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## Book Review: Space, Time and Medicine

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## Space, Time and Medicine

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Larry Dossey, M.D.  
Shambhala, 1982

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Dossey is quite explicit in stating his rationale for writing *Space, Time & Medicine*: modern medicine is obsolete. Unlike other critiques of medicine and the health care system, however, Dossey avoids endless recitations of statistics, anecdotes, and horror stories, focusing, instead, on existing foundations within contemporary physics for changing and updating medical science. The early twentieth century was a period of revolutionary change in physics; within a relatively few years, the physicist's understanding of space, time and matter was dramatically transformed. Yet, Dossey argues, modern medicine continues to operate within the Cartesian-Newtonian scientific framework as it developed and flourished from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The strict Cartesian view of the human body as a complex machine following mechanical laws was complemented by Newton's view of the universe as a giant clockwork mechanism. All matter, following precise mechanical laws, moved within the independently existing three-dimensional container of space. Time, flowing along independently of matter, existed as yet another separate, absolute dimension.

Matter itself, composed of smaller indestructible particles, was, fundamentally, mindless, dead, inert stuff. A living organism, as a mechanical concatenation of inert matter, could be understood, manipulated and repaired like any other machine. This biochemical or medical model leaves no place for the human being as an individually experiencing and mindful body. For any particular body, as a machine, is like any other body, and similar diseases, or malfunctions, require similar repairs. Consciousness -- as either a by-product of matter or as a mere illusion -- has no impact on the body's health or illness.

Modern physics, in moving beyond the notions of an absolute space and time, requires us, for example, to question our common sense experience of time as measured by public clocks. Our conviction of a linear time, flowing

from past to future, is responsible, Dossey suggests, for time-sickness, our obsession with time passing, of time running out, of getting sick, of growing old and dying. In the modern view, however, time is not an external, independently existing reality. Rather, time is a function of our experience of the events comprising it and of the ways in which we choose to measure and organize it. Time-sickness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our own fears, anticipations and sense of urgency cause our internal biorhythmic clocks to run faster, amplifying and accelerating the course of disease and aging. By altering the manner in which we think about and experience time, we can modify and transform our experience: pain can be reduced, healing accelerated, tumor growth retarded or

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halted. Dossey offers some clinical evidence for the success of biofeedback and meditation, for example, in facilitating biological changes through alterations of temporal experience.

Examining the implications of Bell's Theorem, which challenges our usual notion of the strict, temporal cause-effect relationship presumed to hold among all events, Dossey maintains that we, with the physicist, must understand that all material particles within the universe, however distant from one another, are related. Thus, a change in any one particle results in an instantaneous change in the behavior of all other particles in the universe. We are all connected and interrelated. Consciousness is not a property of human individuals, but is a characteristic shared by all matter. Health and illness, life and death, assume new meanings when considered in the broader context of this complex *biodance*.

Dossey discusses a variety of other concepts and theories in modern physics, science and mathematics, including Godel's Theorem, Prigogine's 1977 Nobel Prize winning concept of dissipative structures, and Bohm's imprecise order, continuing to elaborate his

argument: medicine and health care must be responsive to a new conceptualization of the human body and mind consistent with the evidence of modern science. If changes in consciousness, in the way we choose to experience ourselves, can result in dramatic and measurable changes in biochemical processes, then medicine cannot afford to limit itself to understanding and treating the body within a Cartesian-Newtonian framework. Consciousness must become a critical, if not the most vital, consideration in medical practice.

Undoubtedly, many readers of Dossey's book, and certainly quite a few physicists, would criticize the attempt to apply findings in highly specialized fields, under clearly circumscribed and defined conditions, to the everyday realms of common sense experience and modern health care. As Dossey himself points out, the modern physicist makes no claim to describing reality, but rather offers only a convenient, working description of nature. In his attempts to bridge two worlds, the physicist's and our own, Dossey repeatedly slips into self-contradictions: the common sense perspective he assumes in formulating his criticism shares the same Cartesian-Newtonian framework as the medical science he is criticizing.

Nevertheless, Dossey's basic premise regarding the outdated assumptions of medicine is probably valid, and in spite of some serious problems, his thought-provoking discussion deserves serious attention. Perhaps the most conservative, and ultimately constructive, conclusion we can safely draw from Dossey's work is that we do not know what matter is. We do not know what consciousness is. We do not know what life is. In admitting our ignorance, we may become more cautious and self-conscious about our health care myths and less willing, as consumers and providers of health care, to sacrifice ourselves to them unquestioningly. After all, we can never treat the body, only our idea of it. Our conception of space, time and matter have changed before. Those conceptions, and the associated medical practices very probably will change again. In no sense, then, can the body, as the object of medical practice, ever be considered and treated independently of the consciousness which conceptualizes it.

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