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# The Christian as Healer

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*As you have sent me into the world,  
I have sent them into the world.*

*John 17:18*

*But yield who will to their separation.  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one sight.*

*Robert Frost*

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the nature of the doctor-patient relationship from a Christian point of view. More specifically, to pose the question: What is it that a Christian physician can — and must — bring to the professional encounter in the name of Christ?

From time immemorial, the relationship between a physician and his/her patient has been recognized as something unlike any other relationship in society. The very nature of disease, the fear and anguish of physical and emotional pain, the ritual of disrobing and finally the communication of sensitive and intimate details of one's life to another human being whom one may or may not know well — all this marks the relationship as extraordinary and one to be grounded in competence, compassion and confidentiality.

All ancient societies — both Eastern and Western — have believed that there is a direct relationship between disease and its treatment, and man and his gods. And all have believed that the physician (or his Shamanistic counterpart) is a sacred person. It is significant that, although in current practice in this country it is customary to refer to medicine as an "occupation", it was originally called a "profession" because of its relation to religious orders. To "profess" was to take upon oneself the vows of a

religious order. Under the influence of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, a synthesis of learning and commitment to service developed so that "religious professionals" served society as physicians, lawyers, educators and political advisors.<sup>1</sup> The medieval university was one of the major works of these religious professionals with emphasis on what was to be regarded as the noble professions: medicine, law and divinity.

Often these were clergy (as were many Jewish rabbis who served simultaneously as physicians), and almost all students were required to take at least minor clerical orders. By the 16th century, the word "profession" was applied to men who, though not ordained, nonetheless practiced their professional activities within the framework of a religious discipline. It was this ethos which shaped the practice of medicine in Europe and America up until the Civil War.<sup>2</sup>

What all this implies is that, from a historical perspective, man's cosmic view of himself and the meaning of his life, his disease, his suffering and his death have always been inter-related and inter-dependent. It is only in the Cartesian mind-body dualism of the last three hundred years, with the subsequent emergence of 19th century Scientific Positivism and what David Schön has called "20th Century Technical Rationality", that man has "emancipated" himself from such cosmic dependence.<sup>3</sup> Yet in so doing, he appears to have cut himself off from the deepest moorings which have always given him a sense of inner stability amid the trials and vicissitudes of life.

How is the physician — especially the Christian physician — to understand his/her role in light of the increasing de-personalization of a technological society? Are the religious assumptions of the past to be understood simply as pre-modern relics with academic interest but no contemporary value? In fact, is technological medicine sufficient to meet any of modern man's needs?

### **Voices Call for Precepts**

In recent years, as enthusiasm for science as the Grand Emancipator of society has begun to decline in the face of an increasing threat of nuclear holocaust, voices have begun to be raised which sound familiarly ancient in their call for a return to the precepts of old. Abraham Heschel, in an address before the American Medical Association, stated:

Medicine is more than a profession. Medicine has a soul, and its calling involves not only the application of knowledge and the exercise of skill but also the facing a human situation. It is not an occupation for those to whom career is more precious than humanity or for those who value comfort and serenity above service to others. The doctor's mission is prophetic.<sup>4</sup>

In this keynote address to the leading professional organization of American medicine, Heschel boldly touched on an issue which lies close to the heart of the doctor-patient relationship: the prophetic aspect of the doctor's mission to the patient as a person. How is this to be understood? It

will only make sense if we can re-define the purpose and goals of the professional relationship. This is admittedly difficult for modern man, for he/she — like all of us — is the product of his/her education and the philosophical bias of the society and the times in which we live. The Weltanschauung of our times is a direct outgrowth of the philosophical thought of Western Europe since the Enlightenment. Thus a concept like “prophetic mission” has an unfamiliar, almost piously alien, sound to it. But if we re-define the purpose of medicine as “healing” rather than “therapy”, then suddenly another broader dimension of reality is available which then allows us to re-frame both the problem and the solution.

Therapy — whether it is surgical, medical or psychological — is what we are trained to do. And we do it well. And it is vitally important. Yet therapy alone is insufficient. It is insufficient because it excludes the uniquely spiritual dimension of man and his search for meaning and purpose in life. In choosing to remain particularistic in its approach, modern medicine is no longer holistic. That is, it is incapable of viewing the patient as a whole person. On the other hand the clinical practice of medicine can become an authentic healing art only when it is based upon a holistic view of man.

### **Concept of Holism**

Holism (taken from the Greek root meaning “whole” and from which comes the verb “to heal”) is an ancient concept which has found recrudescence in the literature of Western political and scientific thought through the efforts of the South African statesman Jan Smuts:

The whole is not a mere mechanical system. It consists indeed of parts, but it is more than the sum of the parts, which a purely mechanical system necessarily is. The essence of a mechanical system is the absence of all inwardness, of all inner tendencies and relation and activities of the system or its parts. There is no inwardness of action or function either on the part of the body or its parts. Such is a mechanical body, and only such bodies have been assumed to exist on a mechanical hypothesis. A whole, which is MORE than the sum of its parts, has something internal, some inwardness of structure and function, some specific inner relations, some internality of character or nature which constitutes that “more”<sup>5</sup>

For the Christian, the basis of healing — that is, “a healing made manifest by a changed attitude to life so that the local restoration of health becomes durable and progressive”<sup>6</sup> — is integration. The center of integration is the spirit of the soul (or the true self) which informs the rational mind, cleanses and purifies the emotions and can renew the body with strength and vitality. It is this inner orientation - this view of reality which seeks to integrate spirit, mind and body - which the Christian physician brings to bear on the encounter with the other person.

Let us ask the question: What are the attributes of a true physician? However long the desired list may be, it seems to me that there are at least four universal attributes: (1) technical competence which would include particularistic knowledge and skill; (2) compassion; (3) the ability to

inspire the patient to get well — that is, the capacity of character to mobilize the healing forces resident in the patient; (4) wisdom — that is, the ability to apply the appropriate treatment to the specific needs and situation of the patient after having taken all things into consideration.

### **Purpose of Attributes**

What do these attributes have to do with holism? And what do they have to do with being a Christian? In one sense, nothing. Both ancient and contemporary medical practice give eloquent testimony to the fact that one can be a wonderfully skilled, compassionate, inspirational and wise physician without believing in some “internality of character” or without being a Christian or without being outwardly religious at all. If this is so — that is, if being a Christian is not a pre-requisite to being a wise, compassionate and skillful physician — then what is it that the Christian physician qua Christian brings, if anything, to his meeting with the patient?

As a Christian, with all the flaws, foibles and fallacies of my humanity, I find that my self-definition has gradually changed to that of a person who has come to know God and live life in a certain way through the message and life of Jesus of Nazareth. What Jesus said about God, man and the world, I have found to correspond to reality as I know reality to be. Born out of that view regarding the ultimate realities of life has emerged a personal relationship of trust and love which is both unconditional and yet reciprocal. I know that I am deeply loved though I live in a world filled with lovelessness. I have slowly come to realize that there is a purpose and meaning possible to my life which transcends the immediacy of my personal needs and the otherwise overwhelming impression that life is filled with nothing more than banality and senselessness. In coming to know God in this new way, I have come to know myself in a new way and have thus been confronted with my inveterate self-centeredness. Though wanting to hide from this unflattering side of myself, I have experienced the amazing realization that God accepts me as I am and loves me as I am, even in the midst of my self-hate. I have come to see that the Creator of the universe simply wants a relationship of true intimacy with me and has invited me to participate, as a free moral agent, in this relationship. This knowledge of God, as a Father Who loves His children, was brought to me by Jesus of Nazareth Whom I recognize as embodying the likeness and essence of God Himself. I know I have been called to follow this Jesus, in the uniqueness of my own life story and personality, as the truest way to intimacy with God. On the other hand, I struggle with this call, for it creates both pain and joy in the tension created by being at once a servant of God and a servant to my other, more worldly desires. But I know that following Jesus is the only path to true inner freedom, and that I can become truly human only through the inner liberation of the spirit.

Such a relationship with God, through Christ, eventually influences

and re-forms how the Christian thinks about everything else in life. Every encounter is couched potentially in terms of the Christ within Who desires to reach out to touch the person without. Not to convert, not to proselytize. Only to accept, to love, to suffer with. Thus the mission for the Christian becomes one of "being" Christ in the world — that is, being present as a human being in concrete ways which reflect the love and compassion of God. For the physician, it means being present to one's patient in a way which is humanly authentic (e.g., dealing with the immediate technical problems with skill and compassion) and divinely authentic (e.g., seeing beyond the immediacy of the problem to the broader, more holistic dimension of life). It is out of this divine authenticity and sensitivity to the patient as person that one can begin to hear a silent cry for deeper integration and healing). Yet we are called to something more. We are called to be a "living Reminder" of the story of God through Christ,<sup>7</sup> that is, we are called to help the patient see how his/her own story of pain is connected with the pain and love of a God Who knows them and wants to heal them in the midst of their anguish and frailty. This is what it means to be a witness — that is, one who has personal knowledge of something and testifies to that knowledge. It is not so much a ministry of "action" as a ministry of "being". It is not an added set of attributes, but rather a different way of being in the world. A Christian is a person who has a unique story to live out. And if one happens to be a physician, then he or she has the privilege of living God's story through one's skill, compassion, inspiration and wisdom. But one does so in the name of Him Who sent him. And it is this awareness of "being sent" that makes the professional encounter more than a chance meeting along life's path. For the Christian, every patient is a person to be loved and every appointment has the potential for a divine encounter.

### Physician's Prophetic Mission \*

Abraham Heschel spoke of the prophetic mission of the physician. What did he mean? A prophet is one who calls a people back to the ways of God, to the ways of old. He speaks with bold, yet loving, concern both for his people and for his God. This was always the way it was in the Old Testament. A man or woman with a vision which transcended the immediate needs of the people spoke to the broader, more eternal needs within the human heart and society at large. It is in this sense that I understand Heschel to be speaking to our generation in his own prophetic voice. He is calling the physician to recover the prophetic vision of the deeper need of the patient as a person. In so doing he has called the physician to claim our God-given ministry of healing the person from the inner fragmentation of contemporary life which is taking such a toll on the mind and body.

The Christian physician hears God's call to a prophetic ministry and knows that this is the ultimate vocation. As important as our skills are,

they are insufficient to touch the heart. It is only in a deep, inner connectedness to God that our greatest power to heal lies. And it is to this healing ministry — no more but no less — that we have been called.

True medicine only arises from the creative knowledge of the last and deepest powers of the whole universe; only he who grasps the innermost nature of man can cure in earnest.

—Paracelsus

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