today.

One is tempted, in spelling out how spiritual responses correspond to physical health problems, to simplify by discussing preventive disciplines as distinct from curative (or after-the-fact) disciplines. The Lighten Up program illustrates why that is a false approach. The program uses the authority of scripture, information from medical science, and the norming force of group experience to empower individuals, especially those who have or are at risk for diabetes and hypertension, to lose weight and get in better physical shape. The program is both preventive of disease and responsive to existing disease. Finding motivation strong enough to reform one’s eating habits, exercise patterns, and other lifestyle parameters that affect health, means reaching deep into spiritual realities and translating them into common practice. That is the genius of Lighten Up!

The approach I have used in almost two decades of teaching medical students is similar to the approach put into practice by Lighten Up. That is to identify substantive correlations between physical health states, such as diabetes, and spiritual themes or teachings, such as discipline. Take this correlation as an example. Common forms of diabetes are damaging the health and endangering the lives of an exponentially increasing number in American society. The common form of the disease is causally related to obesity and sedentary lifestyle. While medical scientists

research mechanisms and develop drugs for treating diabetes, is it not at least equally important to explore how God’s grace becomes powerful in human life when one takes volitional control over one’s life and adheres to a regime of diet and exercise as a spiritual discipline or practice?

In at least one spiritual tradition (Christian), conscious lifestyle faithfulness is a bodily worship of the Creator. As Thomas Merton has said, “It is a law of man’s nature, that he should want to stand together with other men to acknowledge their common dependence on God, their Father and Creator. In fact, this desire is much more fundamental than any purely physical necessity.”

A study of mechanisms (techniques) by which faith informs practice may result in significant change in the prevalence of diabetes. Lest this statement be construed as a reduction of faith to a pragmatic benefit, I insist also that a person who is keeping weight and blood sugar under control through prayerful, symbolized exercise and eating disciplines is also going to find the power and direction of the Spirit more meaningful in her life and her whole self becoming more worshipful, free, and joyful. Material benefit and spiritual truing-up of the self do correlate.

Similar correlations invite our exploration. To name several correlations we research and teach: heart disease and compassion, addictions and grace, childbirth and surrender, stress and peace (or mindfulness), disability/chronic pain and meaning, cancer and hope, end-of-life care and accompaniment. In the substantive correlations between physical states and spiritual practices—the former studied by medical science, the latter studied by religious traditions and poets—lie creative possibilities for deepening both physical health and spiritual reality, and the promise of human wholeness.★

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