

Working with the Body - Talk to the Guild of Psychotherapists, 12/01/11.

Normally I talk to acupuncturists about the psyche so it's a refreshing change to be talking to psychotherapists about the body. In a way, that simple statement highlights the whole point of the talk. In our culture we do tend to treat the mind and body as separate. We assume, for example, that constipation is a physical problem and that depression is a psychological one - with very different kinds of remedies for each condition. I'm going to put forward the contrary view and to suggest that they can be treated as both physical and psychological conditions, and that to do so opens up interesting approaches for all kinds of practitioners - in this instance for psychotherapists.

Here are some quotations which challenge the accepted view. The first comes from one of the top cancer surgeons in the USA, a man who spends his days in the operating theatre cutting and sewing; treating the body, you might think, entirely on the physical level as if it were no more than a complex machine.

'Years of experience have taught me that cancer and indeed nearly all diseases are psychosomatic. This may sound strange to people accustomed to thinking that psychosomatic ailments are not truly 'real' but, believe me, they are.'

(Bernie S. Siegel, Love, Medicine and Miracles, Arrow, 1988, p 111.)

Fascinating isn't it? No least because it suggests that if you are interested in a patient's psyche then you can learn a lot about it from his or her disease.

Now here is a similar idea expressed by a person with psoriasis, a very obvious physical condition which turns the skin, relentlessly, into a hard and scaly shell. Luckily this patient is also a great writer - John Updike.

'Was not my strength, my insistent specialness, somehow linked to my psoriasis?...What was my creativity, my relentless need to produce but a parody of my skin's overproduction? Was not my thick literary skin which shrugged off rejection slips and patronising reviews by the sheaf, a superior version of my poor vulnerable own?....And with my changeable epiderm came a certain transcendent optimism; like a snake I shed many skins...'

That's a fascinating view, and it leads directly to his conclusion which is a real challenge to the assumptions of modern medicine. I pick up the quote,

'To my body...psoriasis is normal and it's suppression abnormal. Psoriasis is my health.'

(John Updike, Self Consciousness; Memoirs 1989)

I can't resist one more great writer. Here is Boris Pasternak.

'Your health is bound to be affected if, day after day you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune. Our nervous system isn't just a fiction, it's part of our physical body...and is inside us like the teeth in the mouth, It can't be forever violated with impunity.'

(Boris Pasternak. Dr Zhivago)

Our nervous system is part of our physical body. Hmm. Maybe the unconscious is too.

Now, it may be relatively easy to accept all this - theoretically, so to speak. What is more difficult, is to know what to do about it. I know doctors who understand that many of their patient's ailments are psychosomatic, but the knowledge leaves them helpless. Young kids are given steroid inhalers at the same time as their doctors know that asthma is very often a sign of emotional distress. The same point applies, in principle, to psychotherapists. In other words, can you work with the psyche through the body - through its moods, its sensations, its limitations, its symptoms?

Here's a recent example from my own life.

I lived happily with a woman for many years but we split up fifteen years ago. We've stayed on good terms and talk to each other regularly. We have both had a number of relationships since but neither of us has ever settled down with anyone else.

Her daughter, to whom I am very close, got married in the summer and because her father died when she was young, her mother and I played mother and father of the bride together over three days or so.

A month later we met again and she told me she wanted us to get back together, properly. I was astonished. I listened, and said I needed to absorb the idea and think about it.

I woke that night with crippling back pain. It lasted for three days in spite of treatments and painkillers and hot water bottles worn next to the skin. I'd never had back pain before, and I'd not injured myself that day. I'm sure Bernie Seigal, the American cancer surgeon, would reach an instant diagnosis of a psychosomatic illness. And, believe me, it was real.

Finally, after two days in pain, I looked to see what my psyche might be up to. It took a while but eventually I realised that the back pain was stopping me doing three things - moving quickly, bending down, and thinking. Ah (it was beginning to dawn on me) perhaps I shouldn't make a quick decision. Perhaps I shouldn't bend to my previous partner's will, her timetable, her need for an answer. And third, perhaps I shouldn't think about it at all - after all I can think myself into or out of practically anything - and all equally plausibly. Perhaps I should feel my way to an answer instead.

I was obviously on the right track because the pain went away almost immediately, and left only a residual soreness for a day or so - after all the body was affected and it did need to recover at the level of tissue.

I tell this story for two reasons. One is to show that investigating body symptoms really can lead easily to an understanding of the psyche. I sometimes wonder if psychotherapists know enough about their clients' aches and pains - not least because I'm sure some clients simply don't think of talking about them, or at least talking about them in any detail. Bad breath, constipation, headaches, poor circulation, may not seem to them relevant to the process of therapy, but I think they can be. And second, I tell this story because I don't think I would have thought about this incident in this way but for my years as a practitioner of oriental medicine - for that system of medicine provides a framework for thinking about the meaning of symptoms.

Oriental medicine has been in continuous use for well over two thousand years - the basic text, which is clearly a compilation, is dated about 500 BC, and it is still used clinically today - and it has treated countless millions of people. It does not separate the physical from the mental, the emotional, or the spiritual. Actually, putting it negatively like that is a serious misrepresentation. It regards a person's experience of life as one phenomenon.

Take migraines. In oriental medicine, simplifying a bit, migraines are the result of strong flows of energy arising in the liver, rushing upwards and getting trapped in the head. So why would that happen? How does it explain the typical signs and symptoms of a migraine? And does it throw any light on the state of the psyche?

First, I need to explain a bit about the basic functions of the liver. As most sufferers know, chocolate, alcohol and animal fats are common triggers for a migraine; why is that? It's because all of these have to be processed in the liver, and they all make big demands on that organ. Simplifying a bit, the effort this takes allows excess energy to rise up to the head. That's part of it. Another part of it is that migraines often have a strong effect on the eyes; some people really can't stand light at all while it's on, and many have to stay in a darkened room or wear dark glasses. According to this system of medicine, the channel that carries the energy of the liver through the body runs right through the eyes, so they are bound to be affected.

And then a migraine is often accompanied by nausea; why is that? And what is the connection with the liver? The liver is a huge organ and its tip extends from the right hand side across the midline of the body and almost touches the stomach. When its energy rises it meets the diaphragm, a very thick band of muscle which lies right across the body under the rib cage. How to get through? The obvious route is up the tube which links stomach to mouth. So, the sensation of energy rushing up that tube is nausea, and if the flow is strong enough, it will actually bring up the contents of the stomach as it rises.

So much for the links between the organ and the signs and symptoms of a migraine. But John Updike and Bernie Seigal would want to know what is really going on, what a migraine means. And oriental medicine has an answer to that, an answer which links all I've said so far to mental and emotional states.

Oriental medicine holds that each organ has a wide range of functions, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual - though, as I've mentioned, this system of thought doesn't separate them in this way but sees them as consistent aspects of one whole.

In the case of the liver the whole has to do with vision. It is the ability to look ahead, to plan, to see where one is going, to have some kind of impelling purpose to one's life, actually to grow. It is the energy of moving forward, of reaching out into the future. So the fundamental pathology is frustration. That is, if the liver is not working well then you will be unable to move forward in life, unable to see or create a future, and it will be very frustrating.

There are many consequences, many ways in which any individual may express this frustration. One of them is by railing against the world, being bitter and aggrieved, taking it out on other people; a kind of chronic anger. Not a coincidence that this state is often so closely associated with alcoholism, for alcohol has such a devastating physical effect on the liver. Another possibility is depression. If a person loses any sense of purpose in life, and hope of a future, then he or she may simply give up and relapses into greyness and passivity.

Here's another example. The small intestine is basically a tube linking the stomach to the colon, or large intestine. As matter comes down and passes along the small intestine it does the most remarkable thing. It absorbs nutrients through the walls of the tube and takes them into the blood stream to be used. Anything which the body does not need, or indeed which would be harmful is not absorbed but is passed onto the large intestine for elimination. Fantastic. Making decisions all day long, and the overwhelming majority of them are good ones. Now take a young woman who keeps on having sexual relationships with men who treat her badly. Of course it makes sense to enquire into her family background and so on - but it also makes sense to enquire into the state of her small intestine. According to Chinese medicine then her inability to distinguish what is good for her from what is not will be equally true at all levels - the physical, the emotional and so on.

And this idea is has a firm physiological basis. Although the ancient chinese could have no way of knowing this - at least no way according to western methodologies, there is only one organ which has the same kind of tissue as the heart. As you will have guessed, it is the small intestine. In other words, the functioning of that organ - and its pathology - must be intimately linked with the heart. And in every culture I know of, the heart is our emotional centre. So if this young woman is unable to discriminate well in matters of the heart, then it is worth enquiring about the state of her small intestine. There are many routes back to health, and this might provide one of them

I can't go into more detail or more examples in this brief talk. If I have opened a window into new approaches and new concepts then I'll be well satisfied - because then you can follow them up for yourselves.

But I want to leave you with one last idea. I believe that just as the unconscious speaks through dreams so it speaks through the body - because it seeks ways of by-passing the control of the conscious mind. So the body's symptoms, its quirks and its puzzles, its sudden unexplained pains and discomforts, as well as its chronic ailments and even disabilities are not simply accidental malfunctions of mechanism but accurate reports of an inner state - reports expressed in a language which, like the language of dreams, is allusive, suggestive and symbolic. Accordingly they can speak of depths of feeling and significance which a client would find difficult to express in linear grammatical sentences - even if he or she were fully aware of them.

Fascinating reports. You may care to read them. You may find them useful in your work.