

Philosophical Musings on the art of Healing

By
Althea Northrage-Orr

As a clinician I have noticed that one of the most frequently asked and painful questions that patients pose about their illnesses, especially if they are of a serious nature, is "Why am I ill--did I deserve this or somehow cause it?" Obviously, this question needs to be asked if the person wishes to identify lifestyle and constitutional factors in order to remedy or prevent a reoccurrence of their illness, but more often than not the question goes far beyond these factors to include metaphysical questions. "Why me?" or even "Why now" are the questions that plague many patients. When faced with devastating losses or limitations due to disease, many individuals are moved to this line of questioning. There are, of course, many answers. They range from the comforting to denial of the obvious; from the religious to the scientific. I find some of them are damaging to those that hold them and others find impetus for positive change. I would like to examine some of the most common of these answers and put forth a few of my own thoughts on the subject.

One of my least favorite answers, although it does have some merit, is the overly optimistic slogan of "you create your own reality" (and therefore your diseases). While this idea does include the legitimate responsibility we all have for maintaining our health through positive thoughts, actions and habits, it is largely a disguised version of early Calvinist thought in which the elect were blessed by God and fortunate in their lives; and the unfortunate were obviously sinners. The bottom line is that if you are sick you are guilty; and if you don't want to be sick, you must find your fault (learn your lesson), fix it, and abstain from further sin. All illness is avoidable, fixable, and in control of the sufferer. Death and disability represent failure of the will or imagination, and those who can't get well don't want to get well.

Besides being brutally judgmental, this belief is grandiose. It fails to take into account the fact that as individuals we are subject not only to our own reality tunnel, but also the reality of the larger world and everyone who inhabits it. When we attain godhood we will presumably have the kind of control necessary to "think away" all disease; but in the meantime even such august personages as the late Yogananda die of diseases like bowel cancer, respiratory infections etc. This idea that we can be totally in control of our reality is childlike, magical thinking; if I think right, meditate enough, say my "Oms" I won't get hurt. Reality is much more complex. If cholera invades the neighborhood and I happen to get it; I hope I have more than the right attitude to combat it. No matter how much I want to get well, my success will be largely dependent on appropriate medical care, a strong constitution, the right herbs, food, etc. and a good attitude (not to mention luck). Thinking one can avoid disease by not allowing it to be part of your reality is like the infant who thinks you can't see him when he covers his eyes.

Alchemists had an interesting perspective on this question. Paracelsus said there were five causes of disease, the entia or influences. (singular would be ens). The first is the Ens Dei, for disease that are caused by God, or that are Karmic in origin. What he meant by this was that some illnesses were based on large patterns of reality than the individual's own particular fate. So for example, if a plague strikes because of over population, this is a vast natural pattern that will sweep away many individuals, regardless of their worth, probity, value or vision. (In other words, when it comes to

evolution, it's a messy business--a lot of eggs get broken to make that omelette.). This would include what we consider today to be the genetic or inherited illnesses. In this case, an individual is born with an inherent weakness due to their familial line; in other words they are subject to their families karma, a pattern larger than themselves. I think another modern interpretation of this might be that cultures and societies also create illness and disease as a by-product of their imbalances, illnesses that afflict the conscious and highly evolved just as often as the unconscious and less evolved. An example of this would be the current surge in conditions involving impaired immunities and the great increase in cancers, both caused by poor air, water, food, higher stress levels, and of course, pollution. One can work to counteract these influences as much as possible, but obviously they are outside the control of individuals.

"But if one was truly conscious, one could mitigate this somehow by spiritual means," says my imaginary optimist. Alas, in my experience, highly evolved people are not necessarily blessed with strong constitutions. Constitutions are the result of a multitude of factors such as what one's mother ate while pregnant, ethnicity, early medical care, the location of one's planets in one's natal chart, the age of one's parents at conception, the presence or lack thereof of genetic mutations, oncogenes, etc, and early childhood nurturance.

A second cause of illness would be the *Ens Astrale*. In modern parlance, this means that we are affected (like everything else in nature) by the planetary factors. An Anthroposophical physician who is my friend often comments on how certain illnesses "are making the rounds" when various astrological configurations occur. Likewise, at certain sensitive times in a persons life, they are more affected by influences that make them susceptible to illness. This, of course, could be a positive learning experience in some cases, or just plain awful in others. The interesting thing about this particular piece of knowledge is that it can have significance in prevention and treatment, because remedies can be chosen based upon their planetary correspondences to counteract malefic planetary forces or to strengthen weaknesses in the person's planetary make-up. But certainly this indicates that we are exposed to and affected by outside influences that can push our personal karma in some interesting directions. Like plants, oceans, and the rest of the natural world, we are not beyond the pull of larger tides than our own small universe.

A third case would be *Ens Naturale*. In the modern world we would call this the lifestyle factors. In other words, if you eat twinkies instead of dinner, rock and roll all night and have too much to drink, you can expect that some illness will show up sooner or later. This is the sort of obvious "garbage in garbage out" equation to which we are all subject. Included would be dietary factors, stress, exercise, sleep, etc. Franz Hartmann, M.D.) stresses the importance of will in the *Ens Naturale* because it involves a failure of the higher self in regulating the habits and actions of the body. When we live out of balance, we become diseased because we overload our physiology. Inherent in this notion is the concept that what is toxic to one person may be medicine to another, and that what would be invigorating exercise to one individual might kill someone else. Wisdom lies in knowing one's own limits and tendencies.

A fourth case would be the *Ens Spirituale*. This has to do with attitudes and emotions. The body-mind connection is profound, and sustained stress, unbalanced emotions, or acute attacks of an emotion will manifest as illness. I think this connection is well understood in current times, but if you are interested in exploring it further I would refer you to the work of modern immunological

researchers and to the practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), to name a few sources. While understanding this connection can definitely help us to manage our lives in order to prevent disease, allow me to also point out here that sometimes stress or acute emotions are pretty hard to avoid. There is nothing more sad than watching a patient beat themselves up for not "handling better" the loss of a spouse, followed by the death of a child and the collapse of a beloved parent into Alzheimers, all in one year! Even the gods weep at such times. However, it does argue for the necessity of learning to cope with chronic patterns of negative emotions, and for the necessity of counseling, support and extra meditations in times of extreme stress.

The fifth and final category is the *Ens Venemi*. This notion is an ancient one, and is reflected today in modern germ theory. In TCM it is even more flexible, in that it includes invasions not only by microbes or cases of poisoning, but also severe climatic factors such as being exposed to drafts, excessive heat, etc. This category has to do with the way outside agencies can impact upon us. If you leap into a pond in February to rescue a child, your nobility may result in hypothermia. Or if your bus breaks down in the Arizona desert, heat stroke may strike. And of course, if you are unfortunate enough to encounter the Ebola virus, your odds are not good.

"Ah", my imaginary philosopher says triumphantly, "But you chose to be on that bus, you chose your parents..." Um, maybe. Personally, I think that the universe is much more complex than that. While we do have many choices, both before and after incarnation, we are also participating in the wonderful unfolding of creation which includes many a "curve ball." While we cannot and do not control all the events that impact upon us, we can at least have the freedom to respond to them with grace and courage, to squeeze every ounce of learning and experience out of them. And if you happen to be one of the eggs that gets cracked in this lifetime's universal omelette, well at least there are other lifetimes to come. (At least my belief)

Ultimately, while considering all these factors can be helpful when an individual is faced with illness, I would encourage all of us to seek for answers that speak to the larger beingness of the person. Answers that are negative, that diminish or denigrate are never the right answers. If a person needs to make some lifestyle changes, one can look at that necessity from the "you have sinned" perspective; or one can view it as an opportunity to explore self-love and self-nurturance. Above all, one ought to honor the fact that, while the individual in question may have been making choices that were not the most productive, they were acting nonetheless in their quite human attempt to do the best that they can.

Similarly, abandon the phrase "They just want to be sick." I have noticed that phrase generally comes up whenever we are confronted with the discomfort of chronic pain or illness. (As healers, it does let us off the hook now doesn't it? Obviously it isn't our problem they aren't getting well.) I don't think I have ever, in 25 years of clinical practice, encountered a single person who wanted to be sick. I have encountered people for whom getting well wasn't a possibility: because it was an adaptation that they couldn't afford to give up without necessary psychological restructuring, or because they didn't have (or know how to get) the resources to get well, or because they were just plain too constitutionally impaired. Nobody wants to be sick; they just may not know how to be well. I can't help but think of a conversation with a friend of mine who was a recovering alcoholic and who chided me for giving change to a street person who probably in this case was working for the daily bottle. My friend accused me of enabling them in their disease. But my response was that it not my place to judge their

plan. If drinking was the best they could do to get through their life, who was I to judge? If I had the resources to offer them a remedy, it would be different. But their broken humanness remains a mystery; and without a relationship, it is not our place to judge.

Answers that work have compassion in them, and room for mystery, and acknowledge the fact that as humans we are complex packages. From this perspective, every illness is an opportunity to explore ourselves and the world around us. Hahnemann, the founder of Homeopathy, said, "illness is a gift, unwrap it." While it may be an uncomfortable gift, I'm with Hahnemann. We need to view it as an opportunity not to judge ourselves for being flawed and weak, but as a challenge that can make us grow and become more adaptable and creative as human beings.