



New PERSPECTIVES

A Bulletin about Roling and Somatic Awareness

Fall 1992

Spirit: Resource for Healing

Dear Readers,

Warmest greetings to all and welcome to the 10th issue of *New Perspectives*. I am sad to announce that this issue will be the last. Production and printing costs have doubled since the first issue was published four years ago. I hope that *New Perspectives* has provided you with both information and inspiration. It has certainly helped me, not only with practice-building, but as a way to clarify and deepen my commitment to my work. I am pleased to conclude this endeavor by sharing the following article with you: *Spirit: Resource in Healing*, by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen.

This article appears in the *Noetic Sciences Collection (1980-1990)* of the Institute for Noetic Sciences. It was adapted from a talk by Dr. Remen at the "Helping the Whole Person and the Whole World" conference sponsored by the John E. Fetzer Foundation. Its purpose was to explore strategies for addressing the related problems of personal and global health.

—David Laden, Editor

I'd like to examine some of the implications of calling our field the *mind-body* health field. Such terms as *mind-body* research, *mind-body* health are spreading like a wave across the country. They're in every public media. I want to put out some thoughts about this. These thoughts are very personal. There's no need to agree with them. I just want to share them and perhaps they'll serve as a seed for further discussion.

The first thought I have is that I'm not at all certain the mind is the highest human function. Or perhaps the mind is the highest *human* function—but we transcend our humanness. Something in us participates in our humanness, but has its source and its connection far beyond it, and in that connection may lie the hope of healing.

When people, the public in general, talk about *mind-body* health they may be at risk of overlooking or forgetting this. They may be falling into what is a culture-wide tendency to deny spirit or even to omit it totally. The term *mind-body health* suggests to the public that our field is about gaining mental control of physical functions, that we are experts in fixing the body by using the mind.

This makes sense to people, and they are interested, because the mind is a simpler, safer, cheaper, more efficient, more affordable way of fixing the body than, let's say, surgery. So the whole purpose of the field may be coming to be seen as the manipulation of the body to attain physical health. And I'm not at all sure that understanding how to manipulate the body to perfect function with the mind is a large enough purpose for our field.

Health is not an end. Health is a means. Health enables us to serve purpose in life, but it is not the purpose in life. Bernie Siegel pointed this out so beautifully in his talk yesterday in his case of John the landscaper—the man who wanted, in spite of his cancer, to make beauty in the world. *One can serve purpose with impaired health.* One might even regain health through serving purpose as John did.

I am also concerned that this is not just how the public sees us, but, in my less optimistic moments, I fear that the field may actually be deteriorating into a kind of mechanical or mechanistic enterprise. As if in pursuit of deeper and deeper understanding of how we live, how consciousness and the body interact, the mechanism by which emotion affects the T-cells, how the brainwaves change when we pray—that somehow in this pursuit something very important may slip through our fingers, and we might not even know it.



David L. Smith

How we live is not as important to me as *why* we live. Why are we here in these bodies? What are we doing here like this? This mystery is more important to me than discovering how these bodies function.

I saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker* recently which shows two yogis sitting on a lip of a cave on top of a very high mountain, which I assume is a mountain in the Himalayas. Sitting there cross-legged, they obviously have been interrupted in their meditation by a 747 airplane which is flying by. One of them looks at the other and says, "Ah, they have the know-how, but do they have the know-why?"

So the real questions of health may not be questions of mechanism but questions of spirit. Healing is not a matter of mechanism; it is a work of spirit and we need to study those conditions that further that work. We need to remember that at the very heart of spirit is mystery. And the problem with the mind is that the mind cannot tolerate mystery.

Now what are the practical implications of basing a healing system on an aspect of ourselves that can't tolerate

mystery? We have a wonderful example of this in contemporary Western medicine. You know allopathic medicine is one of many medical systems developed by humankind in our pursuit of healing, and ours is the most mentally oriented, the most analytical of the healing systems. It is also the only healing system that does not allow the possibility of the mysterious or the miraculous. So what does it look like when the miraculous, the unexplainable does manifest itself? I think we can see it clearly if we consider those cases when people recover from an illness when all mental, medical, chemical means have been exhausted.

Brendan O'Regan has made a collection of these cases in his work as Vice-President for Research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences. These are well-documented cases known to medical science, and have been published in various medical journals. They are usually presented as single cases and used as "fillers" between the "heavy stuff", the scientific studies. I've been reading them for years. Taken one by one they are puzzling, but no one pays them much attention. Brendan, however, has collected thousands of them. Thousands. That's another matter entirely.

I actually participated in one of these cases as an intern. We had a man with widespread metastasis of cancer to the bone; it was eight months since his last dose of chemotherapy and radiation and he was dying. He was admitted to our hospital at the Cornell Medical Center to ease his last days. In the two-week period while he was in the hospital, the 52 bone lesions disappeared and they never came back. So how did we react? Were we in awe? Certainly not. I remember my chief resident explaining to me that a mistake must have been made, this man didn't really have cancer. So his slides were sent for careful examination by a battery of independent expert pathologists and sure enough, these men confirmed that he did indeed have cancer. So he became the subject of Grand Rounds. And at the meeting of all the doctors in the hospital it was concluded that for some inexplicable reason there was an eight-month delay in the action of this man's chemotherapy and radiation. I want to say to you, the mind is *limited*.

The mind denies that which it can't understand and we are a mentally

identified culture. In valuing the mind as much as we do, we have a cultural tendency to deny mystery, to deny the spiritual. A form of denial, by the way, is delegating these matters. We tend to delegate the spiritual to others who are more interested in it, or who we feel are perhaps better equipped to deal with it. In reality, of course, the spiritual can't be delegated. We all participate in it. It is nature, the core of our humanity.

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There is no situation that is not a spiritual situation, there is no decision that is not a spiritual decision, there is no feeling that is not a spiritual feeling. In fact, the very essence of life may be spiritual in nature. Life may advance some spiritual agenda that we all work towards together, without even knowing. There is a lot of mystery here. Perhaps all life is sacred.

In working with people who are dying and in reading a lot about near-death experiences, people seem to arrive at a sense of what life's purpose is—and it is not to be a doctor or to be well-known or even to make a social contribution. The purpose of life, as these people tell it, is simpler than this. The purpose of life is to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better. If life serves these purposes, then health serves these purposes and illness serves them as well, because illness is part of life.

When I think about mind I think about solutions, because the mind is a solution-giver. In a purely mental perspective, when something is broken we need to understand it so we can figure out better how to fix it. It's all up to us. It's very lonely, the mind.

A spiritual perspective would lead us both to act and to trust the larger natural processes around us. We uncover a natural process moving to a natural resolution. "Broken" is only a stage in that natural process. Not everything that appears to be broken needs fixing, you know. And fixing, itself, is a very reductionistic approach to life and certainly to human beings.

Bernie Siegel said something very, very important about healing in his talk yesterday. He said, "We can grow strong at the broken places." I know that everyone of us understood what he meant, but we didn't understand it with our minds. The mind doesn't understand things like that. The mind fixes the broken places, studies the mechanisms of breaking in the hope of fixing. And yet we do become strong in the broken places. It's the most common thing for a clinician to see.

Let me give you an example. I had a man in my practice with osteogenic sarcoma of the leg, which was removed at the hip in order to save his life. He was 24 years old when I started working with him and he was a very angry man with a lot of bitterness, a deep sense of injustice and a very deep hatred for all the well people, because it seemed so unfair to him that he had suffered this terrible loss so early in life. After working with this man for a couple of years I saw a profound shift. He began "coming out of himself". He began visiting other people in the hospital who had suffered severe physical losses and he would tell me the most wonderful stories about these visits. Once he visited a young woman who was almost his own age. It was a hot day in Palo Alto and he was in running shorts so his artificial leg showed when he came into her hospital room. The woman was so depressed about the loss of both her breasts that she wouldn't even look at

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him, wouldn't pay any attention to him. The nurses had left the radio playing, probably in order to cheer her up. So, desperate to get her attention, he unstrapped his leg and began dancing around the room on one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. She looked at him in amazement, and then she burst out laughing and said, "Man, if you can dance, I can sing."

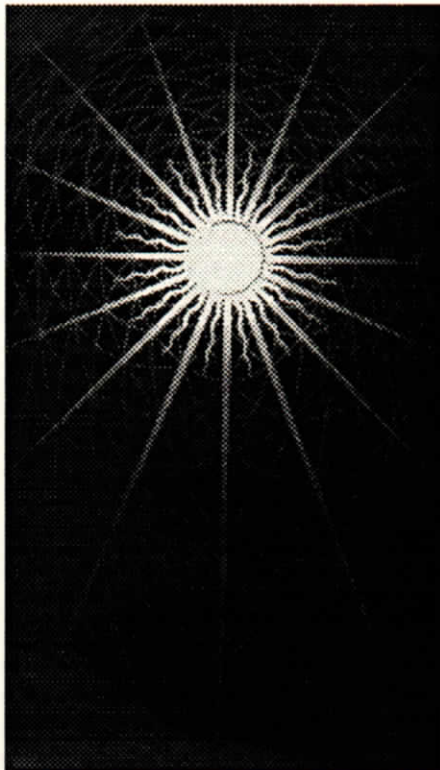
Now I want to tell you something that happened at the end of this man's therapy. At the end of therapy you do a review—people talk about what was significant to them and you share what was significant to you as a therapist working with some one. We were reviewing our two years of work together; I opened his file and there folded up were several drawings he had made early on. I wanted to return these to him, so I unfolded them and handed them to him. He looked through them and said, "Oh, look at this." And he showed me one of the earliest drawings. I had suggested to him that he draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a picture of a vase, and running through this vase was a deep black crack. This was his image of his body and he had taken a black crayon and had drawn the crack over and over and over. He was grinding his teeth with rage at the time. It was very painful because it seemed to me that this vase could never function as a vase again. It could never hold water.

Now, two years later, he came to this picture and looked at it and said, "Oh, this one isn't finished." And I said, extending the box of crayons, "Why don't you finish it?" He picked a yellow crayon and putting his finger on the crack he said, "You see, here—this is where the light comes through." And with the yellow crayon he drew light streaming through the crack in his body.

We can grow strong at the broken places. Now *that* is a process worthy of study.

I would like to share, too, some clinical hunches I have as a practicing physician. These hunches also derive from my own thirty-five-year history of chronic illness. I have Crohn's disease and have had major surgery seven times. I no longer have a colon, so I'm talking to you, really, from both sides of the fence. As a matter of fact I don't even have a fence.

Much illness may have its roots in unrecognized spiritual distress—issues of isolation, of anger, the feelings people have that they don't matter or that nobody matters to them. I think that depression is not so much an issue of nobody loving you. Depression is an issue of not being able to find a place to



give your love, not being able to love enough. There is a general lack of meaning and purpose and significance that seems to underlie illness. What we call stress might really be spiritual isolation. It might really be an insensitivity to and a lack of recognition of our spiritual needs. And so they are unmet because they are unrecognized—and we are spiritually isolated.

I was speaking about this with a friend of mine, Joan Borysenko, who in her innovative work teaches people deep relaxation and imagery—she encourages them to eat well, to exercise and to change their lifestyle. And she noted that occasionally she comes across somebody whose high blood pressure, for example, doesn't respond to any of these things. So she asks this person, "Is there anything that you have not forgiven yourself for?" And they respond and then they often do better. Non-forgiveness is a form of spiritual isolation. Spiritual isolation is bad for your health. Denying

the spiritual is bad for your health.

What is spiritual isolation? Basically to me it seems that it is living with a closed heart. Some people have said to me "If my heart was open, I could forgive." But I think it's the other way around. Forgiveness is a choice. Forgive first—and then your heart can open. Another friend of mine, Dean Ornish, a cardiologist, once said to me that the most popular surgery in this country, coronary bypass surgery, is probably a metaphor. The problem with our culture is that we have bypassed the heart, especially in men. And we keep acting that out, over and over again, in the operating room.

It is very interesting how often the process of physical healing runs concurrent with the healing of the heart. A greater altruism, a greater compassion, seems to occur in different people as you work with them through severe illness.

I want to tell you a story of one of the people at Commonweal—a yoga-based retreat for people with cancer run by Michael Lerner in Bolinas, California. I am fortunate to participate there as the medical director.

People who have cancer, and their families, come and spend a week with us. We do yoga, imagery, sandtray and poetry—and we live and walk in a beautiful natural setting next to the ocean. We have support groups and we meditate and we talk and we hug and we touch. One person who came is a survivor of Auschwitz. He is a chemist—brilliant, a very mental man. He is Polish, with a very deep accent which endeared him to me immediately because it reminded me of people in my own family. Fifteen or so years previously he had an episode of multiple sclerosis which had never returned, but now he has cancer. He wanted to see if he could use his mind to heal his cancer. At first he was taken aback by the Commonweal approach, because we do a lot of touching. He would say, "Vot is this luffy, vot is this huggy, huggy, vot is this huggy the strangers, vot is this?" We continued to hug him anyway.

The fourth day of the retreat is usually a special time because by then the silence generated by doing the yoga has become very deep inside people, and sometimes they can get in touch with their deepest intelligence. When this

man began his yoga meditation on the fourth day he had a startling experience: He experienced himself inside a large field of shifting pinkish energy. When he talked about it later, he called it a "big rose", which was wonderful because his last name is Rose. He found himself inside the big rose and the very center of it seemed to be right here in his chest. As a matter of fact, it seemed to be his heart that was generating this huge energy field around him.

With this realization, he became very frightened because for him it was like having a "hemorrhage of energy". He had nothing in his previous experience to compare it to. When he told us about it later, he said how vulnerable it made him feel, because since his experience as a twelve-year-old boy in Auschwitz he had lived very cautiously with regard to his heart and loved only close people, only family. There is a lot of fear behind and beyond this way of loving. He had begun to feel that fear consciously and it was very uncomfortable for him.

We usually spend the last session tying up the loose ends. I knew how troubled he had been by this experience a few days before, so I said to him, "How are you doing with the big Rose, Harry?" And he said, "Better." I said, "What happened that helped?" He said, "I took a walk and talked to God. It's better." "Harry," I said, "What did God say?" He said, "Ah, I say to God, 'God, what is this, is it OK to luff the strangers?' And God said, 'Harry, what is

this "strangers"? You make strangers, I don't make strangers.'"

This is the man who has given a scholarship so somebody can come free to a retreat. When we asked him about

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it—if he wanted to review the applications—he said, "No, just give it to anybody." In a way what this represents is a movement towards essence. He had closed down a part of himself fifty years ago and in the process of working to heal his cancer this man had begun to heal himself as well. That is common, and it is very curious. It is as if the process of illness, limitation, suffering, the shocking isolation of a brutal disease, awakens in us the seeker, which is so much more than the scientist. We begin to sort values, what matters and what doesn't. We become open to looking at the meaning of life, not just

the meaning of pain, of one's own pain, but even the meaning of life itself.

I'd like to close by reading a poem which was left to me in the will of one of my former patients, a sixteen-year-old girl whose death ended a seven-year battle with leukemia. Her mother brought me this poem in a sealed envelope. It had been left to me, so we opened it together. It said:

*Cancer / I disappear, / devoured by
pain. / I know / I am a speck,
a mote of dust dancing in a sun beam. /
I know my little dance matters. /
My life / serves life, / Itself.*

A human being is not a mechanism, but an opportunity for the Infinite to manifest. The only thing really worthy of our study and attention is spirit. And at the heart of spirit is Mystery. Our need to be in control, our need for mastery, can stifle our sense of Mystery, can blind us to the Mystery around us. And if this happens to the mind-body health field we will all be the losers. ■

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