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Faith Healing vs Wellness: Could it Be?

Faith-healers place their hand on you and yell, "Bam! Feel the touch of Jeee-SUS!" With this simple action, those who believe in faith healers hope that they will be miraculously cured of their disease and/or pain.

Why do I find this such a scam? Jesus healed lots of people in the gospels. It's one of the main things he does, besides preaching, before his death. It seems to me that the difference is that Jesus healed people: heart, soul and body in a ministry that centered on love and faith rather than his personal popularity.

In the gospels, the blind and disease ridden seek Jesus because they have total faith that he can heal them. They come seeking a full change, and afterwards they go and spread the word, so much so that Jesus often tells them to tone it down a bit. In the Mark 10 story of blind Bartaemus, Jesus sends him off with his usual response: "Go. Your faith has healed you." He almost makes it sound like it's Bartaemus's faith in Jesus that saves him, rather than Jesus himself.

Just like when Peter sinks in the water, Jesus rebukes him for his lack of faith. It seems like an internal process or change is required. Bartaemus and Peter need faith in order to be healed or walk on water. We have to actively seek Jesus with our faith buoyant within us. The person himself/herself brings something essential. Jesus catches people when he falls, but he doesn't just fix Peter's lack of faith and let him walk on the water amidst his fear and worryings. Fear and worry have to be let go. (Now, from where the faith to seek Christ comes, I'm not making any claims right now).

Jesus heals people through faith in Him; the problem with "faith healing" is that the poor, ill person puts their faith in the healer (who is often a charlatan) rather than in Jesus Christ. Priests and pastors don't work as men in themselves, for we are all broken. They only work as vessels to communicate the presence of Christ. All the grace and efficacy comes from Christ alone. That's why faith healers don't really work: they encourage people to believe in them, instead of Jesus. (Otherwise, the ill would not seek out specific people as faith healers).

But I do believe in a type of faith healing: the kind that Jesus does. Where faith in him transform us: body, soul and mind. Grace is a process: God acts, we respond, we repent, God acts more, we respond more, and slowly, over time we grow closer to God, to the type of true "putting on Christ" that Paul talks about, where Christ lives in us and us in him.

In this type of grace-fueled healing process, Christ transforms us. We start to learn that we don't have to worry about things, love manifests itself in the lives of those touched by grace. These saintly people who have responded to grace are like an oasis of serenity in the tides and torrents of the world. They respond with love, without judging the soul, and draw near to the wholeness with which God created humanity (maimed by the fall).

Ironically to me, as one so prone to go against poppy trends, I believe that the wholeness that grace produces in men and women of Christ is complete: mind, body and soul. As a result, it can have things in common with the wellness movement, mindfulness and peace that emphasizes the mind-body connection. Like the new age movement, I believe that a lot of illnesses and maladies have something to do with the mind, our mental states.

Stay with me here: it's not as new age crazy as it sounds. As a Catholic Christian, I recognize the mind-body connection because of the Incarnation. Christ is God who became man: 100% God, 100% man. A unity of God-spirit with a mortal human body, so yes, "God died." Because we're not gnostics and don't believe in dualism, there is a deep unity of body and mind.

But this comes from science too: the DSM IV, the authoritative manual for psychological diagnosis, includes psycho-somatic disorders, which are disorders that have no medically discernible, physical cause, yet the patient suffers from it acutely. This would be the case in someone complaining of knee pain, yet no problem with or damage to the knee could be found. Essentially, we can think ourselves sick.

To further support the idea of a strong mind-body connection that can make or break us, I call to the stand The New York Times. In January, The Times publish an article called, "The Americanization of Mental Illness." The article described how the types of mental illnesses that people suffer from vary by culture, place and time. Here are some examples:

"In some Southeast Asian cultures, men have been known to experience what is called amok, an episode of murderous rage followed by amnesia; men in the region also suffer from koro, which is characterized by the debilitating certainty that their genitals are

retracting into their bodies. Across the fertile crescent of the Middle East there is zar, a condition related to spirit-possession beliefs that brings forth dissociative episodes of laughing, shouting and singing."

We here in America wouldn't tend to think of those as typical mental illnesses. But now, says the article, America is starting to shape the way the world sees mental illness:

For more than a generation now, we in the West have aggressively spread our modern knowledge of mental illness around the world. We have done this in the name of science, believing that our approaches reveal the biological basis of psychic suffering and dispel prescientific myths and harmful stigma. There is now good evidence to suggest that in the process of teaching the rest of the world to think like us, we've been exporting our Western "symptom repertoire" as well. That is, we've been changing not only the treatments but also the expression of mental illness in other cultures. Indeed, a handful of mental-health disorders — depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anorexia among them — now appear to be spreading across cultures with the speed of contagious diseases. These symptom clusters are becoming the lingua franca of human suffering, replacing indigenous forms of mental illness. [emphasis mine]

Essentially, the American/Western understanding of mental illnesses, and the types of mental illnesses it recognizes (such as depression, PTSD, anorexia) are starting to pop up over the globe in cultures that they would normally be foreign to. What this shows is that how we think about illness affects the types of illnesses that we get, or more basically: the mind controls the body in illness as well as health. (Note: I know not everything is mental, just some, and that's what this post is focusing on).

Now that we're all on board that there really is a mind-body connection and that it can determine how we get sick, I'd like to take the next step: our mental states can actually make us sick. It is no medical secret that stress is deadly. When there is a problem in our mind, it tends to translate into a bodily ailment as well (consider catatonic schizophrenia which effectively paralyzes the person). Granted, a person can still get sick even with a completely perfect spirit.

But regardless, I think a lot of us harbor deep seated insecurities and troubles that may not interfere with daily life to the point that they qualify as mental disorders, but they may show up in other ways. For instance, I give myself tension headaches when I'm stressed because I tend to lock my shoulders. But imagine the compounded effect if I were stressed all the time: I could lose sleep, become increasingly irritable, harbor unloving feelings and

generally start to get a stomach ache.

Over years and years, my theory holds that these small bodily expressions of mental/spiritual issues could build into consuming disorders or even diseases. So do I have something in common with the chakra & meditation crowd? Yes.

But the cure is Jesus Christ. There is something to faith healing, just not the way we tend to think of it. Jesus healed the sick left and right, and he can heal us. The transforming effects of grace that work in the saints work in us too when we give ourselves over to Christ. We can learn not to worry, to have faith and be at peace with the Lord. Indeed, as Jesus tells us, "Who by worrying can add one second to his life?" Our faith in him can cure us of worldly angst, sorrow and anger because the life he offers can never be taken away.

Jesus can heal our mind and soul which, because of the body-mind connection, can heal us in the body as well. I really do think that physical health can improve through out the process of grace. Inner peace and surrender to Christ can calm our bodies as well.

One huge thing to note though: I'm not saying that all believers (or even saints) will have perfect physical health. Maladies can be completely physical in nature or even accidental. They can be a trial or a way to connect with Christ's suffering. But in the end, I think that many people could benefit from a type of faith-healing, just a Jesus-centered, grace-driven, soul-healing, inner-revival that allows our hearts to rest in him, instead of a restless, personality driven scam like so much of contemporary faith healing is.

What do you think of faith healing? Could the mind-body connection make us sick? Is there something to the idea of faith or inner peace being a force for physical healing?

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