

WTE column of August 28, 2015. Editor's headline: "The many paths of healing"

CST of August 29: "Music can be part of spiritual harmony"

Most medical practitioners agree: The majority of illnesses and patient problems are a symptom of--or the result of--stress. Regrettably, "troubled relationships, inner turmoils, and other mental and spiritual conflicts underlying or accompanying the illness" are ignored by physicians; consequently, as the "New England Journal of Medicine" reported of a study, 34 percent of Americans—approximately 61 million people—used "one or more unconventional therapies or forms of non-medical healing" that year, typically without informing their treating physician. So says Tom Harpur in "The Uncommon Touch."

Inasmuch as all healing is ultimately self-healing, doctors and other healers bring treatment to the sick or injured via aiding the human organism in self-renewing. We are being healed all the time "by various energies in our bodies," Harpur quotes a colleague. "Cells are replaced, cuts are healed, tumors thrown out, various bacteria resisted." Treatment by a genuine healer "stimulates" the system.

As we know from Oliver Sacks's "Tales of Music and the Brain," listening to music also increases health. So does engaging in the practice of music-making. My own experiences bear this out. When singing in groups or practicing with a partner, vitality and joy ensue, the sense of endings.

During a recent childcare stint in California I showed my grandson, not yet nine, how I practice to a YouTube recording when a guitar partner is unavailable. A few days later, on a visit with him to an ailing neighbor who has become a friend, I took my laptop and played the accompaniment on her son's steel-string. By the time I rendered it for my son on his return from business travels—his spouse was still on the road, staffing a trade show—the child knew the piece well enough to dance to it. Naturally, his three-year-old sister joined in.

Back to Tom Harpur and his focus on unconventional healing. Mr. Harpur has been a journalist, parish priest, and editor of the religious section of the "Toronto Times." His brother, a physician, has contributed to the ideas put forth in his books and articles. Harpur began by investigating the healing traditions in Judaic, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu faiths; thus, his book explores the practices of sages like Zarathustra, the Buddha, and Jesus. Whatever he became in Church teachings, Jesus was a healer in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha, a guide of the uncommon touch with "a remarkable range of variables." Remarks on the teachings of Viktor Frankl returned me to my beloved physician-hero of old. Norman Cousins's unique self-healing is given space also.

Physical intervention—the "prescribing of medication, lab tests, surgery, or elaborate high-tech treatments of various kinds"—can be enhanced by visualization, meditation, prayer, the laying on of hands, and the cultivation of "hope, faith, love, forgiveness, courage, purpose, and meaning." These techniques are not meant to replace medical treatment, he advises; rather, they

augment something that lacks a spiritual dimension. Although our materialistic culture “dislikes the thought of non-material intervention,” he finds that the well-educated in society will avail themselves of unconventional ways of healing.

One chapter exposes tent- and television hucksters who prey on the desperate with claims of “faith-healing,” a term Harpur scorns as misleading and injurious. Another chapter, “The Placebo Effect,” examines the power of suggestion in spontaneous remissions.

Many people understand that massage is therapeutic. Therapeutic Touch (shortened “TT”) has been thoroughly scrutinized—and validated—by many studies, including an “extraordinary research project at UCLA’s School of Medicine.” Tens of thousands of nurses now practice TT, in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Professor Bernard Grad reiterates that the laying-on of hands or other non-medical technique is no panacea. It’s a tool among many, and “this kind of healing is real,” Dr. Grad is quoted in “The Uncommon Touch.”

We learn of Janet Quinn, a professor, clinical researcher, and TT practitioner at University of Colorado’s Health Science Center in Denver, who conducted controlled studies showing that the immune systems of “both healer and healee are enhanced during the process of TT.”

Since Harpur’s expositions, writers have explored anything from the Power of Reiki to Francis of Assisi’s “Alternative Way” to Energy Healing.

In California, with grandchildren who often beg to “watch something,” at one point I resorted to singing some stanzas from “The Three Ravens,” of which I was just then practicing an instrumental version. Astoundingly, when I returned to my guitar, I heard the boy sing under his breath as I played. That the medieval ballad is far from cheerful didn’t faze him.

I won’t claim to have strengthened his immune system with music; I merely sought to inspire him to practice his piano. We cannot know what, if anything, we contribute to another’s health or sense of well-being. We must go on faith, intuition, and love.