

# **Science, Spirituality and Medicine**

**Len Saputo, MD**

The supreme task of the physicist is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding of experience that can reach them. Albert Einstein, 1918

## **The role of spirituality in healing**

After fifty years of medical practice, it has become clear to me that there is an intricate organization and incredible perfection in the universe that is mindboggling, especially when it comes to illness. The more I have contemplated the workings of the universe in health and disease, the more I've become impressed with how every aspect of how it unfolds has meaning and value. I have observed so many instances where my patient's illness has had far deeper meaning than its associated physical disabilities and psychological challenges that I've come to expect that there is always a deeper meaning that is an integral part of illness. Now I look for this deeper meaning whenever I'm working with my patients, or for that matter, in everything that happens in my world.

The trinity formed by patient, doctor, and spirit when dealing with illness encourages the creation of a safe, love-filled, partnership. Listening and caring without judgment is key in supporting the development of a sacred space where it becomes possible to connect with our own inner healer. When we connect with our inner healer a channel opens where we feel at one with the universe and commune with spirit. This is where soul healing begins.

Yet, today's medical model fails to acknowledge or address this relationship with spirit. HMO medicine is content to get us back on our feet and back to work. While there is value to the quick fix, there is much more value in addressing the deeper spiritual aspects that are the cause for illness.

What I have discovered is that our spirituality, or the universal consciousness through which we are all connected, plays a central role in all aspects of our lives. This applies to our health as well. I've come to believe that it is our soul, or that spark of spirit

that dwells within each of us, that connects us to universal consciousness and which provides the mechanism through which we can heal. This is nothing new. Ancient shamans were aware of this relationship thousands of years ago, but it has been forgotten as science has superseded spirituality in medicine!

It is important to remember that in contrast to the soul, the mind, or intellect, is a human quality composed of both intellectual and emotional faculties. It is what fuels our creativity. Our culture tends to deify the mind and in the process may compromise our ability for spiritual awareness. Coming into spiritual awareness is not a mental process. It does not involve the mind. In fact, the mind tends to be an obstacle in this process because the experience of pure consciousness occurs in a state of silence that is devoid of thought or language, as in deep meditation.

Over my first several decades of medical practice I began to consider that the human body is a receptor for and reflection of our spiritual health. I believe there is an inseparable and sacred relationship of our earthly human body with its eternal soul. What I mean by this is that all of our human challenges are perfectly manifested in our body as representations or manifestations of spiritual dis-ease. I have repeatedly witnessed that my patients' headaches, back pain, digestive disorders, cancers, etc., are manifested at the physical, mental, and emotional levels by challenges originating and residing at the soul level.

But there is more!

It is even more amazing that our physical, mental, and emotional manifestations of illness are perfectly designed to simultaneously support and encourage our possible next steps for spiritual growth. After all, isn't the most important reason for being incarnated to learn lessons that promote our spiritual growth and development?

Because of our natural curiosity we strive to understand the workings of the universe, and it can be frustrating that we cannot understand its intricate organization and incredible perfection. Nonetheless, so far it has remained beyond human

understanding. Understanding the universe falls within the domain of the Creator, God if you will.

Nowhere is universal organization and perfection more obvious to me than it is in the practice of medicine. Yet, ironically, nowhere has it been more invisible than it is to today's doctors! Our doctors must bear some of the responsibility for this because they are the ones delivering healthcare, but the intrinsic defect is not in our doctors. The defect originates in the healthcare model itself. The lion's share of the defect is in the way our well intentioned and highly committed young doctors are being trained to practice medicine. Medical practice is no longer controlled by experience and conscience; today commercial interests control how medicine is practiced.

Strange as it may seem, most doctors today do have a personal belief in spirituality, and many have a strong religious practice. A large part of the reason why mainstream medicine excludes the role of spirit in healing is because medicine has become so commercialized. Practicing spirituality in medicine is a service that is not particularly profitable. Doctors who focus on patient's spiritual needs have a far lower priority for the use of drugs, technologies, or surgeries, which is where the big money in medicine is generated. As I have repeatedly pointed out throughout this book, medicine has become a business where the bottom line is return on investment, not service.

The vast majority of doctors, who incorporate spirituality into their practice as I do, usually make this transition long after they have completed their formal training. Most of the time it takes years of postgraduate experience before a few doctors come to realize that there's far more to helping their patients heal from an illness than merely curing their symptoms. These special doctors do not fit into today's mainstream medical model because it requires more time than is allotted to "be with" their patients by "listening and caring". Consequently, doctors who include spirituality in their bag of tools tend to have much smaller solo practices that cannot generate nearly as much income. However, the joy that comes with helping the sick that are in need far outweighs any financial returns. There is far more pleasure from gaining the

appreciation and friendship of our fellow human beings than from receiving their money!

### **Organization and perfection beyond our soul**

The manifestation of universal organization and perfection extends far beyond the individual soul level and is integrally connected to cultural, global, and universal domains. It is my personal belief that events originating in each of these domains affect every other domain in an organized and perfect way wherein there is always complete and perfect integration, purpose, and value.

Natural disasters such as droughts, floods, famines, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or even earthly collisions with asteroids may have the appearance of being consequences of chance, but because interconnection and order dominate how the universe works, it doesn't seem consistent that they would be just simple random events. I trust there is always a grand schema underlying everything that happens, and that it always has purpose and value at the spiritual level. Even man-made disasters, where human choice comes into play, such as in the case of war, pollution, global warming, and genocide, I believe there is purpose and value. Very often it is only the Creator that understands the purpose and value of these scenarios. We humans must depend on our trust and faith that God loves us and has created a magnificent universe designed to support our spiritual growth, even when there is great suffering.

It is easy for some people to take the stand that no loving God would allow these man made and natural disasters to happen. It is not easy to have faith and trust in God when we don't understand the point of ruthless events for which we can find no purpose. This is possibly one reason why some people become angry with God and profess atheism.

It can be very difficult to appreciate the value in what appears to be senseless, destructive, or even evil. In the biblical sense, why would a sensible God have allowed the fallen evil angel, Lucifer, to co-exist and thrive in a perfect world? However, think

about it. What more powerful way is there to grow spiritually than by having the opportunity to learn from the choices we make when good and evil are involved and we choose evil?

Could it be that we actually need evil in the world in order to have choices that teach us to appreciate what is good? Don't we learn best from our mistakes? Isn't it through temptation that we sometimes make selfish choices that ultimately have the potential to teach us the strengths of sharing, giving, and loving? It is very possible to make the case that the Creator deliberately included evil in the world so it would be possible to experience the difference between good and evil, and in doing so develop the wisdom to appreciate this difference. This is a significant way that we can achieve spiritual growth!

Sadly, however, not everyone learns that selfishness and greediness are not nearly as likely to bring joy and happiness in life as sharing, giving, and loving. We become more aware of what is important in life when our own death or that of a loved one is imminent. It is at sobering times like this that we awaken to the fact that it isn't our stock portfolio, bank account or other worldly possessions that are most important. We almost instinctively realize that it is our relationships with our self, others, all life forms and with spirit that are the most meaningful and precious priorities in life.

It may be the last few years, seasons, months, weeks, days or on occasion even minutes of our life that a light bulb goes off and we awaken to these realities. As long as we're still breathing and coherent, we still have the opportunity to make a spiritual transformation. The important issue in our life is how much we will grow spiritually. Sometimes it is during the dying process that we learn our most important spiritual lessons.

### **Science and secrets of the universe**

When Rene Descartes introduced science to the world it quickly took hold and became the accepted new way of thinking. At last it seemed that humanity had stumbled on a rational, logical, and understandable approach that promised to reveal the secrets of

the universe. This was perfect for man's insatiable hunger for knowledge about how the universe works and how it could be controlled.

Spirituality on the other hand, because there are no scientific tools or metrics with which it could be reduced and analyzed, was banished from the domain of science. There has not been a way to this day to apply science to understand spirituality. This is why scientists have simply ignored spirituality and put on a back burner for the past four hundred years. With the advent of quantum physics, however, it once again appears that understanding spirituality may possibly be within the grasp of science. We'll have to wait and see!

Scientists have been able to answer a few impressive questions about certain aspects of how the wonders of the universe work. Hi-tech science has been able to accomplish amazing feats that include defining the entire human genome, perfecting stem cell treatment, sending men into space, and so much more. It has clearly established itself as one way to unravel some aspects of a few of the mysteries of the universe. The question remains, "Is it realistic to think that through science human beings are capable of understanding the remainder of what we don't know about ourselves, let alone the entire universe?"

When I completed my medical training I was convinced that by dissecting matter into smaller and smaller pieces and studying how it is organized and works, science would eventually have to reveal its deepest secrets about disease and its cure. After all, we had the electron microscope and could analyze matter at the level of the atom! It would just be a matter of time because doctors are trained scientists and, of course, there has to be a scientific explanation for everything that happens in the universe.

We were assured that if we just kept plugging along, medical science would triumph over Mother Nature and discover the cause and cure for all diseases. This presumes, of course, that humans have the capacity to understand the workings of the universe as they apply to medicine and curing. So far, despite our achievements, one would have to seriously question this presumption!

It took me nearly 20 years of full time, private, outpatient and inpatient internal medicine practice to realize that healing was far more involved than just fixing the abnormal biochemistry and physiology of my patients. I knew deep down inside that something major was missing that was far beyond science alone. There was no going back to practicing the way I was trained in medical school.

It is true that through science we can describe the physical properties of amazing cosmic phenomena such as light, magnetism, gravity, electricity, black holes in space, and so much more. However, we haven't even a single clue about what these forces actually are or why or how they do what they do, even with the advent of quantum physics. Despite our lack of understanding, we still know something about what they do. It is an interesting combination of our understanding, knowing, and imagination that enable us to learn more about the laws of the universe. Yet we have a very long way to go!

While medical training in the use of drugs, surgeries, and technologies to manage the symptoms of illness is highly advanced, the underlying cause for illness still routinely remains a mystery. Until the root cause for illness is addressed and resolved, it is just plain commonsense that it will continue to manifest whether or not its magnitude is sufficient to cause symptoms at the physical level. We must keep in mind that the human body has considerable reserves that have to be lost before we malfunction in a clinically apparent way. The reasons why doctors rarely address the root cause of disease is because it is not part of their curriculum, and they simply don't know how to go about it. We cannot fault them for what they have not learned. However, it does not get them off the hook either! It is not less important to address the root cause for illness just because doctors don't know how to do it.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons medicine has made so little progress in resolving the pandemic of chronic diseases that now exists throughout the entire world. Fortunately, there is a significant trend among doctors, especially some of the younger ones, to think outside of the conventional medical box. Many of them are

wondering about the need for creating a new healthcare model that includes identifying the root cause for illness and includes the role of spirit as important tool in their medical bag.

This, however, certainly does not mean it is easy to make sense of why we get sick or know the best way to resolve illness. Far from it! To even begin the search to identify the root cause for illness requires a willingness to go beyond the boundaries of conventional scientific medical thinking and include the role of spirituality in causing and healing disease.

It is important to keep in mind that we live on a tiny little playing field called planet earth where we see no more than a microscopic sliver of the universe and how it works. Because we have no way of understanding much beyond our earthly experiences, it should not come as a surprise that understanding how the infinite universe or cosmos works may be beyond human comprehension.

If we cannot trust medicine's science, and medicine cannot trust the role of spirit in healing, where does that leave us?

### **Should we trust science?**

It may come as a surprise to you that medical science is typically *not* good science and most of the time should not be trusted. This could explain why the outcome of medical research keeps changing and why replication of studies has been so important. There are so many variables in most medical research studies that cannot be accounted for that their conclusions are highly questionable. What might have been thought to be a revolutionary breakthrough last year may no longer be good treatment this year because repeat studies may have shown different results that may no longer support last year's findings.

However, we must not forget that much of this inconsistency is because of financial conflicts of interests that bias the outcome of studies in order to show benefit from some product that is being developed for marketing. There is a very common

tendency for pharmaceutical companies to present results from scientific studies they have funded in ways that exaggerate their benefits. For example, instead of using actual numbers when summarizing the results of a study, results are reported as percentages. A good example would be in the case of recommending aspirin to prevent repeat heart attacks.

There is not a single study in all of our medical literature showing statistical benefit of aspirin in the prevention of repeat heart attacks! It was necessary to do a meta-analysis and combine several studies to show that there was a reduction after five years of treatment using aspirin to lower the risk of a repeat heart attack. And even then, the reduction was only from 8.2% to 6.8%. This shows a 1.4% reduction in the risk of a repeat heart attack over five years. And there are significant risks associated with using aspirin that seriously offset some of the value of taking aspirin that include cerebral hemorrhages, intraocular bleeding, GI ulcers and bleeding, allergic reactions and much more.

Now, the way the drug company presents this information, they report a very impressive 25% reduction in the risk of having a heart attack by taking prophylactic aspirin. This the same information but presented in a different form. What is more impressive, a 25% reduction in the risk of a repeat heart attack or a mere 1.4% reduction in the risk of repeat heart attack? What should be required from the drug companies is two numbers. First, the number of people who need to be treated for a certain period of time to prevent a certain health problem, and also the number of side effects that are expected if people take the drug for the same period of time.

And lastly, we now know through quantum physics that the observer of an experiment influences the outcome of a scientific experiment. So, it is not even possible to do a "scientific" study if human beings are conducting it!

It seems that for the most part, scientific studies have been degraded to an imprecise and non-scientific technology that is conveniently used by business people to create trust in products and technologies that generate income, whether they work or not!

It is a shame that our doctors have so much trust in what they refer to as “science-based” medicine. The problem is that they routinely and blindly apply misinformation from their “scientific” research to manage our healthcare issues, especially when we’re sick! Knowing this helps explain why, as Gary Null reports in the well-referenced *Death by Medicine* publication, there are nearly one million deaths each year in the US alone from factors related to medical treatment. Wow!

Nonetheless, this is good news for entrepreneurs because it opens the door to a very profitable marketplace to bring a steady stream of new products forward and capture new market share. We all know that it is the job of the FDA to monitor and supervise the safety and effectiveness of new drugs and technologies brought into clinical practice and that it is supposed to protect us against false or unsafe claims. However, we all know that the FDA’s integrity is marred by massive conflicts of interest.

### **Greed and pride trump ethics**

It is interesting that most scientists are well aware that the scientific method has these serious inherent flaws. It is even more interesting that they undauntedly continue doing their research as though they have blinders on. Why?

Many scientists simply ignore what they don’t want to recognize or deal with, especially if it means they might be out of a job because the truth, or lack of it. In addition, how would it feel to face the fact that the value and purpose of your life’s work turned out to be a fraud that not only led to a wrong policy but might also have caused serious harm? Would you try to cover this up? Would it be more comforting to simply ignore or deny the reality of what you know deep inside is true?

Lastly, because the holy grail of our culture is financial wealth, not service, whenever there is an impending potential loss of market share there is resistance from the status quo. Corporate giants that have the most financial power will “do whatever is necessary” to preserve the bottom line.

Sadly, far too often greed and pride trump ethics.

### **Life is for living**

It is inherent in human nature to strive to understand how the world works. We are curious beings and it is fun to try to figure out how we can manipulate Mother Nature to protect ourselves from simple things such as extremes in weather as well as far more complex things such as curing illnesses, or even exploring outer space. This is just good healthy curiosity.

However, we can overdo our curiosity. When we get into our left-brained, analytical, and scientific mode it is easy to become preoccupied and bogged down by innumerable basic questions that have been un-answerable throughout all time. The more we are consumed with our attempts to understand the un-understandable, define the un-definable, and control the un-controllable, we take away from living our lives. We become experts in un-living our lives.

Perhaps we should consider going back to square one and accept that life is for living and forget about being preoccupied with how and why the world is the way it is. What is clear is that when we get overly hung up on thinking we have to understand how the universe works, we can miss out on experiencing it. Analysis paralysis takes the experience out of living!

A good example of this is the simple act of eating an orange. What do you taste when you eat the orange? We can describe the different tastes we know about that include sweet, sour, pungent, astringent, and salty. However, that does not do justice to what the taste of the orange really is. To do that, you have to eat it! We can only know the taste of an orange through experience; you can analyze what taste is until time ends, and it is not going to provide the information we get from simply putting the orange in our mouth and experiencing what happens.

Nonetheless, analysis through the reductionistic scientific method and the holistic experience are partners, not opponents. Each explains reality from a different

perspective, and together they provide deeper understanding that is not possible from either separately.

### **What about spirituality?**

Because the universe is what it is, and because science and spirituality are merely different ways of analyzing and describing how the universe works, they have to be, and always are, 100% compatible. The union of science and spirituality goes beyond DNA, genes, and even epigenetics. It requires a new ideology and a new integrative vocabulary to describe how they complement one another and, hopefully, provide more complete knowledge and understanding about how the universe works.

Yet we instinctively blend science and spirituality, we always have! We depend on our imagination for new ideas; that is where they come from. However, we don't have a clue about how our imagination works or where our ideas come from. Do they come from us or through us? Man has pondered this question for millennia with no clear answer. The bottom line is we trust that ideas "that come to us" from "wherever" they come from, and we then do the best we can to use science to test their validity.

The challenge with our imagination is that it is not so easy to determine whether or not we can trust that it is correct. Sometimes what we imagine seems off base and it takes time to realize it is right on the money. At other times, it is way off the mark! The problem with science is that we aren't that good at it, and we can and often do come to the wrong conclusion. Nonetheless, we naturally use both science and spirituality when we are learning about something new. They have always been partners.

Our magical reflexive universe allows us to consider what we're studying from a wide range of perspectives. It is like the story of the six blind men studying an elephant, each standing in a different place and touching it. One feels a trunk, another the tail, and yet another the foot, and so forth. Each blind man reports something quite different and unique about what they perceive the elephant to be. Individually, of course, the reports are all correct, even though they are come up with completely

different observations and conclusions about what an elephant is. However, when all six inputs are considered together, a more inclusive description of the elephant begins to emerge.

Unfortunately, sometimes there is only a single blind man studying the elephant. In that setting the single truth that emerges can be mistakenly presumed as the only truth and lead to mass opinion and an inflexible cultural belief. When other observers of the elephant begin to report findings that are different, very often there is intolerance to listening.

The beauty of a reflexive universe is that it allows for as many perspectives about a certain issue as can be imagined. Every perspective has its point of view and value. The secret to finding the best and most inclusive story is to consider as many "truths" as possible and then make a collective decision that continues to remain open to possible future adjustments. How many blind men does it take to create a final conclusion?

It is easy to appreciate that science and spirituality are limited in that they can only study something from their own unique perspective. Of course, their observations, analysis, and conclusions will be quite different because their tools and metrics are so different. However, bringing these perspectives together allows us to understand more about what the different perspectives of the universe tell us as well as how they might function as a single unified unit. There is no good reason to make science and spirituality enemies when, in fact, they are intimate and inseparable partners! It is easy to highlight their differences. The challenge is to integrate them into a single unified principle rather than highlight why one is correct and the other not.

What we know about spiritual matters is based on faith and trust, and is experiential. We need faith that we are truly inseparably connected with the universe, and trust that we are integral to its function if we are going to experience this connection. We depend on our imagination, intuition, and gut feelings, those intangible aspects of our humanism that we all know so well but do not understand, to connect with our

spirituality. Could these be pathways that enter that sacred space where we experience oneness with the universe?

How wise would it be to discard what we know about spirituality simply because we don't understand how it works in scientific terms? How sad it would be if we reduced ourselves to mere robots programmed to respond only to logic and science? Aren't the intangible aspects of our humanity what make us uniquely and wonderfully human?

All human beings have an inner voice that is an interesting combination of at least our imagination, instincts, conscience, and intuition. We know it as a very special, and perhaps sacred voice that guides us to make "right" decisions. Could our inner voice be the vehicle that connects us with spirit, or even be the voice of spirit itself? Or is it merely a voice that leads to indecision, confusion, and low self-esteem? How do we know when we are in touch with our authentic sacred inner voice or in touch with another quite different voice that is disempowering and disrespectful?

When we do not develop healthy self-respect and are filled with self-doubt, guilt or shame, we may tap into another voice that is a reflection of our fears. It is important to not confuse this critical negative voice with our true inner voice that is authentic and loving. At times it can be very difficult to differentiate these voices, especially if we have been abused, trained to be controlled by fear, or have low self-esteem. Still, our authentic inner voice knows the right action even when it is subjected to fear, and it is always there if we need it. Our challenge is to overcome our fears and trust that our authentic self knows the right action. This can be extremely difficult for those who have been severely abused. Sometimes it takes considerable treatment with a variety of psychotherapy techniques and/or bodywork strategies such as somatic experiencing to silence the negative voices that try to drown out our true authentic inner voice.

I believe it is when we knowingly experience and acknowledge connection to the divine that we are granted access to a door that opens to universal connection, wisdom, and oneness.

## **Medicine as an art**

Many of our most treasured elders in medicine consider medicine an art as well as a science. The goal of an artist is to create a story that conveys thoughts, concepts and feelings on canvas and captures the imagination. A good doctor addresses these same aspects in human beings and develops a story much like a painting, sculpture or even a jig saw puzzle, where each addition reveals just a little more about who the person is and the meaning of their story. Every story is unique to each individual person and should be considered as a special work of art.

It is simple commonsense that the more tools we have to assess our health, the more information we have for interpretation. More is not necessarily better, however, so picking and choosing becomes critically important and may not be so easy.

Unnecessarily complicating an assessment is not only a distraction that can be misleading, but can also waste precious time, especially when we're sick and time may be critical. Passing over an approach can make the difference between a successful treatment and life or death. Keeping an open mind can be quite a challenge and may require great wisdom.

Sometimes when an approach is new and we don't yet understand or trust it, rather than struggling to make the best decision, it may be tempting to simply ignore or just throw it out. "Radical" new methods of treatment such as hand washing to prevent postpartum infection in the days of Semmelweis are a sad commentary on this. Thousands of women died because no one believed what Semmelweis discovered.

On the other hand some treatments such as prolonged usage of large doses of corticosteroids for rheumatoid arthritis as was done in the 1950s showed incredible and dramatic short-term benefits that led to a premature celebration of what was thought to be a major breakthrough in medical science. Consequently steroids were immediately brought into mainstream clinical practice as a miraculous breakthrough. However, this treatment turned out to be a disastrous failure because of the long term side effects that were not only severely disabling and disfiguring, but also often lethal. Thousands of people suffered or died from this treatment.

Keeping an appropriate open mind takes knowledge and wisdom that usually comes from experience and hard work. The problem is that some of what we believe to be knowledge is really nothing other than premature assumptions. When we learn how a certain situation plays out, our mind makes a judgment about it. When what we perceive as the same situation coming up a second time, we don't usually reassess it from scratch. Our prejudice, or pre-judgment or assumptions, can get us in trouble if the situation we're dealing with is just a little different and we don't recognize it. It is a bit like accepting the assessment of a single blind man reporting on what the elephant is.

Despite the fact that there have been multitudes of healthcare disciplines that have dealt with illness throughout history, aside from shamanic healing the vast majority of these approaches have been primarily oriented to make us feel better. The underlying spiritual cause of illness is rarely considered, let alone explored. While many of these disciplines are an interesting combination of both reductionistic and spiritual approaches, the bottom line that needs to be considered is "What is the root cause of illness and what is the best way to resolve it?"

### **Making sense of illness**

In my medical training at Duke University Medical School in the 1960s, my professors taught us that physicians are in a high-stakes, life and death war against disease. Illness was the enemy and the medical profession the savior. There was no accepted value or purpose for illness. Put simply, illness was the enemy and it had to be destroyed. Nothing much has changed in medical theory since I attended medical school. We are still engaged in a war against disease.

However, as I have become a more experienced and seasoned physician, I discovered that there were times when, despite the obvious associated physical and emotional disabilities that affected my patients, I could appreciate that illness was not necessarily random and affecting only hapless unlucky victims who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I began to appreciate there were connections between the

symptoms and psychospiritual factors in some of my patients' stories. Was this mere coincidence? Or was it my first conscious awareness of an organization to the universe that was unappreciated and mindboggling?

I began to realize that it is sometimes possible to make sense of an illness in a way that science doesn't even consider. As I continued to explore this with more and more of my patients I began to notice the connections between their diseases and symptoms that were related to their psychological challenges. Of course, that is a lot of what modern psychology and psychiatry is about, so it is not a new concept in the practice of medicine. However, what I didn't realize is that the "mind-body" connection was so consistently prevalent. Neither did most of my professors and colleagues.

But there was much more to this story than any of us imagined!

Gradually, as I studied the mind-body relationship to illness more deeply, I realized that while the mind-body connection is very important, there is more to illness than just the mind-body perspective. What about the role of spirit in illness? Did we throw the baby out with the bathwater when medicine abandoned the ways of the shaman and turned to science some 400 years ago?

Since that time I have come to believe there is *always* an intended spiritual lesson offered by illness. Perhaps this has become my personal religion, but I am not alone. This was the belief of the ancient shamans as well. Very often the spiritual understanding of illness is elusive or even beyond human comprehension, but I have faith that it is always there. Perhaps the lack of including the role of spirit in healing by modern medicine is one of the reasons why most physicians do not even attempt to address healing of the soul. Nonetheless, our job as healers is to address not only curing symptoms at the physical and emotional level but also healing at the soul level. While the medical profession has abandoned the practice of soul healing, it has continued to have a strong presence in most religions today.

This is not where the story ends. The meaning and impact of illness extends far beyond its effects on us as individual human beings. It is also about effects on families and communities, and nations and the planet. While these effects may not be massive at the universal and cosmic level, it always has an impact at these levels, however small, that changes the whole in important and meaningful ways.

Everything that happens in every nanometer of space in every nanosecond affects everything else in the universe to some meaningful extent. We can look at the universe as a giant spider web. There is no separation of anything that happens in the universe (it is a "uni" or "one-verse") and everything inherently affects everything else at all times. We live in a dynamic universe characterized by continuous change and constant evolution.

When I realized that this is how the universe works, I could no longer live my life or practice medicine the way I was taught. The physically oriented "fix it" model could no longer be my primary modus operandi. Fixing symptoms is merely one merciful but limited way of helping the sick recover from their physical disability and emotional distress. Compassion, of course, is important, but by itself it is not sufficient for deep soul healing. The deeper, psychospiritual, root causes for illness simply cannot be addressed at the biochemical or physiologic level alone if healing is to be the goal.

True healers understand the critical importance for patients, their families, and their doctors to go the extra mile by going beyond the fix-it model and shift their focus to address and resolve the underlying psychospiritual roots of illness to enable healing at the soul level.

In science the goal is to understand how and why things work as they do. However, we don't have to understand anything about spirituality. What is necessary is that we *know* about spirituality through experience, whether we understand it or not. When we enter this space our individuality dissolves as we let go of our judgments and expectations, and we feel the "oneness" of the universe. It is within this place that we can begin healing the wounds of duality and experiencing the joy of oneness.

## **Lessons learned from illness**

So illness, then, has the purpose of getting our attention so we can awaken to our spiritual dis-ease and have the opportunity to further evolve on our spiritual path. Another way to say this is that our physical disabilities are manifested from higher self with the intent and purpose of offering a lesson that encourages spiritual growth and transformation. Treating symptoms may be compassionate and merciful, and what patients want from their doctors, but it also may soften or even undermine the lesson offered by illness. That is why it is so important as a healer to not just ease the pain of illness at the physical or psychological level, but to also search for the underlying root causes so healing can happen at the soul level. This may involve openness to spiritual guidance on the part of the healer.

I've witnessed many of my patients learning important life lessons that would not likely have been possible without the experience of being challenged by illness. While symptoms may not be cured, when healing occurs new wisdom comes with it that is the result of a spiritual transformation. Curing and healing are different processes. Here are a couple of stories that highlight this point.

### **Rod's story**

Rod loved his family very much and believed it was his responsibility to make sure they would make the "right" decisions when anyone in his family faced a problem. He had a deep and overwhelming need to oversee most every situation to be sure everything would be done the best way possible. His way! At the same time, Rod nearly always put everyone's needs before his own. He was driving himself and everyone else crazy with his need to micromanage even the simplest of situations that most anyone with commonsense could resolve.

While it is normal to care about family members and help them when in need, Rod obviously did this to an extreme. He worried when his grandchildren weren't getting top grades in school or when they had a cold, if someone was having marital or work issues, or if someone had financial problems or even if a family pet had an issue. He

was the self appointed “family fixer,” the patriarch. Worrying interfered with his sleep to the point where he was only getting about 4-5 hours of interrupted sleep each night. He was always tired, but that did not stop him from performing his patriarchal duties.

Because he was sure his way was the only way, he wasn’t a good listener. At the same time, he refused to discuss the way he was running his own life, even though he had been suffering from severe anxiety and moderate depression for decades. He could not accept help from anyone, not even from me as his doctor.

When Rod found out he had lung cancer that had spread to his lymph nodes everything changed. He wanted to do what he thought was the “right” thing. He followed his oncologist’s advice and had surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. His treatment made him feel weak, nauseated, lose his beautiful hair, develop painful neuropathy, and suffer from severe malaise. For the first time in his life, the shoe was on the other foot. Rod could no longer function as the family patriarch. He finally realized he would need the help and support from his family because he could no longer take care of himself. Rod was sailing in uncharted waters and he was scared.

While getting cancer comes at a very high price, it can also offer important life lessons that might never be possible without having had it. This could be one of the reasons why the universe “gave” Rod the gift of no longer being able to help others and force him to take better care of himself and even accept the love and support from his family that he had never before allowed.

Rod’s anxiety and depression began to lift. His cancer responded much better to treatment than was predicted. He began to sleep better at night. Rod was happier than he’d been in his entire life despite having cancer! He was learning to feel worthy of being loved and being taken care of.

However, Rod's cancer came back with a vengeance. He died a few months later. He was forced to accept the support of his family and doctors and he died in the presence of their love and support. I doubt he could have experienced this without his illness.

Now I'd like to share my own personal story about how my own personal and health problems led to my spiritual growth.

### **My story**

Who would have thought tennis would play an important role in my spiritual growth and development? Certainly, I never expected that! I played tennis because I loved to test the boundaries of my physical, mental, and emotional abilities. It was great fun to react quickly, run, stay present and focused, deal with my expectations, and create a plan to win. And I was very good at tennis.

My first encounter with tennis aside from playing tennis was when I applied to medical school. I had been accepted to one medical school, but I really did not want to go there. It was just a week before the first year would begin when I got a call from Duke Medical School inviting me to be part of the class of 1965. I accepted and made plans to travel to Durham, North Carolina!

When I arrived the director of admissions called me to his office. He couldn't wait to inform me that his committee had passed over the first alternate to select me instead. The reason, he told me, was that he hoped I would be his doubles partner in the local tournaments around Durham. I smiled and agreed! We became good friends and enjoyed playing together. We even won a couple of doubles tournaments over the next four years.

The next encounter was six years later. I was drafted into the Air Force in 1966 and stationed at Glasgow Air Force Base in Montana. After serving my first year, unknowingly I had orders to be transferred to Vietnam as a jungle doctor. I didn't find out until about six weeks after the orders were cancelled when the assistant base commander and I were talking and he told me that he did me a favor. He told me that

I was indispensable to the base. When I asked why, he said it was because I was his doubles partner! My tennis skill once again made a big difference in how my life unfolded.

Becoming a doctor was what my family had prepared me for and was definitely something I wanted, but tennis was my very own personal thing; my parents had no investment in my tennis career and were essentially uninvolved. To me, however, tennis was the most defining part of who I was. Had there been a professional tour in that era I would very likely have tried to make professional tennis a career. However, now that I'm looking back, I'm glad I made the choice to become a doctor!

My talent in tennis was speed and quickness, but it was my passion and determination that made me a fierce competitor. I can thank my parents for a good portion of this in an interesting way. Certainly it was me that became a tennis champion. But without growing up as I did by being expected to excel in whatever I did, I wonder if I would have been driven to be the tough competitor that I eventually became.

However, there was a price to pay. By the time I was in my late 50s I had suffered from torn cartilage in both knees, osteoarthritis in my hips, an eye injury, and a painful lumbar disc. My last serious competition was in 2001 when I won the International Tennis Federation (ITF) World Senior Singles title in Perth, Australia, at age 61. It was my second ITF singles world championship.

It was downhill from there physically because of progressively worsening joint deterioration and pain. I had several tennis-related surgeries that included: arthroscopies on both knees, a right hip replacement (this gruesome story that I won't include), and left eye surgery (I was hit in the eye with a tennis ball years before). Today I cannot run without pain. Finally, a couple of years ago I was forced to give up tennis and turned to riding a bike for fitness. Sometimes even that causes too much pain.

So what might be the spiritual message of these physical disabilities and psychological challenges?

What I finally worked out was that playing tennis was all about proving to myself that I was capable, important, and worthy of being loved and respected by myself and by my family, friends and peers. When I earned the ranking of the number one senior men's singles player in the world in my division by the ITF, my self-confidence soared. While this was very important for my self-image and opened the door for spiritual growth, it was also time to rethink what my life was about in a much deeper way.

The question that surfaced was would my life be about being a tennis champion or about giving back to the world to do my small part to help make it a better place as a doctor? I realized that the world had become a big tennis court! Deep down inside I knew there had to be more to life than being a tennis champion. It was time to find out who I would be after freeing myself of my more narcissistic needs.

It wasn't easy to give up the sport I loved, was so good at, and received a so much external validation that felt good. I suppose that had I not had so much pain I might still be playing the super-senior tennis circuit today! I might have been helped by a hip replacement on my other hip and another for a low back disc, but I had made up my mind that was too much and that my competitive tennis days were over. I got the message that my aging body was no longer going to endure the harsh physical demands of tennis. It was time to explore how I might contribute to making the world a better place by finding a deeper purpose in my life.

Today I am engaged in a full time medical practice, medical research, lecturing, writing books, my family, and teaching. I no longer play tennis. It was a very difficult but worthwhile trade off!

Another interesting synchronicity in my life was the illness that Vicki developed in the late 1980s (discussed in another chapter). How this was woven into not just Vicki's life but also mine is another amazing example of the intricate organization and incredible

perfection of the universe. Not only did Vicki learn valuable spiritual lessons for herself but it also served as a powerful lesson for me in my own spiritual training to become the person I am today. It also led to our working together on our radio and television shows, and in creating our website, [doctorsaputo.com](http://doctorsaputo.com).

It is fascinating that so often we do not pay attention to the precision of how our lives unfold and how they play such important roles in our spiritual development. Once we take a serious look at these so-called "synchronicities" and appreciate how they serve us, it *is* truly mindboggling. Yes, I wish I could have learned these lessons without ruining my body, but then chances are I'd not have learned much; as I said, I'd probably still be playing on the super-senior tennis circuit!

### **The boundaries of human potential**

For thousands of years ancient shamans have had great reverence for the magnificence and power of spirit in our lives. They recognized and honored the wholeness of the universe and that all of our experiences are synchronized so perfectly. The shamans saw no flaws in the way the universe operates. Not one! They marveled and worshipped this perfection. They believed we manifest our dreams to the extent of our faith and trust in the universe. Perhaps we do play an important role in creating our own destiny!

Many quantum physicist theorists tell us that we do create our own reality by the decisions we make. The theory is enticing but up to this time it has been impossible to prove using scientific metrics. While it has not been easy to put aside my training as a "medical scientist," experience has been a powerful teacher that has been very convincing. I have witnessed too many synchronicities in my life to discount that we create our own reality and I now believe we have a partnership with spirit wherein we co-create our future.

Even though science and spirituality must always be congruent, there are many stories that leave us wondering about our understanding of the laws of physics. In the summer of 1986 one of my patients mentioned he was going to walk barefooted on

2000 degree coals as part of a Tony Robbins Fire-walk Event. This is impossible by science as we know it, and it was what I believed at the time.

“People can’t expose themselves to 2000-degree temperatures without getting burned,” I thought. I foolishly ridiculed my patient, saying that if he was silly enough to walk on hot coals that I’d soon be taking care of his barbequed feet in the ICU! Nonetheless Vicki and I accepted his invitation because we were curious and wanted to witness what we expected would be a hoax of some kind. Certainly neither of us had any intention of walking on 2000-degree hot coals!

The event began in the morning and consisted of Tony preparing everyone for the fire-walk. I have to admit, he is an amazingly inspirational speaker and the way he hypnotized us was very impressive. Then to our disbelief, early in the evening Vicki and I watched all 300 people walk across the 12-foot long and 3-foot wide 2000-degree glowing coals barefooted! No one had a single burn on his or her feet! Our world changed in seconds!

We knew we had no choice; we were going to walk in the coals too! But it wasn’t without considerable apprehension. We got in line to walk across the coals. We saw the red-hot flames and felt their tremendous heat from a few feet away. As I took my first step on to the burning coals I knew that one way or another it would be life changing. To say I was in a trance is an understatement. The possible penalties for doing this little stunt could have been disastrous. In just one week, I was scheduled to play in the International Senior Tennis Championships in Jakarta, so barbequing my feet would not have been a good thing for me or for our team. It would also have been quite embarrassing as a physician if I was burned from 2000-degree coals and had to explain what I had done to my colleague doctors in the ICU who would be taking care of me!

So, how can we explain what happened? How can we explain other similar phenomena? How can people pierce their tongues with a skewer and not feel pain or bleed even a single drop of blood? How can Brazil’s John of God scrape the surface

of the cornea with a non-sterile kitchen table knife and cure an illness without causing any pain or problems with vision? How does voodoo work? And what about the placebo effect?

A real scientist would welcome the opportunity to study what appears to be an anomaly. After all, isn't that is how most advances in our knowledge are discovered! The fact is, however, that there is no such thing as an anomaly. What we call an anomaly is no more than a lack of understanding of how the laws of the universe operate. Hiding from phenomena that don't fit the present accepted model of the universe is not only ignoring an opportunity to expand our knowledge and understanding, but also very poor science.

### **Where do we go from here?**

I have shared the spiritual basis that has helped me evolve into the human being and doctor that I am today. It is with great humility and gratitude that I acknowledge the lessons that have deepened my knowledge and understanding of who I am, who my patients are, and how to relate to one another to allow healing to happen. We all heal together.

I have felt the separation of myself from my patients, family and friends diminishing over the years. At other times I have felt their pain as though it were my own. I know of no greater joy than helping others find happiness by giving of myself. What I have discovered is that enlightenment comes from the awareness and exhilaration of the oneness of all that there is, and that this is possible to experience when I am fully present in this sacred space.

Mature love is about wanting to make others happy. It is not narcissistic; it is not about us. It is about giving unconditionally. When we contribute to making someone else happy, it makes us happy. However, we cannot give what we don't have. We must first learn how to love and respect ourselves before we can give unconditional love to another. This is not so easy when so many of us are raised in severely dysfunctional families where there is an epidemic of physical, emotional, and sexual

abuse and where love is uncommonly experienced. Sometimes it takes decades to recover from these childhood wounds. It is only when we have resolved these traumas through understanding and forgiveness that we can begin the journey of healthy self love. Before we can heal our healthcare system, we must heal our culture, and we cannot heal our culture unless we are first willing to heal ourselves.

Perhaps our most important and meaningful purpose on earth is to grow spiritually. We all have spiritual work to do, and we know it. Most of the time it may be obvious and seem simple, but spiritual growth is rarely easy. It is necessary to stretch beyond our comfort zones and overcome our fear of the unknown. If we can truly understand and accept this, it may allow the inherent suffering of spiritual growth become more of an option than a requirement. This may lead to finding joy in this process and the inevitable shift from wanting to satisfy our own narcissistic needs to wanting to share, give, and love unconditionally so as to make others happy. We must learn that love is for giving and graciously receiving, but never for taking.

If the underlying energy of the universe is love, then it makes perfect sense that we are simply the consciousness of the universe reflected upon itself.