



Heal thyself

WHEN ILLNESS, DEPRESSION OR ADDICTION TAKE OVER OUR LIVES, IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO LOOK TO SPIRITUAL SOLUTIONS TO HEAL WHAT MIGHT BE BROKEN, IGNORED OR REPRESSED.

BY ROSAMUND BURTON

In ancient cultures, such as Greece and ancient Egypt, medicine and spirituality were seen as one and the same. In North American Indian tribes, the medicine man or woman is also the spiritual leader of the tribe. In these cultures, disease is regarded as being due to a person not being connected to certain spiritual realities. The role of the medicine man is to reconnect, or bring a person back into relationship with a spiritual energy.

The word "religion" comes from a Latin word meaning "to bind back to" or "to reconnect with". Christianity in its early days was not concerned with just the teachings but also with healing people. Jesus spent much of his time healing people of physical ailments. He enabled the deaf to hear, the blind to see and the crippled to walk again. The Bible has many examples of the connection between the physical and the spiritual.

David Tacey is Associate Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies at La Trobe University in Melbourne and author of *Gods and Diseases: Making Sense of Our Physical and Mental Wellbeing*. In his book he looks at medical conditions such as depression, alcohol and drug addictions and also phobias. He believes the inability of today's medical science to stem the ever-increasing rise in these conditions means we need to turn to spirituality to find a path to physical and mental wellbeing.

When David was a young teenager his family moved from Melbourne to Alice Springs and he became interested in Aboriginal culture, particularly that of the Arrernte tribe, the local people of the area.

"One of the things I found most interesting," he explains, "was that reality is essentially for them spiritual rather than material, which is why they don't put much emphasis on material items. They've never been a materialistic culture; in fact, they've been a culture which has had absolutely the minimum of what we might call today the necessities of life." He was bowled over by the emphasis the Arrernte people placed on spirituality. "For them the necessity was primarily spiritual and not material," he says.

Tacey became interested in Aboriginal culture at the age of 13, the age at which his Aboriginal contemporaries were being inducted into the tribal mysteries. He was not allowed to learn about the women's business but explains that the boys

underwent an initiation which, in effect, terminated the childhood ego state. He learnt about the whole initiation ritual, in which the boys are painted white — the colour of death in Aboriginal culture because of the association of white with bone — and put in a shallow grave. This ritual symbolises the death of the ego and with that comes the birth of the connection with the ancestral forces and the "true self".

When the boys returned to their families they had a different name, he explains, and "saw themselves after the initiation as reincarnated ancestral spirits. They seemed suddenly more mature, less anxious and less uncertain of themselves.

"There's a great degree of identity crisis in the teenager today, but the traditional person didn't have an identity crisis because the initiation ceremony put an end to that crisis by telling them exactly who they were. Therefore they acquired a certain dignity. They renounced their personal identity and took on a cosmic identity."

Tacey believes there is a definite connection between the diminishing of the spiritual rites of passage in Indigenous cultures and the maladies, such as loneliness, despair and depression, which all too often lead to suicide. In traditional Indigenous culture, in which the tribal law was respected, depression would seldom occur because from early adulthood people knew who they were and their role within the tribe. They did not feel isolated or alone because they were vibrantly connected to the tribe.

Tacey also looks at how an Aboriginal healer would treat someone in the tribe who was suffering from depression or suicidal thoughts. He says that instead of completely identifying with the negative thoughts about dying, as is done in Western culture, followed by trying to overcome them, usually using antidepressants, the Aboriginal healer would look at what wanted to die and be born within the person and transform the experience of suicidal thoughts into a rite of passage.

"The Aboriginal healer would say, 'Of course you want to die because you're living mainly through your ego consciousness, your limited or small self. The small self has to die so the big self can live,'" Tacey explains. He believes our Western culture has no idea about the spiritual dimension of depression. He says cases of depression are on the rise because "it's not the natural

state of the person to be confined within the isolation of the ego. We really need to give birth to the soul."

We need to change our consciousness and realise that as well as being egos we are souls and that the soul is the "true self", whereas the ego is merely a passing self.

Stephanie Dowrick, author of best-selling books *Intimacy and Solitude* and *Seeking the Sacred*, is a trained psychotherapist and also an ordained interfaith minister. She leads spiritually inclusive services in Sydney as well as giving regular retreats and workshops. She believes a spiritual life provides a sense of connection and that sense of connection creates meaning, which is so helpful when it comes to health.

"Even when we are physically extremely unwell, or dying, it means we have a sense of self to call upon that's more than just the body: that we are meeting life to the very end from our centre which, in spiritual terms, is

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always entirely and eternally 'well'."

Dowrick emphasises there is no one path of spirituality and the feeling of connection and centredness in life to which she refers can be achieved in many different ways, from religious practices to walking, volunteering, gardening, journaling, caring for others, singing and meditating. She believes spirituality can help us not only see what truly matters and what really doesn't but also connect to our inner strengths.

"I cannot emphasise too highly how transformative it is to identify those strengths and call on them when life is genuinely tough. Or when we simply want to heal an old hurt or improve our relationships and ways of living."

She wrote about this in her book *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*, which →

came out after she had had cancer. She was experiencing extremely high levels of stress and had to draw on her great qualities to keep going — for both her children's sake and her own.

When asked about suggestions she would give for living a healthy, spiritual life, she emphasises having an attitude toward life that is grateful, gracious, joyful, forgiving and appreciative.

In her recent book *Everyday Kindness*, Stephanie Dowrick reflects on her work on the visionary poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who 100 years ago warned against the psychic and emotional losses or even devastation that occur when we constantly override our deepest needs. When people work excessively long hours and then in the remaining hours of the day spend their time dealing with practical household demands or partying before they return to work again, those deepest needs are unlikely to be heard. In even the busiest of lives, she stresses the necessity of stillness and creating that sense of centredness and connection.

“We live in a culture of criticism that can keep us small and scared, even mean-minded — and this affects our bodies as much as our thinking. We need to defy that and let ourselves feel awe, contentment, even bliss,” she stresses.

She is emphatic that our bodies are our best monitors for helping us to know ourselves better and also look after ourselves more effectively and more lovingly. “We literally contract or feel unwell or exhausted in a draining, tense situation; we literally relax and expand when we are with people we trust or in a situation that soothes or uplifts us.”

One person who was adamant about the link between health and spirituality was Dr Carl Jung and it was his advice to a patient who was a chronic alcoholic that led to the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous.

When a man called Rowland Hazard, who had been Carl Jung's patient for about a year in 1931, relapsed and started drinking heavily again, Carl Jung told him he was a hopeless case with regard to further medical or psychiatric treatment. When asked if there was any hope for him, Carl Jung said a spiritual awakening had helped other alcoholics and suggested he place himself in a religious atmosphere.

Rowland joined the Oxford Group, a non-denominational movement modelled on

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first-century Christianity. He found he was released from his compulsion to drink by a higher power and then he began to help other alcoholics, including an old friend, Edwin Thatcher. Edwin was also able to give up alcohol as a result of a spiritual experience and, having done so, wanted to help his friend Bill Wilson, who in turn had a conversion experience and gave up drinking.

Wilson went on to help Dr Robert Smith, a surgeon and member of the Oxford Group who had been unable to remain sober, and a couple of years later they set up Alcoholics Anonymous. In a letter written to Carl Jung in 1961, Wilson says: “In the wake of my spiritual experience there came a vision of a society of alcoholics, each identifying with and transmitting his experience to the next — chain-style. If each sufferer were to carry the news of the scientific hopelessness of alcoholism to each new prospect, he might be able to lay every newcomer wide open to a transforming spiritual experience.”

Also, in the letter he says, “Most common experiences, whatever their variety, do have a common denominator of ego collapse at depth. The individual faces an impossible dilemma. In my case the dilemma had been created by my compulsive drinking and the deep feeling of hopelessness.”

Although it has come under occasional criticism and not been effective for all alcoholics, Alcoholics Anonymous is now a worldwide organisation that has helped hundreds of thousands of people achieve sobriety, as well as leading to the establishment of other similar associations such as Narcotics Anonymous.

In recent years, mainstream medicine has come to an extremely materialistic understanding of the body as a machine with various moving parts. But despite this, David Tacey believes that increasingly it is being understood that we are a combination of mind, body and spirit. He says today in

Australia most leading medical schools are aware of the need for a spiritual perspective to be brought to bear on health. It will take some time for this idea to be embraced by the average local doctor; however, there are more and more doctors using alternative therapies in correlation with more mainstream medical practices.

It was only 50 years ago, he explains, that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, saw spirituality as a cause of disease rather than a cure for it. “We are in a time of enormous transition,” he says. “Suddenly the textbooks are being rewritten. The new *DSM* actually says it's quite likely spirituality can be an important aspect in healing both mental and physical disease.”

In 1999, The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Britain established the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group (SPSIG) to help psychiatrists share experiences and explore spirituality in mental health care and also increase knowledge of the research linking spirituality with better health. Today, SPSIG has over 2500 members.

It is becoming increasingly recognised that spirituality is an important factor in our health. And, as people are facing ever more demands on their time and uncertainty about their future, and figures for mental and physical illness continue to rise, David Tacey and Stephanie Dowrick offer us two very different perspectives on spirituality for addressing health issues.

But both are firm in their belief that spirituality is no longer just a choice but a necessity for our health and happiness. ☺

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