

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Greenwood, Peter Nunn (1992). PARADOX AND HEALING: MEDICINE, MYTHOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATION. Victoria: Meridian House. \$18.95
Reviewed by David Johnston.

In a recent P. B. S. program on Bill Moyer's Mind and Healing there were two examples of how alternative approaches to medicine are beginning to gain credibility, even in mainline institutions. In a large New York hospital, for instance, Doctors regularly send patients with chronic pain to a center whose director teaches meditation and the need to bring pain into full bodied sensual awareness. People enrich their lives by learning to live around "the edge of their pain" while finding some measure of relief. In the second example, a psychiatrist is in the process of testing his unexpected finding that women with cancer participating in a support group live on average one and a half years longer than women who don't participate in such a group. One of the important advantages of being in support groups is the encouragement to express feelings, fears and anxieties. In addition to living longer, life itself is enhanced.

For those interested in exploring this phenomenon in more depth, Paradox and Healing is a good place to start. Michael Greenwood, the medical Director of the Meridian Holistic Health Center in Victoria and Peter Nunn, who co-founded the institute, along with his wife Heather, are the authors. In their highly readable book, they manage to make some difficult concepts readily accessible to the layperson. Their use of fairy tale and myth as an explanatory device adds charm to the book and instructs by appealing to both the imagination and feelings.

The authors' central thesis is that conventional Western medicine is based on denial and a split between the mind, the body and the emotions and that a more holistic approach is not only preferable but is essentially healthier. A true holistic approach, they argue, does not discard conventional medicine, but puts it in perspective along with complementary medicine. It does, however, require full acceptance, even surrender to the disease, which Nunn and Greenwood view as a compensating balancing factor and part of our wholeness. Full acceptance of the disease and attending emotions can then become an impetus for changing one's life.

From a holistic point of view, the disease comes as both a symptom for a life that needs redressing and as an essential aspect of wholeness that comes as part and parcel of the way we conduct our life. For example, when we continuously live with high levels of ambient stress, then there will be breakdown and, from a holistic point of view, potentially breakthrough to a new lifestyle. A new way of life consisting of changed beliefs, attitudes and behaviour patterns will result in a different balance of energies and less body tension.

In addition to describing the nature of a holistic approach to medicine, the authors make suggestions on what would encourage a healthy lifestyle. It includes rest, meditation and a judicious exercise program. It also involves seeking congruence between the intellect and feelings as well as referral to subjective feedback. What is ultimately important, however, is that individuals

take back the power they give to their doctors and the medical profession, while taking on personal responsibility for their own lives.

I am in general agreement with the views presented by Nunn and Greenwood and warmly recommend this book, especially for people who are suffering from a bothersome physical ailment or stress-related tension that creates bodily discomfort or pain. I have, nonetheless, two points of criticism. One is that the authors at times treat their subject too simplistically and allow their idealism to get in the way of a more credible presentation. They write, for instance, that ‘...if we know that illness is good, we are unlikely to get ill at all, because, understanding that there is nothing to fear in the universe we will not generate the tension patterns which cause illness.’

My second point of criticism has to do with their concept of wholeness. The meaning the author’s give to it is limited, having to do with a certain integration of the mind, the feelings and bodily messages. The way they write about it, it seems to be a relatively easy thing to attain, the result of a simple shift in belief and behaviour. In fact, wholeness can only be a life-long goal and, at best, one can be ‘in process’ towards that end. Moreover the meaning of wholeness and what is involved in attaining it is far more profound and complex than what is hinted at in the book. The reader would be better served had the authors stuck closer to their subject, holistic medicine, which may well profit from a holistic attitude, without making this other extravagant claim.