

The Gift of Illness



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On reflection, I suspect my decision to become a doctor was based not only on a desire to help others but also on my natural curiosity to understand; *'Why do people become sick and what are the factors which encourage wellness?'* Despite my intensive training as a medical student, within a few months of entering general practice in 1983, it was blatantly clear that the presence of health had far more to do with mental and spiritual wellbeing than the mere absence of physical symptoms.

Seeing an average of forty patients a day as a general practitioner, I began to see links emerging between certain personality traits and specific illnesses. For instance, most of the patients complaining of lower back pain also complained of feeling unsupported in their lives, whether at home or at work. However, despite their craving for help, they were also the same individuals who were resistant to receiving support, often saying; *'I'm fine, don't worry... I'll do it myself.'* I found myself offering simple advice to such patients, which included; *'Let people into your life in small doses; say 'yes' to assistance rather than your customary 'No'.*

As my years in practice continued, I became increasingly fascinated by the link between the mind and the body and how body wisdom never gets it wrong. The pathological changes seen in a specific organ always seem to mirror unresolved personal issues in our inner or outer lives, begging such questions as:

- Who is the pain in the neck?
- What can't you digest? (indigestion)
- What feelings of irritability or frustration are you swallowing rather than expressing? (irritable bowel disease)
- What are you refusing to hear despite the fact the bells are ringing loudly? (tinnitus)
- I know you care for everybody else, but who takes care of you? (fibroids)

In my opinion, heart disease is not primarily caused by the usual medical suspects – high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking and high blood pressure. They are merely physiological by-products of an unhappy and stressed individual. The commonest form of heart disease is due to narrowing of the coronary arteries which feed the muscles of the heart during its relaxation or diastolic phase. The heart is associated with joy and creative freedom, which are most prolific when we are able to relax and, for a while, see beyond limiting thoughts which include paying the mortgage, saving for a pension or paying for our child's education. Since the mid-seventies, it has been known that the commonest time to experience a heart attack is between 8–9am on a Monday morning, the beginning of the work week and the perceived loss of freedom. When an individual feels trapped by circumstances, especially financial burdens, the joy ebbs out of life and their heart suffers.

My awareness of the link between the mind and the body has been supported by several experts in the fields of neurophysiology and developmental biology. One such pioneer is Dr Candace Pert who, as a neuroscientist in the 1980s, revealed that the body secretes hundreds of protein messengers known as neuropeptides, which change our physiology in response to our emotions. These messengers act as tiny keys which fit into receptor sites or locks in our cell membrane, causing us to react in certain ways to learned or past stimuli. Hence, when we hear a young child giggle, through the lock-and-key combination, the happiness we feel inside spreads outwards, creating a noticeable relaxation in the body. On the other hand, when a situation reminds us of a previous insult, the

link between the neuropeptides and their receptors leads to our muscles tightening and an increase in the heart rate as we prepare to defend our position.

All of this occurs in a split second, and it is now recognised that just thinking about a situation leads to the same neurophysiological response. In other words, the mind-body doesn't know the difference between an imaginary insult and the real thing. Over time, most of us have become hardwired for a wide variety of emotions and reactions, some of which are healthy while others are decidedly harmful in the long term. Another pioneer called Dr Bruce Lipton took the mind-body connection one step further by showing that a gene can be turned on or off by the presence of a specific lock or receptor site on the cell membrane. Yet all is not lost, for he also revealed that you can change your receptor sites by changing your beliefs. In other words, your beliefs or perceptions of life influence your biology.

Equipped with this understanding, I always ask the same question at the beginning of a consultation; *"What was going on when you first became sick?"* Time and again, I hear a similar answer; *"I know why I have cancer etc."* I have been amazed by the richness of a patient's insight into their illness. I remember one young man who had metastases from testicular cancer. *"I know why I have cancer,"* he boldly stated, *"It was the only way I could get away from an insurmountable problem at work."* I asked why he hadn't just left his job and he answered; *"I didn't have the balls!"*

But there is one more component which cannot be left out of the mix when studying health: the role of the individual's soul or spirit. Is illness just a result of misperceptions and bad choices or is there a greater plan? Based on my thirty years of research and observation, I'm in no doubt that in over ninety per cent of cases, illness is a wake-up call from the soul, telling the individual to stop and review life and perhaps alter their life's course.

This was definitely the stance I took when diagnosed with breast cancer at the beginning of 2012. I couldn't go along with the popular belief that I was being attacked by an outside invader. I refused to go to battle against my own body or soul. Instead, I remembered that nothing had ever happened in my life, however painful, that hadn't changed me for the better. I never doubted that my soul loves me and that it created the cancer for my own good. All I needed to do was to hear its message and make the most of the possibilities it was affording me.

When I asked myself the question; *"What was happening when the breast lump appeared?"* it felt highly relevant that I had just submitted the first draft of my latest book called *The Healing Power of the Sacred Woman*, which devotes a large section to the underlying causes of breast cancer. Embraced by the love of my soul, I used the opportunities of my disease to explore my deeply held beliefs about love and nurturing. It quickly became apparent that in my desire to please other people, I commonly ignored my own needs, with my decisions often being based on their happiness and not my own. Now, a year later, I see the gifts of my illness as the renewal and deepening of friendships, a strengthening of self-confidence and most important of all, a profound love and appreciation of the essential me.

 **DR CHRISTINE PAGE HMAR**

www.christinepage.com

Dr Christine Page is a mystical physician, lecturer and author of seven books including *Frontiers of Health* and her latest book, *The Healing Power of the Sacred Woman*.

