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McGuire, M. B., & Kantor, D. J. (1987). Belief systems and illness experiences: The case of non-medical healing groups. In J. A. Roth & P. Conrad (Vol. Eds.), *Research in the Sociology of Health Care: Vol. 6. The experience and management of chronic illness* (pp. 221-248). Jai Press.

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BELIEF SYSTEMS AND ILLNESS EXPERIENCES: THE CASE OF NON-MEDICAL HEALING GROUPS

Meredith B. McGuire and Debra J. Kantor

An important, and often neglected, aspect of the illness experience is *meaning*—that is, how affected persons make sense of their experiences. Responses to illness, coping strategies, and the healing process itself are all shaped by the meanings people apply to their illnesses. This chapter examines some of the nonmedical approaches to illness used by middle-class suburbanites in order to highlight the importance of meaning in all illness experiences. The particular interpretations applied in these alternative healing systems vary, but the way these interpretive frameworks shape the illness experience sheds light on the broader significance of meaning in health, illness, and healing.

Sociologists have typically viewed “non-scientific” medical systems in modern society as remnants of primitive or peasant, old-country traditions, or as characteristic of uneducated, lower-class persons who cannot afford modern “scientific” medical treatment. Our research in a suburban area, however, suggests that nonmedical forms of healing are actually rather widespread among educated, fully acculturated, economically secure people. Similarly, contrary to the usual image of adherents of alternative

Research in the Sociology of Health Care, Volume 6, pages 221–248.
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ISBN: 0-89232-834-7

healing, these people did not use it to the exclusion of medical treatment; rather, they viewed alternative healing approaches as a complement and corrective to the limitations of modern medicine. Furthermore, alternative healing methods were not typically something to which persons turned in desperation, when medical efforts were failing. Instead, virtually all respondents in this study were initially attracted to the healing groups' whole belief system—including its approach to health and illness—and then gradually began trying that approach in their own lives as needs arose.

Our main focus is the meaning of healing to adherents. We are looking for underlying definitions of health, illness, and healing in each of these alternative healing systems, because they differ dramatically from the conceptions of the dominant medical system.

This chapter examines briefly the belief systems of three such alternative healing groups, as represented by local adherents of Unity, Women Aglow, and a psychic healing circle. It demonstrates the importance of examining believers' ideals of health and wellness, their notions of illness and healing, and their ideas about the causes and meanings of illness. Most important to an understanding of alternative healing practices is adherents' image of healing power—its nature, source and location, and how it is channeled to individuals who need it.

The idea of health is a socially defined norm. Each group's idea of health embodies its distinctive ideals. It is impossible to understand why a group uses healing as it does without understanding what it considers to need healing—that is, what falls short of the norm of healthiness. A group's overarching meaning system shapes its basic definitions of health. The groups described here were similar in their insistence upon a holistic image of health [3]. Health or wellness was not merely—indeed, not mainly—a physical condition; it included mental, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. The groups differed as to which aspects were central, but all rejected a purely physical conception of health.

Likewise, ideas of illness and healing are shaped by adherents' overall meaning systems. One of the most serious problems with some studies of alternative healing is the assumption that adherents share the dominant medical system's notions of illness and healing. Adherents of alternative healing, however, often have radically different notions of what needs to be healed, of what they consider to be a healing, and of how healing takes place.

Furthermore, their interpretations of illness embody their attempts to deal with the problems of *meaning* linked with illness, pain, suffering, and death. The issue of meaning is generally not addressed by the dominant medical system, but in many alternative healing systems it is central. Why do people suffer? Why do people get sick, despite preventive measures? Why do good people have troubles and bad people appear to flourish?

Why do some people die “before their time”? Why has this misfortune happened to *me*?

Underlying all alternative healing systems is an alternative understanding of what causes illness. Part of the healing process is the sick person's and healer's co-construction of an illness etiology. Etiologies are analytical, focusing on certain facts and discarding others as irrelevant. They result in a culturally meaningful explanation of the illness that specifies causal relations among selected facts and connects them with the larger, socially prescribed, or “ideal” relations of that group [8].

All healing systems include ideas about where healing power is located and how it is channeled to where it is needed. Etiologies of illness yield information as to the group's ideas about disease-causing power, and therapies embody ideas about how that power can be overcome. From this perspective, the treatment of illness is essentially the restoration of the balance of power—by weakening the disease-causing power or by strengthening the victim's power [8]. The groups compared here have differing images of healing power, its source, and how it is mediated to the ill person. Specifically, they differ in how much power they attribute to the individual or to external forces.

METHOD

This paper uses material from a larger study of all types of nonmedical healing found in the suburban communities of western Essex County, N.J., and in nearby counties where groups draw adherents from Essex (over 130 different groups or healers were identified). Some groups of each healing type—including groups described here—have been studied intensively by participant observation for 10 to 18 months; other groups have been visited only occasionally. A total of 255 group sessions were observed and recorded in detail; 71 of these were observations of the specific groups described below.

Three hundred thirty-two interviews (1–3 hours long) have been conducted with leaders, healers, adherents, and clients of the various forms of nonmedical healing. Of these, 29 were with Women Aglow, 26 with Unity, and nine with members of the particular psychic healing group reported here (and an additional 31 interviews were conducted with other psychic healers/adherents). Interviews were conducted according to an open-ended schedule; verbatim transcripts of these interviews, together with extensive field notes of ethnographic material, provide the empirical base of these interpretations.

We have been studying five broad types of nonmedical healing (although several groups represent an overlap between types): (1) Christian healing,

(2) meditation and Human Potential groups, (3) traditional Metaphysical groups, (4) occult and eclectic groups, and (5) manipulation/technique practitioners. Three of these types are described in this chapter.

FEATURES OF GROUPS STUDIED

This chapter uses Women Aglow to exemplify a Christian healing group; Unity represents a traditional Metaphysical group, and a local psychic healing circle exemplifies the occult and eclectic type.

Christian Groups

Most of these groups base their healing emphasis primarily upon New Testament descriptions of Jesus' healing ministry and the place of healing in the early churches. Generally, although these groups were middle-class, members were less well to do than in the other types studied. Far more women than men were active members in gender-mixed groups, but men were conspicuously predominant in number and influence among the leadership of all groups. Members were drawn from all age groups, but were mainly older middle age (40–60). The groups studied were not racially mixed, and no middle-class black Christian healing group was found in the racially mixed suburban communities studied. Christian groups were highly sectarian in orientation—that is, extremely intolerant of non-Christian forms of healing.

Women's Aglow, International, is a very good example of these Christian healing groups. It is a nondenominational fellowship of pentecostal (Full Gospel) women. The movement began in 1967 in Seattle, eventually taking its name from a Scripture verse admonishing Christians to "Be aglow and burning with the Spirit" (Romans 12: 11). Since then, numerous local Women's Aglow fellowships have developed—1300 worldwide. The international organization publishes an attractive, glossy monthly magazine, provides Bible study guides, paperback books (with special emphasis on themes of interest to women), pamphlets, instructional and devotional tape cassettes, and television and radio series of programs¹ [see also 1, 2, 9, 13, 19].

Although the membership is essentially all female, the international organization requires that each chapter's advisors be men (since they believe that Scripture teaches that women should be submissive to men's authority). Furthermore, in order to serve as officers of Aglow, women must obtain their husbands' permission, as well as the approval of their local pastors and chapter advisors. The activities of Aglow are, for most members, only one—albeit very important—aspect of their religiosity; most

are also active in local churches and watch much religious programming on television. Very few of the members are employed full-time. Religious and child-rearing activities dominate their daytime lives. It is not uncommon for a member to spend 3–4 half-days per week on Aglow and other religious group activities.

Healing is an important part of the Aglow focus, since healing is one of the "gifts of the Spirit" Pentecostal Christians believe God gives them. Although members recognize the extraordinary healing ministries of faith healers, such as Kathryn Kuhlman and Oral Roberts, they also emphasize that the Spirit works through ordinary Christians. Thus, regular prayer meetings usually include petitions for healing of members and their loved ones; study group members frequently lay hands on each other in healing prayer, and testimonies often recount stories of healings of body, mind, and spirit.

One typical weekly "prayer and share" meeting began with a brown bag lunch in a church basement. Conversation consisted of swapping advice about children's entertainment; members felt that too much children's TV, games, and other influences were not "of the Lord." Members talked about how to control children's activities in the face of strong social pressures and other cultural influences.

After a leisurely lunch, members were joined upstairs in the church by others who came just for the prayer service. A lengthy period of gospel hymns opened the service. The opening blessing was led by the chapter President, who included prayers for several organizational needs, as well as the ritual invocation of the Spirit and exorcism of "other" spirits. There were Scripture readings, more hymns, followed by three long (30–40 minutes) prepared testimonies by members. These testimonies were stylized, quiet, straightforward, and somewhat halting (in marked contrast to the short, "impromptu" yet proficient, fervent testimonies typically given in many Pentecostal prayer services).

One emphasized how the Lord had helped her overcome difficulties in her marriage and adjust to the bad situation of a husband who was not Born Again. Another talked about how frequently her husband had been transferred from one part of the country to another and how important her faith and the local churches were in helping to keep the family stable and to settle into unfamiliar towns. The third described a problem child and how his symptoms could be reinterpreted through the eyes of faith.

After the testimonies, there was a long period of praise, in which participants all prayed prayers of praise—some in "tongues" (glossolalia) out loud and simultaneously. This style of prayer is common to most Pentecostal groups and not peculiar to Aglow. One member also pronounced a prophecy in proficient tongues; a brief interpretation of the prophecy was "received" by another member: the Lord was reminding the group to "wait

on” Him, even when it was not convenient in their busy lives; He was telling them that He had never promised it would be easy to be a Christian—they had to sacrifice and use self-control.

After more Scripture and hymns, there was a period for petitions, during which participants presented special needs for the prayers of the group. Sometimes they described these petitions in detail (such as going into a lengthy description of a woman who had Lupus, her family and their needs), but more often a simple sentence was sufficient. The service leader gathered the petitions, figuratively, with a fervent prayer for healing and a show of God’s power. The vigorous delivery style of this prayer led to another period of prayers out loud by the entire group—this time with more glosolalia—clearly a crescendo in the fervor of this prayer meeting. As the prayers died down, the music leader played a few chords to introduce a favorite hymn. More hymns were requested and enthusiastically sung by members of the audience. A brief final blessing and announcements ended the service.

There were several local chapters of Aglow in the region. A typical chapter held large monthly luncheon meetings at a restaurant; these attracted over 100 paying members for an entire afternoon, which typically featured national or international movement speakers. There were smaller weekly prayer meetings (attracting some 50 people) in a Full Gospel church. Regular members typically also belonged to Bible study/prayer groups of some 8–20 persons who met weekly in members’ homes. The chapter organized a substantial “prayer-chain” which mobilized the prayers of members for anyone requesting prayers for a particular need—a forthcoming operation, a child’s illness, recuperation after an accident. The prayer groups also often organized concrete expressions of mutual support and care, arranging for food and child care for families of sick members, visiting people in hospital, accompanying frightened friends going for medical tests, collecting money for special therapeutic equipment, etc.

Healing activities in this group, as in other Christian groups, were mainly in the form of prayer and laying on of hands. Words of Scripture, too, were important in the healing process. While healing was seen as a very important “gift of the Spirit,” it was not a primary reason for most members’ belonging. Nevertheless, healing was a significant function in virtually every Aglow meeting, and it was an important part of the network of mutual support for these women.

Metaphysical Groups

For the purposes of this typology, the term refers mainly to the early 20th century “Metaphysical Movement” which spawned groups such as “I AM,” Theosophy, Christian Science, Unity, and Religious Science. While

these groups hold many beliefs in common with the “occult and eclectic” type described below, they are organized more like denominations, maintain church buildings, and control religious teaching. They also emphasize their continuity with Christian traditions far more than do eclectic and occult groups.

Unity, or Unity School of Christianity, is a prime example of this type of group. An offshoot of the turn-of-the-century metaphysical movement, Unity was established by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. It was incorporated in 1903 as an educational society, with a correspondence school and publishing enterprise. In the 1920s the group separated from the New Thought Alliance (an association of various metaphysical movements) and gradually developed its denominational form [4, 5, 10]. Although it has legal status as a religious organization, however, Unity’s members—like those of Women’s Aglow—often belong to other churches simultaneously. Thus census data do not represent the extent of membership and influence of this group.

The Association of Unity Churches listed, in 1981, 361 affiliated churches and study groups in North America, and an additional 99 affiliates in other countries. Much of Unity’s influence comes from its extensive publishing; many of its books and magazines are read widely by people not affiliated with Unity. Three periodicals in particular reach wider audiences: *Daily Word* (a pocket-sized monthly magazine with daily meditations and “affirmations”), *Wee Wisdom* (an attractive children’s magazine), and *Unity Magazine* (a broader teaching tool, founded in 1889 by the Fillmores).

Like other metaphysical movements, Unity emphasizes the transcendent nature of self rather than a distant deity. Accordingly, individuals have total control of their lives; there are no chance events. Indeed, things that appear to be chance or luck are known “intuitively” to be “the inner spirit, the activity of God.” Every single moment of life is filled with meaning and lessons; one has only to become aware of them. Believers must “Be true to this moment, for a divine experience awaits us all.” This emphasis upon individual responsibility and the here-and-now has appeal to this movement’s largely middle-class following.

One Unity center studied had over 500 on its mailing list and an average attendance of 100–120 adherents at the Sunday services. It also offered daily noontime services, one weeknight service, and several study groups. Services attracted a largely middle-aged, mostly female, but racially integrated group. A second Unity center studied had an average attendance of 60 people. Its members were older, generally middle-aged to elderly, with few young adults. Women outnumbered men by a significant margin, but there were fewer minority members.

To become a “student of Truth,” as Unity adherents call themselves, requires little commitment to the group itself. Members may simultaneously maintain membership in other religions; Unity membership requires

no dues or obligations. Each Unity Center operates independently and may take on distinctive characteristics as the result of its leadership or congregation composition. Nevertheless, centers are required to have all books used in study groups approved by the central headquarters (Unity of the Infinite Presence) in Michigan. Also, the weekly affirmation statements which are thematic in Unity services are supplied by the central headquarters.

A typical Unity meeting consisted of: a preliminary meditation; opening statement (containing the day's affirmation statement); the Lord's Prayer (in song); a welcome and the announcements; meditation hymn (a solo performance); the lesson; offertory; hymn; and closing prayer. Thus, in many respects, Unity worship services resemble many Protestant denominational services. Lessons were typically delivered by the Center's minister; occasionally, licensed Unity teachers were substitutes for the regular minister. Lesson themes were taken from biblical stories, popular psychology, metaphysics, or everyday concerns such as inflation.

Unity's emphasis on individuality is reinforced by the process of meditation which, while performed in a group setting, is totally introspective, requiring no interaction among members. Meditations are led by the minister and are given in the first person—as one minister explained, “so as not to impinge on anyone's ‘space’.” The goal of meditation is to get in touch with one's true self, God within. The goal is that: “Order, harmony, perfect peace are restored to my mind and heart.” The lights are dimmed, the body relaxed, soft background music is provided. The leader's soft voice frequently evokes nature imagery to assist in becoming “still.” A typical meditation contained the following images:

Visualize a quiet pool and the still waters of that scene. Take the time to get the image clear. [pause] Whisper into this scene: My mind is a quiet pool. My mind is stirred only by the ripples of God's inspiration. I AM the keeper of my mind. No condition can agitate the quiet waters unless I permit it.

This introspective emphasis, together with the lack of prescribed doctrine and commitment requirements, give participants a sense of individual control which is consistent with the movement's ideals. At the same time, Unity's organizational structure is religious enough for those seeking the atmosphere of traditional Christianity. Sunday services that include baptisms, hymns, biblical passages, and frequent references to God and Jesus demonstrate Unity's continuity with traditional religion. In contrast with the fervor and enthusiasm of Aglow's prayer meetings, an “ideal” Unity service is very quiet, “dignified,” calming and meditative.

It is possible to be involved in Unity's beliefs without ever actually attending a meeting. Initial introduction to Unity is often through non-

personal media, such as: Eric Butterworth's radio programs, a local Dial-A-Prayer service, or *The Daily Word*. *The Daily Word* is popular across denominational lines; many respondents—including fundamentalists and members of psychic awareness groups—were among its regular readers.

Individual Unity members choose the level of commitment that suits them. They believe that all answers or causes to life's problems are to be found within each person, the “individualized expression of Divine Mind.”

Occult and Eclectic Groups

This category is the most diverse and thus the most difficult to describe by generalization. A private *healing circle* is used here to illustrate this type. Several such healing circles were found, sometimes in conjunction with a meditation/Human Potential approach or with occult or psychic healing (like this particular group).

Psychic healing is itself diverse and difficult to describe by generalization [see, for example 11, 14, 17]. Practitioners of psychic healing hold in common the belief that individuals have innate powers which can be developed by training the mind to tap its own energies, which are part of larger, cosmic forces. Widely varying notions of psychic powers and practices abound, because psychic groups and individuals are essentially independent, sharing little or no teaching authority [15, 16]. Psychic associations are very weakly connected, and it is possible for a psychic group to develop and maintain itself with little or no connection to related groups or organizations.

There were some psychic associations in the region studied; occasional study groups affiliated with the Association for Research and Enlightenment (Edgar Cayce's organization), or the Christian psychic organization, Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship. There was a large and active regional association devoted to psychic, occult, and other nonmainstream spiritual/therapeutic approaches; some respondents participated individually in it, but it held no teaching authority and was mainly a source of new ideas for their eclectic amalgams. None of the groups studied was affiliated with or chartered by any of the national Spiritualist societies. Although these groups borrowed some ideas and practices from Spiritualism, they were far too eclectic and independent to be acceptable by orthodox Spiritualist groups [compare 21, 23].

Historically, psychic practices developed from 19th-century Spiritualism, borrowing also from medieval strains of occultism. The connections between classical Spiritualism and the psychic healing groups studied are extremely dim, however; these healing groups have borrowed just as heavily from popular psychology, the Human Potential movement, American versions of Eastern philosophies and spiritual practices, and popular tracts on health and fitness. For example, the group described in detail here had

a spirit-guide (as in classical Spiritualism), but members were equally influenced by inspirations from the writings of Swami Muktananda, articles in *Psychology Today*, or talks by an American Indian healer, On Shinnah.

While the spirit-guide (that of a beloved deceased member) gave all of the members of this group support and guidance, he was not called upon to act upon members' lives or to manifest his influence physically. He was not, for example, a special channel of healing power. In traditional Spiritualism, by contrast, the spirit-guides are the foremost channel of energy and knowledge for the group. They are typically not accessible to the entire group; communication with them is the main basis of the medium's/leader's authority and power in the group [cf., 12, 16, 20, 23].

This typical psychic circle met each week in a member's home. The group consisted of about nine regular members, ranging in age from mid-30s to mid-60s. Because the group met in the daytime, it had only a few members who were employed full-time; its membership was largely female. Visitors had to be invited by the group as a whole, and membership was put to a vote. The group maintained no ties with any larger psychic association, although a few members occasionally attended the regional association's programs. It has been meeting for nine years, formed as an offshoot of a nearby psychic development group. Its formation was something of a protest against the leader of the other group, who had begun to charge for her services as a teacher of psychic awareness. These believers felt that psychic awareness should be for all—a gift to share, not to sell.

The group atmosphere was warm and friendly. A specific chair was provided in the circle for each member; if physically absent, one was assumed to be present in spirit, at least. The group expected reverence, concentration, and participation from all. Everyone arrived early, set up the room and chatted; as the clock chimed 9:30, all assumed their places. The session began with readings from various spiritual sources (such as the Bible, *Daily Word*, Ram Dass), which members had selected or offered as they felt inclined.

Setting the mood for their meditation, they chanted three Om's and recited the Lord's Prayer in unison. A guided meditation by one of the members started the meditation period, after which each person meditated silently, until the mantel clock chimed 10:00. All stood and moved to the center, holding hands. Lists with the names of persons needing healing were put in the center of the circle, and members around the circle added names verbally. A member would lead a prayer-like meditation for healing; this especially serious part of the session ended with vigorous hugs for each other. Returning to their seats, members shared the content of their individual meditations. They discussed and helped each other interpret these meditations. After announcements and a closing prayer, members enjoyed refreshments and socializing. Although they met once a week as a group,

a considerable amount of social interaction took place outside of these sessions: shopping and lunches together, attending lectures, and phone calls and visits for further sharing or help.

The group offered much social and emotional support to members undergoing crises, such as cancer or a bad marriage, as well as day-to-day problems. Their interpretations of each others' meditations were similarly supportive. Sharing was open and friendly; it was a gentle learning experience, in which fellow members helped interpret which elements of a meditation experience were important and which could be ignored. No interpretation was "wrong" or could be invalidated. Often members deliberately meditated on each other, providing such advice as the need to watch a purse while shopping, reassurance that the member would achieve an advanced spiritual level, or foreseeing that a slightly plump member's weight was only a temporary problem. The group had been together for years and provided each other considerable and continuing personal support, friendship and guidance.

While similar to other psychic healing groups, this group had its own particular eclectic mixture of beliefs about healing. Healing was primarily concerned with the channeling of universal energy to assist the body's natural healing abilities. The matter needing healing might be presented to the group by the individual in need, or it might be identified by another member in meditation, or it might be observed by the color and shape of the person's aura.

The group's primary response was to offer a healing meditation, in which the group envisioned bathing the individual in white light and seeing them whole and well. Then, members suggested numerous adjunct techniques, such as the wearing of certain colors or crystals, eating certain foods (for purification or raising spiritual energies), or the ingestion of various herbal remedies. Typically, each member of the group offered a variety of possible healing methods, and the individual tried (serially or simultaneously) whichever practices appealed to him or her.

IDEAS OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Christian Groups: Women's Aglow

The power of God is central to Christian groups' focus on healing. While most Christian denominations believe generally in God's healing power, the groups in which healing is an important focus are distinguished by their belief in the immediacy of that power. They believe that they have received gifts of power through the Holy Spirit. One of the foremost of these gifts is healing, which they seek regularly in their individual and collective prayers.

Typically, it is *not* the need for healing of some pre-existing physical ailment that initially brings recruits to the group. Rather, through their experience in the prayer group, members come to realize their needs for healing and to believe in dramatic healing power. They usually come to full belief and practice of faith healing gradually, as their general acceptance of the group's whole belief system builds.

Through interaction with the prayer group, individuals come to share a norm of health centered around the group's spiritual ideas. One woman described health in terms of several attitudinal qualities: outgoingness, inner vision, tenderness, willingness to listen to people. She added, "I think I could put attitude at the top of every list. I've seen people who are virtually crippled in a wheelchair, and their attitude far surpasses mine. They're fantastic." Emotional and attitudinal qualities are specifically linked with spiritual sources—"fruits of the Spirit," as some members described them.

The ideal of health is, thus, emphatically a holistic norm. A housewife commented, "Health, wholeness—all these words are to me are scripture and salvation. It all goes together. A healthy person to me would be one that was whole in spirit, soul, mind and body."

The key to health, according to this ideal, is a good relationship with God. Health is defined as holiness, but because this ideal is so extreme, many members emphasized that it was not possible to achieve it in this life. The ultimate ideal is perfection. Such extreme norms of health are an important factor in the significance of faith healing; if all are so far from the ideal of health, then all require frequent, regular healings, until the final "healing"—death.

Members of these groups submitted a wide range of situations for "healing." Essentially, any problematic situation that is felt to be "out of order," needing mending and God's power to make it whole, is considered appropriate for healing. Obvious problems, such as physical illnesses, handicaps, chronic conditions, were frequently objects of healing petitions. More often however, emotional, spiritual, and relationship problems were mentioned by respondents. Fear, depression, anxiety, bitterness, resentment, compulsiveness, grieving, suicidal urges, and tension, were listed by numerous respondents as being healed or needing healing. While most prayers were for relatively serious personal matters—causes of some worry—any disordered situation might be "healed." Respondents described, as "healings," such diverse situations as a broken lawnmower suddenly working, or receiving some unexpected money, or a pet surviving a difficult labor.

Many respondents felt that the whole society needed healing, in the sense that it was not in the right relationship with God. Social problems (as defined by their norms), such as pornography, crime, divorce, alco-

holism, rock music, adultery, and abortion, would be ultimately resolved only by a spiritual healing of the society.

Similarly, members described a broad range of episodes as "healings: To be healed is not necessarily the same as to be cured. It is common to have received a healing and still have symptoms or recurrences of the illness. This is not inconsistent with believers' notions of healing, because they believe that—for a number of reasons—a healing experience may not be physically manifest. For example, one woman had experienced the healing of her thyroid condition; she added, however, that the thyroid gland is still swollen, and "I get a twinge every once in a while reminding me that if you don't believe that you know, you take it for granted sometimes, when you're healed." Small improvements in a condition are also defined as healings, while full healing is still being sought.

Members of these groups often included as healing events episodes which nonbelievers would attribute to merely natural or human agency. It is not inconsistent with their beliefs to see a healing where, for example, a person under medical care recovered sooner than expected. Another kind of healing episode is one in which a healing appears to have failed, but the believer discovers that an unexpected healing occurred in another area or to another person. Still another type of healing episode is one in which one's worst fears are not confirmed (e.g., chest pains are prayed for, and medical tests subsequently show that the condition is minor and not a heart condition as feared).

The key criterion of healing is the process of becoming closer to the Lord. Some described it as becoming able to do the right thing, overcoming sin, growing into a more personal relationship with God. This emphasis on process is used to explain why people must suffer illness; God uses illness and healing to chastise and to teach people in order to bring them closer to him. Thus, healing is not only the result of faith; it also produces faith.

Metaphysical Groups: Unity

Like Christian healing groups, metaphysical groups also emphasize a holistic image of health. By contrast, however, they believe that the key quality of the desired wholeness is mental more than spiritual. Unity members define health as wholeness—oneness with "Christ Mind" (i.e., the part of the Divine Mind that is within the human individual). Thus health—indeed, perfection in all aspects of life—is the *normal* condition of all persons. As one woman explained, "We're made perfect, it's what we do—it's our wrong thinking that brings about the imperfection."

Illness is "an inharmonious condition in mind and body." It is, by def-

inition, an *error*. Illness does not exist in Truth. Illness comes to have existence and power only by people who allow it to reign in their consciousness. Thus, while the pain or other symptoms of illness are real enough in the individual's experience, they are not necessary parts of human existence. One who walks in Truth need not experience any such negative conditions; pain and other "inharmonious" experiences serve only to remind people that they need to "work" to affirm the Truth and deny Error in their lives [6, 7].

While affirmations of health and healing were regular parts of group meetings, as well as individual meditations, this concern was not as central in Unity as in Aglow. This difference is largely because, to Unity believers, healing is a more diffuse process—part of a very general lifelong movement away from "error thinking" in all aspects of life. When describing "healings" that they had experienced, Unity members typically recounted the *discovery* of the element of error in their thinking, rather than any particular changes in their condition. Indeed, one might be experiencing further bouts of discomfort, but the healing consists in the recognition of Truth and the rooting out of error. A secretary described this process:

This healing process is going on within me and I don't have to depend on somebody to actually do the healing for me. To know that I'm whole—even though I might be going through a certain experience at a certain time—but to tell me that wholeness is always there. The perfect life is always there, because I'm a part of the whole.

Thus the healing experience was primarily that of discovering the error thinking that needed correcting; whatever physical, emotional, or spiritual effects that flowed from correcting that error were secondary. At the same time, respondents were adamant that, without correcting the error thinking, any improvements (such as pain relief) were purely temporary. Real healing required a new way of thinking. The ultimate goal of this lifelong developmental process was perfection—the restoration of people to their natural state.

Occult and Eclectic Groups: A Healing Circle

These groups emphasized that health was the person's natural state. An instructor in a beginning class on psychic awareness admonished, "You were designed to be healthy. You were not designed to be at dis-ease." Psychics' definition of health was holistic and broad: it meant a condition of balance, moderation, and wholeness. A healthy person is one who is flexible in mind and body. Spontaneity—especially in being able to cope effectively as things change in everyday life—is another characteristic of the truly healthy person. For example, one woman explained:

I think that they [healthy persons] are very spontaneous, and flexible. And I think they have more options that they experience. I think they have a sense of aliveness and a feeling of being in the flow. They are feeling connected to a larger purpose and connected with other people. They are in touch with their rhythm—whether it's to be withdrawn and hang out by themselves for a while, or whether it's to be in a crowd. And to sense where their needs are at. Sensitivity is an important part of being healthy. I would also say that being in power, feeling powerful in your life, feeling responsible for your life is a very important part of it.

As this quotation illustrates, self-awareness and responsibility for one's life are critical aspects of the psychics' definition of healthiness.

The truly healthy person is connected with the universe—in tune with cosmic sources of energy. Accordingly, healthiness entails balance, harmony, and unity of mental, emotional, and physical aspects. Several respondents emphasized that one manifestation of healthiness is love. For example, a medical technologist said:

I'm gonna have to go back to my [answer about] love, because if you've got that, your mental state, your emotional state, your psychological state and then your physical state are going to be in line—because you're not going to be doing anything destructive on any level of your being, and you're totally in tune. You are totally harmonious, you're totally balanced, and that I think is total health.

This healthiness is attributed to being in touch with higher energy. As one woman explained:

Your whole life is centered more around love. It's expressed more through love. You're just perceiving higher vibrational feelings, rather than lower ones. And as it filters down into the physical, then you receive the benefits of endurance and rosy cheeks, and clearer eyes and nice coloration and healthy aura, powerful energy body—so that you can come into the presence of another person and just influence them, because your energy field is of a strong vibrational nature that you just elevate the other person.

Being in touch with this higher energy, the healthy person is more self-aware, more intuitive, more "clear"—i.e., more free of mental and emotional blockages that obstruct the flow of love and vitality in all aspects of life.

What needs healing? As used by psychic adherents interviewed, healing is the appropriate response to *all* imbalance and disorder. Spiritual, physical, emotional, and social problems were all submitted for healing. As in Unity and Aglow, psychic adherents did not make any particular distinction between seeking physical healing and seeking other needs or meeting other challenges. They submit, for "healing," such diverse needs as radon pollution in the community, inflation, a difficult relationship with a mother-in-law, a child's success on a forthcoming exam, fear of being mugged, or a bout of colitis.

Accordingly, healing is not merely—or even necessarily—physical. Most respondents referred to the acceptance of responsibility for one's life and condition as the basic healing. If one realizes that one's situation is the product of one's own actions, thoughts, attitudes, and direction of energy, that realization is the first step to change. That realization and acceptance of responsibility is the real healing.

The very acceptance of responsibility is the essential healing, even if the physical condition addressed in the healing process remains unchanged. For example, in another psychic healing group, a young woman paralyzed in an automobile accident described herself as "greatly healed" through the ministrations of the group, even though her physical condition had not changed significantly. One of the healers working with her commented, "It's hard to convince her that she chose her karma. Who would want to choose being completely paralyzed in a wheelchair? But this has been a learning experience, which means her next reincarnation will be that much better for what she is doing now."

The relief of pain or the amelioration of symptoms is secondary—or even undesirable—according to this perspective. Psychic adherents emphasized that people choose pain for a purpose. One man explained, "For the most part, pain is an illusion. It only becomes real where we need it to be real." People "need" their pain or symptoms for a number of secondary gains (such as attention or affection); more commonly, however, they "need" their symptoms to teach them a lesson. One man explained, "Each person takes on the kind of illness they need for their own growth and development and the lessons they have to learn in this life. So I feel that each individual tailors his own illness to fit his emotional needs."

Another common interpretation was that the illness episode was actually a cleansing or purification process. One woman explained that "the cold is the cure—the releasing of the body's metabolic wastes and acids." Another member considered a fever to be the burning of disease elements.

Because of their distinctive definition of illness and pain, many psychic adherents welcomed (or at least, accepted) pain. As one believer said:

Pain and pleasure come from the same place: it's a pressure. It's a tension. The mind interprets that tension as pleasure of painful, but it's the same stress. . . . So, it became very apparent to me that I had to refocus my attention on something healthy. And so I began to experience this pain and equate it with the healing process. In other words, every time I experienced pain, I—in my own mind—saw it as a battle between the healing forces in my body and the ill forces in my body—the tension of the battle. But that this was an indication that I wasn't giving into it. In other words, that I was fighting it and that every pain was making me better and better.

If pain and illness communicate a lesson, then it is not good to eliminate the symptoms (for example, with medication) until the person has under-

stood the lesson. For example, one woman interpreted a blow on the ear (resulting in subsequent temporary hearing loss) as a warning: "Wake up, I've got your attention. Now listen." Often respondents interpreted specific physical conditions as metaphors for a deeper healing that was needed; the lesson to be learned from the condition came out in the psychic exploration of these symbols. Eyesight problems were discovered to be linked with broader problems of "negative self-image" or "negative feelings about seeing the world" or "lack of clarity".

Like the perspectives of Unity and Aglow, the entire meaning system used by these adherents of psychic healing implies a totally different conception of health, illness and healing from that of the dominant medical system. Given such different definitions, then, it is understandable that the healing practices of these three groups are also different. All three groups have differing notions of what the causes of illness are. These causal ideas are, likewise, linked to their beliefs about how healing takes place—especially where the power to heal is located. These images of healing power, then, are connected to each group's sense of the appropriate roles of the healer, the group, and the person seeking healing.

HEALING POWER AND THE BELIEVER

Christian Groups: Women's Aglow

Since members believe that illness is more than just a physical condition, they also believe that the causes of illness are not mere physical causes. The foremost cause of illness, according to Aglow members, is sin. Some emphasized personal sin on the part of the sick person; others mentioned Original Sin or the sinful estate of humankind. For example, one teacher explained:

Sin is probably the root cause; it's probably the only cause. Sin—either your own sin or the sins of others around you or just the sin factor in the world. Not being in tune with the Lord. Not being disciplined enough to hear Him speak and direct your life. . . . Disregarding the laws of God, being not in tune with Him, committing sins. Subtle sins, like hatred of another person that you're not fully aware of. That's sin.

Satan was another frequently used explanation for illness. Many of these respondents had strongly dualistic cosmologies: Nearly everything was interpreted in terms of a struggle between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil. For example, a woman said; "Satan is the author of sickness and disease. God doesn't give sickness, because he's the God who heals us. . . . [Sickness] is Satanic oppression."

The influence of Satan is not merely general; it explains particular bouts of illness or other troubles. For example, one housewife stated:

I believe that it's coming from Satan. And he uses it in all sorts of ways to either zap you with something. You know, all of a sudden you feel fine, then tomorrow morning you wake up with something horrible, and you've probably been exposed to it. I mean illness is in the realm of Satan. And however you get it—whether it's through sin or exposure or neglect or whatever—that all is Satan's territory.

Some illnesses, however, are attributed to a more dangerous form of Satan's influence: possession. Emotional problems, or physical illnesses with important emotional components, are especially likely to result from possession by the Devil. Examples described by respondents include: an emotional disturbance in a woman who had been to see a fortune teller, a housewife's depression and subsequent dependence on Valium, extreme fear in a child who had been molested, a college student's sudden change to rebelliousness and sullenness. Possession is very dangerous, because it is linked with extraordinary satanic powers; it required special prayers for deliverance.

Implicit in these believers' ideas about the causation of illness is the notion of a hierarchy of powers—powers to cause illness or to effect healing. Most respondents in this type of group believed that humans have little or no natural power to effect health or healing; one must tap God's superior power to heal and be healed. Accordingly, God's power can be mediated to others; it can be mediated through human agents, words of power (such as the name of Jesus, a scripture verse, or a prayer), through objects (such as prayer cloths or blessed water).

Forces of Good and Evil are seen as warring with each other; the outcome for the sick person depends upon allying with the right forces. The individual's sin (separation from God) is seen as a barrier between the sick person and the sole source of help—God. Healing is accomplished by strengthening the sick person (through God's power) and/or by counteracting the Evil One's power to cause the illness.

Healing practices in these groups are, therefore, means of channeling God's power to the ill person. The receiver's role is to be open to God's power. The process of being healed involves repentance of sin, submission to God's way, and praise to God for His mercy, help, and guidance. Members were adamant that the power of the person doing the healing is actually God's power being channeled through that person. All of the various prayer techniques recommended were, likewise, merely the "best ways" to channel God's healing power—not powerful in themselves.

The role of the prayer group is important in this process of mediating God's power. In addition to the purely human social support given by

fellow believers, the prayer group is an especially powerful channel for God's healing power. Members believe that the group receives a wider range of gifts of the Spirit than do individuals; the group can create an atmosphere of faith and expectancy that is more conducive to healing; and the group is a source of teaching and admonition, which are often necessary for a person to repent and be healed.

Metaphysical Groups: Unity

According to Unity adherents, the primary cause of illness is "error thought." The corollary of this concept is the belief that error thoughts can be eliminated by denying their reality and power and by affirming the Truth of Being. This mentalistic concept of illness is illustrated by a teacher, who said:

When the mind has an idea about something, and you identify with the mind, you say "I am . . .," whatever negativity is in there, you become the negativity. That's the beginning of illness.

Likewise, a businesswoman emphasized, "The cause is always within the person . . . Illness is a misuse of your own creative power." Another teacher explained, "Illnesses are developed first in the mentality of the person . . . For example, if there is a pain and I know that the pain started first in my thinking somewhere, so I [tell] my upstairs to clear up my act."

The mental concept of illness is taken quite literally, because most members believe in the power of words themselves to effect a person's well-being. For example, one woman told of an experience in which she was in such pain that she could not get out of bed one morning. She began to meditate on what error thinking could have been the source, and she realized that she had developed the bad habit of saying, especially at work, "I will not stand for that." She interpreted her inability to stand up that morning as the manifestation of this negative thought.

Some Unity members acknowledged the influence of "evil forces" in the causation of human illness, but they defined these evil forces quite differently from the Aglow members' idea of Satan. One woman explained this definition:

Evil forces, like good forces, stem from our own thinking. In other words, the wars, the hurricanes, the tornados and things like that are caused by mankind and their own thinking. So, it goes right back to that. I hear recently a woman who kept saying "That burns me up!" Two times. This was a common expression of hers. You know, eventually she got a burning sensation all over her body. Of course, she had to go to all kinds of medical doctors to find out why, until this friend of mine said to her one time, "Do you realize that you keep saying 'that burns me up?' Two times." "Yeah,"

she said. Well, she stopped thinking about it, and well eventually the burning sensation cleared up. That's how powerful thought is!

Consistent with this notion of the causes of illness, Unity members held fairly mental and individualistic ideas of healing power. One man said, "The healing power comes from the individual—the individual with the change in their concept, a change in their attitude, with a change in what they are accepting, can just about heal themselves." He added, later:

I use [the word] "process." I use "healing activity," the healing "energy." I believe it is an energy that is everywhere present in all forms of life. I believe that we can allow that energy to do its work . . . Some people sometimes call it 'God,' sometimes "spirit." I think of it mainly as a creative energy that is in the universe and its purpose is to keep the universe and everything in it perfect and free . . . I can heal myself. I can be healthy and wealthy and live a harmonious, beautiful life. It's still the same; it depends on me—no one else or nothing else outside of myself.

Like Aglow members, Unity adherents did not come to Unity out of a need for healing; they became interested in healing after learning Unity's approach to it. Unity's emphasis on affirming Truth and denying Error is the all-purpose response to any adversity: ill-health, poor interpersonal relations, unsatisfactory job, lack of prosperity, inclement weather, social and political concerns, emotional problems, marital and family problems, and so on.

Accordingly, healing is the process of restoring the afflicted person to the perfection that exists within. The healing process is not medical. While Unity respondents all used medical services, they were quick to add that real healing had to take place within. Healing is, therefore, primarily a "mind process" (not an intellectual process, however, since intellectualizing can lead to error). It is a growth process involving much "work."

This "work" consists of examining one's thinking habits, and then eliminating all negative thought and substituting positive thought. As one Unity minister explained, "We have to fight that [acceptance of disease and illness] all the time. We have to constantly remind ourselves that the natural state of the human being is to be well."

The typical formula for these positive thoughts is a statement of affirmation. Unity meditations are filled with such affirmations; the dial-a-prayer and *Daily Word* messages focus on affirmations. For example, attached to the monthly contribution envelope of the Unity centers studied was a set of recommended affirmations, including (for healing): "The consistent flow of God-life within me heals, restores, and strengthens my mind and body," and (for prosperity): "The steadfastness of God's care assures me of unending supply and abundant prosperity," (published by Unity School of Christianity, July, 1981).

Even more specific affirmations should be used for specific conditions. One dated (but still widely used) Unity book interprets numerous illnesses in terms of the group's beliefs and, for each, recommends specified affirmations. For example, it states:

To be delivered from the error called bronchitis, one needs a greater sense of vitality and a freeing and harmonizing of the life forces. When these two changes are brought about, the congested thought which is centered in the bronchial tubes will be released. Hold: *The purifying, vitalizing, healing Christ life is now doing its perfect work in me and through me.* [18]

This mental "work" is essentially individual. Even when a minister or other member works with someone for a healing, the process consists of showing the affected person how to change error thinking. Unity ministers and teachers also often lead relaxation meditations as part of accomplishing a healing. This emphasis on relaxation considerably predates the current notions of stress reduction; rather, relaxation is viewed as a form of mental denial of error and a preparation of the mind for affirmation.

The individualism of Unity's approach to healing also helps to explain the low levels of reliance on the group and the low levels of commitment to the local Center. Unlike in Christian and psychic groups, in Unity the group of fellow believers is not a channel or a source of greater energy for the individual. The Center is a source of teaching and creates an atmosphere for individuals to do their own "work."

Occult and Eclectic Groups: A Healing Circle

The foremost emphasis of psychic healing adherents is upon the *responsibility* of the individual for his or her own condition. Illness, misfortune, even death, are the result of people's conscious or unconscious choices. The person's responsibility may be direct or indirect. An example of direct responsibility would be illnesses (such as high blood pressure, lung cancer, or migraine headaches) resulting from an unhealthy lifestyle—that is, a lifestyle lacking moderation, balance, care, and positive energy. Indirect responsibility is exemplified by illnesses resulting from karma (deeds in one's past life that are carried forward as negative energy into one's present life, requiring attention to "transmute" them into positive energy).

As a cause of illness, however, karma might not mean one's personal karma. Some respondents believed that certain illnesses might be the result of "world karma"—a category somewhat comparable to the Christians' notion of "Original Sin" or to Unity's concept of "race consciousness." These broader causal categories implied less individual responsibility than categories of personal karma, personal sin, or error thought. Some ad-

herents of psychic and occult groups believed it was possible that some persons' suffering might be surrogate suffering for others' karma. Accordingly, individuals who had transmuted their personal karma might voluntarily be reincarnated in order to help transmute planetary karma.

Other causes of illness salient to adherents of psychic healing include stress and pollution. Diseases, such as cancer and heart disease, were attributed to stress, as were emotional ills. One respondent described illness caused by stress as this society's "combat disease." While environmental pollution was mentioned by several members as a cause of much disease (especially in this region with its extensive petrochemical industry), some psychic adherents had a broader, more spiritual notion of "pollution."

Accordingly, pollution was anything—such as negative thinking or bad attitudes—that prevented the individual from utilizing innate energies fully. In order for a real healing to occur, then, it is necessary to purify oneself of these negative energies or attitudes—the true causes of illness—and to replace them with positive energies or attitudes. Anything else is merely treating the symptoms, not the actual cause.

Psychic healing adherents believed that the power to heal resides in the cosmic force, but that developed souls gain their individual spiritual powers by participating in this force. They considered this use of power to be a normal process—available to anyone. Their image of healing power was external, but—unlike the Christian groups' conception—it was not so supernatural or awesome; it was accessible. At the same time, in contrast to Unity adherents' conception, healing power was not primarily individual or internal.

The source of healing power, for psychic adherents, was external and needed mediating. They believed that, ultimately, all healing was self-healing, but that individuals who did not have highly developed spiritual powers could have the power channeled to them through the mediation of another (developed) psychic. Thus, the various healing techniques typically involved some mode of transmitting healing energy from the cosmic source to the needy individual—for example, by stroking the person's aura, by sending them energy through visualizations, or by focusing energy through crystals.

Because of this notion of mediation, psychic healing adherents tended to be less individualistic than Unity members; they relied upon their healer or (more typically) healing group to mediate the necessary healing energy. Even experienced psychic healers themselves availed themselves of this channeling process. In addition, psychic adherents believed that the group could achieve higher energy levels than individual members alone, so they were grateful when the entire group turned its energies to their problems. They believed that various members had different psychic gifts, and that healing power was enhanced by having the entire group address their

problems. Like Christian groups, psychic healing circles gave their members much informal social support and mutual care.

The appropriate role of the person needing healing, in this case, was to be open to healing, to attempt to use one's own psychic powers and to attune oneself with the healing power, and—ultimately, to take responsibility for one's life and one's condition—including the responsibility to change.

HEALING PRACTICES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Alternative healing beliefs and practices are integrated into the routines of most believers' everyday lives so thoroughly that these persons are rarely conscious that they are specifically "doing healing." Similarly, healing is seldom distinguished from prevention; an entire approach to life is involved, not merely responding to a particular illness.

A typical day of one representative eclectic adherent would include a short round of yoga exercises ("sun salutations"—believed to be energizing) before her morning shower, meals selected for particular nutritional benefits, mini-meditations during her hectic moments at the office, use of acupressure and visualization to counter a headache, use of breathing techniques and visualization at each stoplight to handle the stress of the difficult commute home, use of a mantra, crystal, and visualization to center herself during an argument with her teenage daughter, an hour of exercise (with special attention to flexibility and aerobic exercises), followed by stress-reducing visualizations in the sauna, and a cup of herbal tea and half-hour meditation at bedtime. In addition, this woman attends weekly meditations with her group, gets biweekly Shiatsu massages from a friend, sees a nutritionist about three times a year, and utilizes regular medical doctors for checkups and acute conditions.

Despite the extensive amount she devotes to her alternative health and healing practices, she is hardly aware of them because they are so pervasive in her everyday routine and way of thinking. There is no neat distinction between what she does for her arthritis and what she does as part of her preventive care and lifestyle.

Most respondents were surprised at how many healing practices they used when they described them to the interviewers. Seemingly minor responses and ways of thinking were used constantly throughout the day. One psychic adherent said, "For instance, at an athletic event, if there's a kid who got hurt or something, I go like this [gestures] and I visualize these rays coming out of me and making like a rainbow shape dropping onto the person."

Similarly, several Christian healing adherents described a steady flow of

everyday conversation with God, in which requests for healing of every little aspect of life were regular themes. They often tucked in brief blessings for healing of their children with routine touches. For example, one woman always prayed that her children would be protected from sickness as she dressed them, and each time she bathed her daughter, she “soaked” the child’s eczema in prayer.

Many respondents with particular illnesses had created their own personalized healing meditations or other practices. One woman had humorously named her arthritis “Arthur” and regularly talked to it, commanding it to behave. She had a series of little mental exercises (such as imagining Arthur doing a frolicking dance), which she used, depending upon how the arthritis was “acting” that day.

Another woman described a gradual “healing” of epilepsy through meditation. Her daily routine involved:

I bring myself down to a deeper level where the—everything slows—where you’re in the alpha level . . . and you’re in the meditative state . . . , I use that state for programming, for replacing parts of the body visually, rebuilding the brain—a new one—symbolically, or opening up the head—this is all inside, with imagination, creative imagination, and scouring it and polishing it and making it brand new. And then [I use] positive affirmations: “I am free.” And then filling in the blanks whatever it is I want to be free of: “I am free of symptoms of epilepsy; I am free of the discomfort that is so terrifying and I am free of losing consciousness; I am free of unstable brain waves; My brain waves are functioning perfectly and normally.” Positive directions and positive affirmations at the alpha level, where I believe the computer lies—that which governs our whole functioning.

Thus, for most adherents of alternative healing, their beliefs and practices are thoroughly interwoven into everyday life, not so much as a response to illness per se but as a gradual but comprehensive change in their entire approach to well-being.

THE MALLEABILITY OF THE ILLNESS EXPERIENCE

The diversity of respondents’ experiences with illnesses suggests that interpretations shape the illness experience both retrospectively and currently. The retrospective influence is often a planned part of the therapeutic approach of alternative healing groups. They lead believers in a recollection and examination of memories of previous experiences, searching for clues consistent with their notions of causality of illness and hoping to “heal” or counteract those experiences.

Several Christian groups, for example, had a healing approach called “the healing of memories.” Consistent with their theories of the causes of illness, a person’s arthritis (for instance) might be discerned to be due to

bitterness and resentment, thus keeping the person from full spiritual health. Appropriate therapy might consist of guiding him or her through a series of meditations in which the ill person expresses memories of relationships or experiences that might be sources of the present bitterness and resentment. For example, it might be revealed (through the individual’s expression or through divine revelation) that the person holds a serious grudge against a dead parent. Each memory is, in turn, “healed” through prayer, in which the individual is asked to forgive others who hurt him or her. After this repentance and symbolic reconciliation, the ill person is then urged to seek similar forgiveness and reconciliation from God.

Through such guided meditations, as well as ordinary teaching and prayer, the individual believers engage in continual redefinition of their past experiences. Belief systems simultaneously shape ill persons’ ongoing experiences, too. Beliefs about the *causality* of illness inform them which experiences are relevant to their problem. Beliefs about the *meaning of illness* tell them whether to welcome, fight, or ignore symptoms. And beliefs about *responsibility and control* direct the ill persons’ attention to what they could/should do in response to illness.

Causality

All illness etiologies are selective; when a particular explanation for illness is applied, some possible factors are discarded as irrelevant and other factors become focal. As the above description of diverse healing groups shows, widely varying causal explanations can be applied. If careless use of words or thoughts is believed to be a source of illness, the ill person is likely to examine past words/thoughts and be careful of present practices as a healing or preventive approach. If a group defines pollution as a significant cause of illness, the ill person is likely to become especially aware of sources of pollution in past and present daily life. Thus, ideas about causality of illness shape the way the ill person interprets and notices both past and present experiences.

Although adherents of alternative healing groups do not reject medical notions of causality altogether, they use far broader causal interpretations. They might agree that the doctor’s explanation was a correct statement of the proximate cause, but they seek also to understand the *ultimate* causes of illness. The search is not philosophical; they believe that illness cannot be really healed unless the ultimate causes are addressed.

Meaning

As the preceding description of groups’ belief systems shows, one of the main functions of alternative healing is giving meaning to the illness ex-

perience. Often respondents explained that understanding the meaning was more important than symptom relief *per se*. The meanings given by these alternative healing groups shaped believers' coping strategies, "understanding" of the illness itself, and their very experience of its symptoms.

Pain, disability, and even the prospect of death take on different meanings, depending upon how the belief system interprets them. For example, several groups shared the notion that much illness was a form of bodily purification; accordingly, the experience of pains, fever, weakness, etc., was part of the cure and to be welcomed (although hardly enjoyed).

By contrast, other groups (such as Unity) denied the reality of the illness. While the experience of bodily discomfort was considered real, to dwell on the symptoms and talk about the illness was believed to give the illness a reality it did not have in Truth. So believers tended to treat many symptoms as a warning that they needed to do "work" but not as something worthy of a lot of attention.

Many groups believed that illness was an opportunity for growth. Although they did not enjoy the experience, they were generally more positive about having been ill than were persons who saw no benefit to illness. Furthermore, many respondents considered the symptoms to be symbolic of some larger meaning to be discovered in the illness experience. Thus, they paid a different kind of attention to their bodily sensations. For example, a person who had suffered a concussion interpreted her prolonged dizziness as a symbol of the need to grow in balance in all aspects of her life.

Consistent with the notion of illness as an opportunity, the idea that one should learn to pay much more attention to one's body was common. Adherents learned to notice their "normal" patterns of breathing, moving, digesting, resting, and so on. Then when irregularities occurred, they were more aware of how their body was out of its ordinary pattern. Ideally, they would use this awareness to correct the problem and prevent further problems. Thus, each bout of identification and correction of illness led to further physical-emotional-spiritual growth and control. Without understanding the meaning of each illness episode, this personal change would not be possible.

Responsibility and Control

One of the most dramatic ways alternative healing systems differ—from each other and from the dominant medical belief system—is in the imputation of responsibility and the images of control/power. As shown in the descriptions above, all of the groups studied had articulated ideas about who/what was responsible for the illness. All of the groups attributed some measure of responsibility to ill persons themselves.

For example, all Christian groups studied considered personal sin to be a major source of illness (although they differed widely as to how much emphasis they placed upon individual responsibility, as opposed to general sin or diabolical influences). Likewise, Unity and similar metaphysical groups attributed most illness (indeed, all misfortune) to the individual's incorrect ways of thinking and speaking, evidence of the person's lack of connection with Truth or Divine Mind. Psychic and related healing groups were the strongest in their emphasis upon individual responsibility for illness and other troubles. Illnesses, accidents, handicaps—even birth defects and homicide—are attributed, at least in part, to the responsibility of the victim. Indeed, these respondents would assert that there are no real victims; no one is truly the helpless pawn of adversity. For this reason, while these groups offer ill members much support, warmth and help, they offer no sympathy.

The corollary of this notion of responsibility for illness is belief in the person's control. The more one assumes, responsibility for a problem that the more one is asserting control over that problem area. One characteristic, then, of these alternative healing groups is that they promote an active coping response on the part of believers. Coping does not mean merely adjusting to the fact of suffering or limitation; it means changing one's life.

These meanings shape the ill person's subjective experience of his or her condition, far more so than the disease itself; two persons with the same bio-physical condition could have totally different experiences of that condition because of how their beliefs shaped their perceptions and interpretations. Thus, the illness experience itself is shaped by one's beliefs, ideals, and conceptions of health and illness itself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is based upon research made possible by NIMH grant #1RO1MH33664 (Meredith B. McGuire, Principal Investigator), and by grants of Released Time by Montclair State College. Pat Brown, Debra Kantor, Matt Krautheim, Kathy Lee, and Linda Mai assisted in the gathering of data.

NOTE

1. Women's Aglow Fellowship, "What is Aglow?"—leaflet, n.d.; see also *Aglow* magazine and leaflet, "How to Start an Aglow Fellowship," Women's Aglow Fellowship, Lynnwood, Washington.

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