

## The Meaning of Health and The Health of Meaning

While general health might be reflected in our active life, ill health may often reveal depletion of our spirit; when confronting pain or distress, we are required to draw from deep reserves of courage and conviction. Therefore naturopathy is sympathetic to the view that health may not only involve the need to be well, but also the necessity of being successfully ill.

This requirement is sometimes highlighted in the struggle of a client who is not so much challenged by how to get well – the means - but why - the purpose of health.

The naturopath's role may not only be to convey a meaning of health, but also to help explore the health of a patient's meaning.

### Definition

Our governments are increasingly providing us with well-intentioned and ambitious pronouncements on health. Regularly updated scientific formulas deemed necessary for a healthy life are issued, yet a comprehensive definition of what health might actually be is elusive.

Is life expectancy a useful measure, if more of us are living longer but with a reduced quality of life? Are we living fully if life is unlivable without anti-depressant medication? Are our measures for health realistic when socio-economic factors predominate? And after taking all these into consideration, for those who are happy to ignore the healthful recommendations we are given, to what extent does happiness define health?

### Is the conventional view of health a mirage?

In everyday experience we observe that some of the apparently cleanest living are apt to drop dead after 'never a day's illness', while 'unhealthy' types seem to go on regardless. And whereas ill health is often associated with stress and strain, health often breaks down not in the midst of the stressful week but at the restful weekend, or not at the most strenuous point in a career but in retirement.

Physical fitness is promoted yet considerable physical deficiency need not prevent outstanding performance - some of our Olympic heroes have suffered chronic airway obstruction or heart defect. Just as impressive in daily life, couples that have been found to be technically 'inconceivable' often discover that after adopting a child, a successful pregnancy ensues!

In the UK in 1947, it was envisaged that adoption of a National Health Service, free at the point of delivery, would eventually make much of medical practice redundant and hospitals would have to close. The effect has been the complete opposite and the Service is \$2 billion dollars in debt. (BBC 2006) (1)

In the US, per capita spending on healthcare in 2002 was \$5000; Cuba spends just \$235 per person, but has average life expectancy just a few months shorter than that of the US. (The Independent 2006) (2)

In the efforts to rescue health from illness, success in modern methods might no longer be as predictable as once expected. Diagnosis, which has traditionally been more sophisticated than treatment, is in danger of becoming too technological for treatment to match. At a more basic level, common treatments formerly useful are now a leading cause of more illness.

While some of us are hypersensitive to medication and react unfavorably to surgery, others enthusiastically self-medicate or seem to thrive from countless surgical interventions. To complicate matters further, the medical phenomena of remission, which describes the spontaneous recovery of health in often termed 'hopeless' cases, continues to baffle clinicians.

Surely, to regard health as a measurable condition, a target, for generalized aims to produce wellbeing, is perhaps the most misguided aspect of the conventional view.

## Health as a continuum

From observations of 'what comes natural', naturopaths have learned not to offer one-size fits -all definition of health. Rather, variations in behavior and culture are entertained, and health is seen more as a reflection of human life rather than its aim. Health is not a state but a continuum, not a measure of us, certainly not something which is the result of a curing mentality; not a product but perhaps the forces of nature in our lives - seeking an equilibrium between our health and our meaning.

We are fortunate in naturopathy to have a distinguished history of such observers. Alongside impressions gained from others who are able to sense an interweaving of life's tapestry, an inspiring anthology of naturopathic sentiments can be made. Moreover, we do not underestimate the importance of accessing our patients' experiences, through which our methods of consultation give advantage over conventional interaction - not mere testimonials of cures but from case histories to the unfolding stories told, we have the recordings of recovery, insight and transformation that naturopathy offers.

## The Meaning of Our Health...

### Nature

*Nature is not out there as an object to be manipulated and exploited. Planet Earth is a self-organising, self-managing and self-correcting living organism and human life is Nature too: ultimately life is one, manifesting in millions of forms.*

Satish Kumar: Eco-philosopher  
Resurgence 2006 (3)

### The Body

*If the body be in all respects correctly treated, it will continue, from birth till worn out with old age, free from disease and in the full enjoyment of health. If the body becomes diseased, it is always the result of some disturbing, some offending cause and health can only be recovered by the healthy operations of the system. The system therefore does not require the application of any causes of health, for it exclusively possesses those in its own constitutional powers.*

Sylvester Graham: Hygienist  
Aesculapian Tablets 1834 (4)

*By the time anyone feels ill enough to call a doctor, he has already been receiving free treatment from a private physician whose personal services have been available to him from the moment of his conception. By inheriting the premises in which we shall spend the rest of our lives, we are born in to a hospital whose 24-hour services are designed to counteract risks of living. It is a hospital staffed by only one patient, and although we may take no conscious part in our own therapeutic activities, the fact that we have ourselves on call around the clock means that we can overcome most emergencies without having to summon outside help.*

Jonathan Miller: MD  
The Body in Question 1978 (5)

### Discovery

*Through naturopathy I lost an old fear and I began to trust my body, not in a technical sense, more how I imagine we must do in childhood. I don't consider it to be a 'regime' at all. I eat judiciously but find my food more enjoyable; I have found new sources of pleasure in exercise; and have been able to identify my tendencies to overreach myself, and can seek rest without feeling guilty. I also look forward to the feeling of exhilaration after the occasional, if inevitable 'detox'! It's as if I have been let in on the Secret of Life, yet I feel I want to tell everyone about it.*

V.M: Client

### Healing

*My experience is that natural living develops a different, more positive perception of oneself. Positive in that one has a stronger awareness of how life involves growing, healing and self-repairing. It's not simply that we have the capacity for these processes; it is what our body is doing all the time and the 'healing crisis' is a manifestation of this. This perception is so different from the conventional attitude that it takes time to truly absorb, but it is a genuine awareness of the holistic principle: that every part and aspect of us continuously affects every other.*

M.M: Client

*To live in a world that heals does not simply mean a healing of individual hurt, but rather something more ambitious: the creation of a healthy culture. This culture must be one that encourages us to come home to ourselves, to honor our true selves in relation to others, and to commit ourselves to the most universal values we can find. Such a world cannot help but heal us into new ways of living, loving and contributing.*

Dina Glouberman: Psychotherapist  
Skyros 2004 (6)

### Manner of Living

*"May I ask a question?"* asked someone. *"In what manner should one live one's daily life?"*

As though one were living for that single day, for that single hour.

*"How?"*

If you had only one hour to live, what would you do?

*"I really don't know",* he replied anxiously.

Would you not arrange what is necessary outwardly, your affairs, your will, and so on? Would you not call your family and friends together and ask their forgiveness for the harm that you might have done them, and forgive them for whatever harm they might have done to you? Would you not die completely to the things of the mind, to desires and to the world? And if it can be done for an hour, then it can also be done for the days and years that may remain.

*"Is such a thing really possible, sir?"*

Try it and you will find out.

J Krishnamurti: Philosopher  
Talks and Writings 1990 (7)

## ...and the Health of Our Meaning

### The Secret of Life

*In my hunt for the secret of life, I started my research in histology. Unsatisfied with the information cellular morphology could give me about life, I turned to physiology. Finding physiology too complex, I took up pharmacology. Still finding the situation too complicated, I turned to bacteriology. But bacteria were too complex, so I descended to the molecular level, studying chemistry and physical chemistry. After 20 years work, I was led to conclude that to understand life we have to descend to the electronic level, and to the world of wave mechanics. But electrons are just electrons and have no life at all. Evidently on the way I lost life; it had run out between my fingers.*

Albert Szent Gyorgi: Nobel Laureate  
in *The Participatory Mind* 1994 (8)

### Natural Law

*Naturopathy from beginning to end is one grand, true prayer. It teaches the Law on all planes of being, the physical, the mental, the moral, and the spiritual; and it insists that the only way to attain perfect health of the body, mind and soul is to comply with the law to the best of our ability. When we do that, we place ourselves in alignment with the constructive principle in Nature, and in exact proportion to our intelligent and voluntary cooperation with the laws of our being, all good things will come to us.*

Henry Lindlahr: MD  
*Nature Cure* 1913 (9)

### Nourishment

*The basic reason for ill health is the need of the body to defend itself against life denying influences. Fundamental as good diet is, one that contains even a minimum of the basic elements can be sufficient; so did the Irish with potatoes, the Scots with oats, and for the Far Eastern countries, rice. Because if the cook really loves the food he is cooking for the partner he loves (or even oneself), then the body can cope with a fair amount of abuse!*

A.Milne: Naturopath  
*The Nature Cure Files* 2005 (10)

### Healing and Renewal

*Allopathic medicine is the most intellectually oriented of the many healing systems we have developed, the only system which does not allow for Divine intervention, the possibility of the mysterious. But the unexplained is part of everyday life. After watching people heal in great variety of circumstances, I have come to suspect that healing is more closely related to mystery than mastery, more a function of the soul than of the mind.*

Rachel Naomi Remen: MD  
in *Voices From the Heart* 1998 (11)

*For thousands of years, rites have been teaching spiritual rebirth; yet strangely enough, man forgets the meaning. There is surely no evidence of a strong life of the spirit; and yet the penalty of misunderstanding is heavy, for it is nothing less than neurotic decay, embitterment, atrophy and sterility. It is easy enough to drive the spirit out of the door, but when we have done so the salt of life grows flat – it loses its flavor. Fortunately, the spirit always renews its strength- the equal balance of the flesh and the spirit is not lost.*

CJ Jung: Psychoanalyst  
in *The Choice is Always Ours* 1960 (12)

## Successful Illness

*It is more than taking on responsibility for my own wellbeing; having claimed illness as a part of the dense weave of my life, I have become engaged in the process of healing. In particular I have realized two things; that an illness presents an opportunity to learn about ourselves and the world we inhabit and create, and that chronic illness in particular challenges us to ask if it is possible to be successfully ill.*

TB: Client

*Our bodies remember it all. Symptoms unlock the body's memory and therefore should not be 'cured' too quickly. Conventional medicine banishes that knowledge by insisting that suffering is unnecessary because pain can be technically eliminated. Symptoms are divorced from the person who has them, secularized as mechanical mishaps, stripped of their spirit and missing pieces of history that make meaning. I think we would lose ourselves altogether if it were not for our stubborn, irrepressible symptoms calling us, requiring us, to recollect ourselves and reorient ourselves to life.*

KD: Client

## Connectedness

*I was frightened and I spoke with God. "Is it OK to love strangers?" And God said, " Who are these strangers? You make strangers: I don't make strangers".*

YS: Client

*No man is an Island; everyman is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promonterie were; as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.*

John Donne: English Poet

In The Choice is Always Ours 1960 (13)

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