

**Vincent Di Stefano (2006): Holism and Complementary Medicine. Origins and Principles. Allen & Unwin, Sydney**

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **COMPLETING THE CIRCLE Voices of renewal**

*For all its technological power, medicine is not a technological enterprise. The practice of medicine is a special kind of love.*

*Rachel Naomi Remen, 1996<sup>1</sup>*

*It should be especially clear in medicine that we cannot have well humans on a sick planet. Medicine must first turn its attention to protecting the health and wellbeing of the Earth before there can be any effective human health.*

*Thomas Berry, 1991<sup>2</sup>*

During the closing decades of the twentieth century, the profession of medicine in the West began to reacquire many of the holistic principles that have governed the practice of thoughtful and evolved physicianship through the ages. Ironically, this happened at a time when scientific medicine was at its most powerful, when the nature of the body and the diseases to which it is subject have been charted virtually down to the last detail, when the search for knowledge of the processes that sustain life itself reached deeply into the creative core of cellular DNA.

With most diseases now documented and well understood, it is tempting to ask where the further movement of medicine is likely to proceed. New frontiers begin to open up in such areas as molecular genetics and embryonic research. It is as though the notion of limitless growth has seized the imagination of those on the far edge of medical research, even though such notions are ultimately unsustainable.

Although the accomplishments of biomedicine over the past century have been truly staggering, there are aspects of human suffering that call for more than technical solutions. Those living under the shadow of chronic degenerative diseases, or the so-called 'diseases of civilisation' know that they can only be propped up for so long with more drugs and more procedures.

In this time of universal knowledge and education, we need to ask further regarding the true limits of medicine, the degree to which it is prepared to work towards healing all aspects of life as far as it is possible to do so. Is it enough to expect of medicine only that of which it is technically capable? By focusing primarily on disease, has biomedicine neglected many of the other dimensions of contemporary life that contribute to ill-health? Is the task of medicine confined to the health of the individual, or is there a duty of care towards the health of families, of communities, of the ecosystems within which we participate, and of the earth itself?

Holism inherently calls for broader perspectives. It calls for the development of an ecological sensitivity that discerns patterns of influence and interaction that extend beyond individual biology. Holistic approaches to health require both a willingness to look beyond the obvious, and an acceptance that uncertainty is part of the cost of transcending the fixed boundaries of individual pathology. A nursing educator and early critic of the holistic health movement in the United States has taken up this dialectic:

Holists claim that medicine (a term that in this section will denote all conventional health-care disciplines) defines its practice too narrowly, an approach that results in dehumanising treatment of patients. Medicine is accused of focussing on the disease, the part, the technique - all at the expense, of course, of the "whole person". It is too much concerned, accuse the holists, with the therapy and too little with the patient. The scientific method is felt to impose too small a focus.

Conventional providers, on the other hand, protest that the holists are acting irresponsibly by trying to assign every human problem to the province of health care, thereby increasing the already heavy burden of practitioners. They believe that use of the scientific method allows them to do what they do best - heal the sick - and that holism may be encouraging them to do many things badly.<sup>3</sup>

There are no ready answers to such questions. The issues are, by their very nature, complex. But the movement of medicine in recent decades has been more towards, rather than away from, a deepening appreciation of the nature of holism and of its role in the mission of healing. It is not that holism encourages healers to do many things badly. Holism, in fact, encourages healers to do many things well.

## **Of simpler times**

It remains a curious anomaly that scientific medicine's deep knowledge of disease and its treatment has not been matched by a similar knowledge of health and of ways that it can be maintained or augmented. That project was, perhaps, the necessity of earlier times, of times when diseases were as yet poorly understood, of times when knowledge of medicines was rudimentary.

Ancient healers sought to actively support the forces that sustained the health of their people rather than contending in often fruitless battles with diseases of which they knew little with medicines of which they knew less. In such times, effectiveness rested largely in the person of the healer, in their capacity to awaken hope in their patients, and in their ability to offer meaningful explanations of sickness that restored some order to their patients' worlds.

The priest-doctors of ancient Egypt clearly understood the importance of preventive medicine. They encouraged the use of hygienic practices to preserve the health of their people. During the time of the later dynasties, the people of the Nile delta regularly undertook a ritual cleansing of their bodies through the use of purgatives, enemas, and dietary restriction. Egyptian medical historian Paul Galioungui recalls:

Even the Greeks thought excessive the care that Egyptians took of their bodies. All their travellers talk with admiration of the Egyptian customs of washing the hands and the crockery, and of taking purgatives and emetics every month. These customs were

certainly in large part due to the example and teaching of the priests, who practiced an extremely fastidious ritual of cleanliness and of whom Herodotus wrote that they must certainly have received many benefits to submit to these innumerable observances.<sup>4</sup>

Such practices, at the very least, enabled the population as a whole to better cope with the many waterborne diseases and parasites carried by the yearly flooding of their rivers and waterways. In addition, they would have conferred the benefits of metabolic renewal brought about by short periods of fasting and cleansing.

During the pre-Hippocratic period in Greece, Asklepiad physicians attended their patients both directly and through the 300 healing temples scattered throughout their land. These places of healing were generally located away from the towns and cities and provided a place of rest and renewal for those in need. Patients would bathe in the waters of the springs alongside which many of the temples were situated, and then be massaged with fragrant oils and nourished with pure foods. Periods spent in these early hospitals were times of ritual purification of the body and mind, and offered the opportunity for inner reflection and bodily recovery. The gently restorative treatments received by patients served to strengthen them during their time of recuperation.

In the present day, such systems as Indian Ayurvedic medicine and traditional Chinese medicine continue to make use of special treatments that aim primarily to strengthen and restore the physical and mental reserves of patients. These Eastern systems of medicine provide both curative treatments and time-tested methods that serve to actively increase health and vigour. Such methods include dietary regulation, yoga and tai ch'i practices, and the use of tonic plants such as Ginseng, or the restorative *rasayanas* of Ayurvedic medicine, those herbal and mineral preparations used specifically for the purposes of physical regeneration rather than for the cure of disease.<sup>5</sup>

One of the more significant contributions of complementary medicine in the present time is its reminder that the work of the physician not only calls for the effective treatment of diseases, but also for the active support of health.

## **The freedom to choose**

The health-based paradigm of complementary medicine has been strongly welcomed by many within Western communities. People are keen to learn what they can do to maintain their own and their families' wellbeing. The clinical style of the modalities of complementary medicine offers a highly personalised means whereby patients can become more informed in matters of health. The clinical encounter serves not only to provide relief for the patient's symptoms or condition, but also provides an opportunity to explore preventative and restorative strategies that the patient can work with in their own time.

The increasing presence and accessibility of practitioners prepared to work with patients in this way has been felt at all levels. An osteopath observes:

*Our local GP down the road here, who is very sound in her orthodox medicine, has sent a letter round to her patients saying now what times she is available and so on. She's doing a bit more advertising, and she also says in her letter that she is happy to work with alternative practitioners*

*on people's problems. And so within the demographics of this area, patients are beginning to become sort of therapy shoppers who will have a number of different practitioners they go to for different things. And the GP, the medical GP is feeling the strain of that. She's not getting the people to come and consult her first.*

This comment made in the mid 1990s reflects the reality on the ground for practitioners of biomedicine in a large Australian city. This scenario closely mirrors the situation in most English speaking countries throughout the world at the time. The expansion of the health care marketplace is not only a notable social and political phenomenon, but also carries significant economic implications. Even in crude terms, the increasing popularity of non-orthodox approaches to health care has resulted in greater competition between providers.

The increasing willingness of medical practitioners to cooperate with their non-medical colleagues may be driven as much by level-headed pragmatism as by a genuine desire for inter-professional conciliation and collaboration. Practitioners of biomedicine can no longer afford to alienate patients who have experienced for themselves the benefits of non-conventional approaches to health care.

Even during the 1980s, it was clear to some observers that the increasing popularity of non-orthodox healing modalities in the West carried strong implications for the direction in which the practice of community medicine was moving. Steven Fulder offered his own view of how things were shaping up in the United Kingdom at that time:

The individuals concerned are ceasing to be mindless consumers of drugs and services, becoming more discriminating and aware in their choices. They are also bringing their new options back home to their family physicians, and contributing to an awareness among doctors of the existence and potential of natural therapies. It is the patients, rather than organised lobbies, who will bring about the coexistence and mutual respect between the various medical systems which is as obvious as it is inevitable.<sup>6</sup>

What was obvious and inevitable to Fulder at that time is rapidly coming to pass. One of the more significant consequences of this development is that many within biomedicine have extended their professional networks beyond the inner circle of specialist medical suites and now include the names of practitioners of complementary medicine on their patient referral lists. Practitioners across the board are beginning to talk to each other, and are becoming increasingly aware of the particular strengths and qualities of their respective approaches. In addition, many doctors are learning for themselves about ways of healing that may not have been part of their formal education through seminars, graduate programs, and the pages of their professional journals.<sup>7</sup>

The core values of complementary medicine are reflected not so much in their unusual techniques or exotic pharmacopoeias, but in their expression of holistic principles. The disciplines themselves are characterised by a different relational style between patients and physicians to that of biomedicine. Their underlying philosophies tend to be health-based rather than disease-based. And the modalities of complementary medicine more comfortably accommodate the role of non-material influences in health and disease in their diagnostic and treatment methods.

Although there are strong currents of renewal coursing through medicine at present, the task of reclaiming the perennial values of physicianship is an historical one that cannot happen overnight. For behind many of the powerful institutions associated with biomedicine are particular interests that carry both their own momentum and their own inertia. Our osteopath continues:

*The idea of psychosocial or psychosomatic medicine having something to say that would actually be heaps cheaper and heaps healthier won't really dawn on orthodox medicine ever because they make heaps more money. . . That probably always will be so. That high-tech, sexy, "beyond 2000", physical, technological cure-type medicine - which actually never cures anything - will flourish. But the softer, more holistic approach will gather ground.*

Technology has reached into virtually every aspect of life in the developed world. The practice of biomedicine is no exception. The production of drugs, the manufacture and maintenance of diagnostic equipment, and the operation of acute and intensive care facilities, surgical theatres and nuclear medicine departments are all dependent on high technology. And although the perceived benefits of that technology may be great, this osteopath reminds us that they come at a cost, often a very high cost.

Huge amounts of money are vested in the discovery, manufacture and marketing of synthesised pharmaceutical drugs. And even greater amounts are generated by their sale. Our respondent reminds us of the obvious when he points out that such realities make it unlikely that things will change in a hurry.

The methods of complementary medicine do not require elaborate technologies and are generally far less costly than those of biomedicine. The correction of structural problems through manual methods will often eliminate the need for analgesic or anti-inflammatory medication. Herbal and homoeopathic medicines are easily produced from natural substances and are far less expensive than synthesised drugs. Disposable acupuncture needles can be carried anywhere and cost very little. Supplying the kitchen with whole foods costs little more, and often less, than their equivalent in processed and denatured foods, yet may provide health benefits for the whole family that are reflected in fewer episodes of sickness and a decreased need for medication.

Sickness and disease can often be handled in ways other than the preferred methods of biomedicine and often at a fraction of the cost. The effective treatment of lifestyle-related or chronic degenerative diseases may require more than the setting and monitoring of drug schedules. The development of social support networks, and the cultivation of mental attitudes that enable a person better to deal with pain or limitation have a major role in the management of such conditions. So also does the facilitation of changes in patients' lifestyle and pattern of activities that may benefit their condition.

The osteopath quoted earlier seems quietly confident that despite the immense capabilities of technological medicine, "the softer, more holistic approach will gather ground." That ground has certainly been gained more recently. The very urgency of the times has called for a transcendence of the hostilities that, during the latter decades of the twentieth century, defined the boundaries of acceptable medicine. The old divisions now begin to give way to an increasingly integrated understanding.

## **The best and the worst of times**

The scientific and technological developments of the past century have completely altered the way that humanity lives upon the earth. Machines now fly across continents and between planets. Our voices are invisibly carried through the ether by microwave radiation. Acts of war are perpetrated with deadly precision and devastating consequence by remote control. Five hundred million computers, all of which will eventually need to be disposed of, hum away in numerous households, businesses and institutions around the world. The cities of the earth are filled with the quiet roar of six hundred million cars as commuters daily brave peak hour.

During that same time, the remaining forests of northern Europe and North America have begun to wither under a rain of industrial pollutants. The skin of young children now reddens and blisters even under cloudy skies as the earth's protective ozone shield thins out. Southern icebergs the size of entire countries fracture and float northwards through shipping lanes, and majestic tropical coral reefs whiten and slowly die as the oceans begin to warm. Sixty-five million tons of precious topsoil is dispersed and lost every year through the methods of broadacre farming and contemporary agriculture. Elected politicians ignore calls to preserve old growth and tropical forests as ancient watchers of time are felled and turned to pulp and woodchip.

Our ways are strangely set in a peculiar, yet understandable attachment to the hard-won benefits of industrial civilisation. It is as though we believe that we have either gone too far and can do little about the situation, or that if we just keep on with it, things will eventually sort themselves out. But there is a growing realisation that things are unlikely to sort themselves out of their own accord.

The intelligence and ingenuity that contributed to the creation of our present freedoms needs to turn not only towards minimising and repairing the damage that has already been done, but also towards developing a deeper understanding of how it is that such catastrophic harm has been allowed to go as far as it has.

Like the human body, the earth itself cannot be subjected to a constant and relentless assault without being severely damaged. As the health of the earth's finely balanced ecosystems is weakened through a progressive poisoning of air, water and the soil, so also is the health of the earth's inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

## **The boiling frog principle**

There is a story told that may give pause regarding the nature of the situation within which we presently find ourselves. If frogs are placed into a vat of water, they will swim happily about. If the water is gradually heated up, they will tend to swim a little faster. As the temperature steadily rises, they will swim more and more vigorously, but make no attempt to remove themselves from the increasingly dangerous environment in which they find themselves. One could say that they were adapting well to their changed circumstances. They adapt so well, in fact, that they will allow themselves to be eventually boiled to death. But if the same frogs are dropped into a vat of water that has already been heated to a high temperature, they will thrash and

struggle fiercely in order to remove themselves from the deadly situation into which they have been placed.<sup>9</sup>

We have perhaps too vigorously defended the benefits of economic growth and technological development without giving sufficient attention to the more damaging consequences of such activities upon the biosphere and the earth's ecosystems, and upon human health. The very term 'diseases of civilisation' itself points to the known consequences of affluent and wasteful lifestyles.

The philosophy of holism rests on an understanding that all things are interconnected and that nothing occurs in isolation. For the first time in history, we know ourselves to be inhabitants of a finite world with finite resources, in a world that has been brought to its present state of equilibrium through hundreds of millions of years of slow adaptation to changing conditions. The past two centuries of human activity have brought about a degree of change in the natural balance of the world that could never have been fully anticipated. Many have become aware that the health of the earth's atmosphere, and of its terrestrial and marine ecosystems is now in jeopardy. These changes herald difficult times ahead.

Ironically, it has been technology itself that has brought to our attention the true nature of our present predicament. The image of the earth from space represents one of the most powerful and transformative symbols in human consciousness. This image has made us all aware that we inhabit a single earth as one of myriad species that have arisen through the creative expression of the living forces of nature. Yet our industrial and commercial activities over the past two centuries have changed the balance of the earth's regulatory systems in ways we are barely beginning to come to terms with.

Cultural historian Thomas Berry has offered a profoundly disquieting assessment of the planetary consequences of industrial proliferation and its multiple influences upon the earth and its myriad ecosystems:

The earth cannot sustain such an industrial system or its devastating technologies. In the future, the industrial system will have its elements of apparent recovery, but these will be minor and momentary. The larger movement is towards dissolution. The impact of our present technologies is beyond what the earth can endure.<sup>10</sup>

One year after Berry offered this judgement regarding the present situation, the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a statement entitled "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity". It included the following comment:

A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.<sup>11</sup>

These are not the hysterical projections of latter-day Luddites, but represent sober assessments of present realities. The Union of Concerned Scientists' Warning was endorsed by over 1 700 of the world's leading scientists, including the majority of Nobel laureates in the sciences.

Thomas Berry has devoted most of his adult life to a study of human history and its various cultural manifestations. In recent decades, his energies have been directed

towards understanding the nature of human connectedness with the earth and pursuing the deeper meaning of twentieth-century technological civilisation. Now in his nineties, Berry continues his work as an advocate for a more holistic and conscious cooperation with the forces that sustain all of life on the planet. Berry believes that our present predicament has been brought about through a growing separation from nature and natural forces that has occurred over the past three centuries. He attributes this desacralisation and loss of communion with the earth to the widespread influence of Descartes' dualistic philosophy upon the scientific community.<sup>12</sup>

The work ahead will require more than elaborate recycling systems and a reduction of the amount of energy that we consume, although these are essential elements of any program that seeks to limit further damage. The healing of the earth will be accomplished not so much by developing new technical solutions to the present problems, but by becoming more conscious of our integral relatedness to each other and to the earth and by acting accordingly. We are a part of nature and not apart from nature, and will inevitably suffer the consequences of any disturbance we may cause, whether individually or collectively, to natural systems.

The growth of interest in complementary medicine that occurred during the latter decades of the twentieth century needs to be understood in the broader context of such realities.

## **Recovering nature**

Complementary medicine has not arisen in a vacuum. Even though its various modalities have been quietly practised alongside biomedicine throughout the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, there occurred a dramatic growth in the popularity in what was then referred to as 'alternative' or 'natural' medicine during the 1960s and 1970s. This appeared to be part of a wide-ranging cultural response to the escalating problems confronting contemporary civilisation. Those problems included increasing environmental degradation, rampant consumerism, a growing nuclear militarism and widespread social alienation.<sup>13</sup>

The growth of both the holistic health movement and the rise of alternative or complementary medicine have been linked to the development of what became known as the counter-culture during the 1960s. In the United States, nursing educator Kristine Alster observed:

Although holistic thought has a long tradition in many disciplines, including medicine, it was the counter-culture that was the direct antecedent of the holistic health movement.<sup>14</sup>

This notion was more recently revisited by British sociologist Mike Saks. He suggested that the ideas and the consciousness that were identified with the counter-culture movement of the 1960s were significant influences in the growth in popularity of 'alternative' systems of medicine at the time:

Although there had been an undercurrent of public scepticism about medical orthodoxy since its establishment in both Britain and the United States, what was different about the mid-1960s was the scale and intensity with which this was manifested. The emergence of

a strong medical counter-culture was also importantly associated with the wider social changes that were taking place in the West. . . .

[T]he long-standing materialistic values that emphasized the delivery of technocratic solutions to problems generally came under fire at this time. The ideology of 'scientific progress' was also debunked, as growing numbers of the public sought to escape from established patterns of deference to authority and to explore alternative lifestyles.<sup>15</sup>

What is now commonly referred to as complementary medicine is more in the nature of a social and cultural phenomenon than simply a group of competing systems of therapy jousting for a place in the health care arena. This development is characterised by a number of distinctive attributes: a higher value tends to be placed on the natural world than the man-made world; self-reliance is valued over dependence, interconnectedness over separateness, sustainability over consumerism, and cooperation over competition. Support for the environment movement, the peace movement and an interest in spirituality and the wisdom traditions of indigenous cultures are also common elements within this development.

The high level of community support for the modalities of complementary medicine represents but one manifestation of the sense that our lives have somehow lost touch with the deeper realities within which we participate, consciously or unconsciously. More holistic approaches to health care offer a means of partially reclaiming those realities. A naturopath offers her own reflection:

*I suppose it's something to do with the advance of science and technology and the whole worship of that in modern life. We're getting further and further away from a natural state and more and more into a technological artificial world. Medicine's a big part of that. And what alternative medicine is trying to bring back or maintain is the natural, or some elements of the natural world.*

It has already been noted that, in contrast to biomedicine, the modalities of complementary medicine are relatively independent of high technology. Within the Australian context, the term natural medicine was generally used up until the 1990s to describe such approaches as naturopathy, homoeopathy, herbalism, many of the manual therapies and mind-body medicine. This term points towards a major difference in perception of both the methods and the philosophies of complementary medicine and biomedicine. Rightly or wrongly, the modalities of complementary medicine are perceived to be more closely linked with the natural world, while biomedicine and its institutions are perceived to be part of the technological world.

The living forces that drive a seed to its full expression as a mature plant, and the mysterious processes that transform a caterpillar into a butterfly are manifestations of the same powers that sustain our own human nature. Our foods when wisely used become as medicines, and there are also within nature many plants that are capable of acting as agents for the healing of our sicknesses. The energy carried in a high-potency homoeopathic medicine and the intention carried in human caring and the healing touch can similarly act as forces for healing.

The naturopath quoted above sees the dependence of biomedicine upon technology as a source of alienation not only between doctors and patients, but also between medicine itself and the forces that sustain our life and our health. She points towards what Thomas Berry has called the technological "entrancement" that can blind us to a

perception of the natural world as a perennial repository of healing influences and capabilities.

This perspective in many ways goes against the temper of the times and the view that technology is a universally positive source of human progress and material abundance. The diagnostic technologies of biomedicine certainly represent an expression of extraordinary creativity and immense usefulness. But the shadow cast by industrial technologies over the past century appears to be darkening our collective futures as environmental degradation, deforestation, rising levels of greenhouse gasses, loss of the protective ozone layer and increasing levels of background radiation all continue to gather momentum.

The philosophies and practices underlying the modalities of complementary medicine remind us of the existence of perennial forms and perennial values within healing that transcend the particular circumstances of any given era. Nature remains capable of producing medicines without the manipulation by pharmaceutical engineers of atoms within and around complex molecules under conditions of high temperature and pressure. The skilled use of our hands will often help overcome joint restriction and inflammation far more decisively than measured doses of analgesics or anti-inflammatory drugs. And inner motivation or change may prove to be of far greater influence than outer intervention in the task of reclaiming and restoring health. A practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine reflects:

*I think that health, the secrets of health are locked up in nature. And I think this is probably why most of us are, why a majority of people are so ill, because of our so-called civilised living. I'm not sure that civilisation has done all that much good for man, to be quite honest.*

This comment reiterates the view that the present age has somehow seen a profound loss in our relationship with the world of nature. The natural world has been treated as a commodity that exists largely for our own benefit. Until recently, there has been but little regard for the damage that has been wrought upon the earth and its ecosystems through industrial, commercial, military and agricultural activities. The natural cycles that exert a subtle influence upon living processes have also been largely overridden by our 'civilised' life styles. Our foods are transported across continents and between hemispheres regardless of the season. Our eating patterns are determined more by coffee and lunch breaks than by hunger. And our minor sicknesses are treated with drugs rather than by rest and recuperation.

The world-view of this practitioner is conditioned by a Chinese medical philosophy that draws from Taoist understandings of our connectedness with the timeless cycles and rhythms of the natural world. Medical researcher and historian Rene Dubos reflects further:

Biological rhythms were inscribed in man's genetic make-up during evolutionary development when human life was closely linked to the natural events determined by the movements of the earth around the sun and of the moon around the earth. Biological rhythms are important for the understanding of modern man because they persist even though he now lives in an artificial environment. He may intellectually forget diurnal, lunar and seasonal influences, but he cannot escape their physiological and mental effects.<sup>16</sup>

Even though technology has enabled us to live for extended periods of time cruising the ocean floor in submarines carrying multiple nuclear warheads, and to wheel beyond the earth's atmosphere in space shuttles that place new satellite systems into orbit, we yet remain part of nature.

Despite the awesome capabilities of technology, we continue to be influenced by the natural rhythms within nature that have been created through aeons of adaptation and evolutionary change. Technology has enabled us to transcend the limits of the natural world in ways that have never before been possible. In the process, we have also changed the character of the natural world to a mythic extent. Species extinction, loss of biodiversity, desertification and climate change are but part of the cost of this extraordinary dance with power.

There is a growing sense that our Promethean fire may engulf rather than kindle, may destroy rather than transform, and that we should return our attention to the earth from which we were formed and from which are derived our perennial sources of renewal.

### **The opening doors**

The growth of complementary medicine has brought about a realisation that healing is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be approached from many directions. The range of modalities of complementary medicine attests to this reality. As the biomedical mindset itself begins to move beyond reductionist philosophies and fixed patterns of treatment based largely upon pharmaceutical and surgical interventions, we witness an increasing receptivity to the forms that were not so long ago dismissed as spurious and ineffectual.

It is no longer unusual to find biomedical practitioners using or recommending acupuncture, spinal manipulation, vitamins and minerals, herbal medicines or psychosomatic approaches such as meditation and deep relaxation. The mind of biomedicine has begun to awaken to a deeper understanding of the complexity of our natures, and to the realisation that healing can occur in ways that are not necessarily taught in medical school. An acupuncturist reflects:

*People can't live by the biomedical methods alone. There need to be people who are skilled at working at the earth levels, working with things like herbs, and using the natural sort of products of the world that have been provided here to help us maintain this balance. And there need to be people that can work with their hands, who can work with people at that tactile level. There need to be people who are well trained to be able to work at energetic levels. There need to be people that can work at the heart to heart level. There need to be people that can work at the spiritual and philosophical levels. They all need to be there.*

We have here a quintessential statement of the task that lies ahead. The significance of biomedicine is fully acknowledged. But the value of the many other forms of healing is also poetically affirmed. The earth itself produces our medicinal plants and nourishing foods and is honoured as a great source of healing influences that can be effectively brought to the task of healing. The importance of skilled touch, whether it takes the form of structural diagnosis and correction, of comfort and reassurance, or as a direct source of healing energy, is similarly honoured.

Beyond the nourishment, repair and restoration of our physical bodies, our energetic natures may also be harmonised and strengthened through the influence of those whose vision or sensitivity is tuned to the more subtle realms of consciousness. The importance of love, relationship, compassion and empathy in the work of true healing is reaffirmed.

This quote further reminds us that our souls and spirits may need as much nourishment and restoration and healing as our bodies during times of difficulty, of grief, or of collapse of meaning in our lives. The call to physicianship needs to embrace the full extent of human pain and suffering, and attend to our total humanity, not just our physical embodiment.

## **Towards renewal**

As we draw towards a conclusion, it may be helpful to reflect back and bring together as far as possible the central notions that underlie this work.

It is clear that the will to heal is indelibly imprinted in our natures. This is reflected in the capacity of all living organisms for self-repair and restoration after injury and sickness. And this is more poignantly expressed in the human desire to help and care for others in their times of sickness and suffering.

Throughout history, this desire has given rise to many creative responses. The prayers and intercessions of the shaman, the compounding of medicines from the products of nature, the manipulation of body energies through touch and through the medium of acupuncture needles, and the activation of both the human will and the capacity of the body to renew itself through fasting or dietary restriction are all manifestations of the desire to alleviate the suffering borne of sickness, and to restore a state of health and wholeness.

The earlier chapters of this text hopefully will have provided an appreciation of the relativity of healing practices and deepened our awareness of the human ingenuity that has constantly sought to overcome limitation and uncertainty. Reviewing the various forms that healing has taken at different times and in different places will also better enable us to view contemporary Western medicine as part of a broader historical project that continues to change and evolve.

There is a potency today that is unique in human history. Some view our present state of knowledge and technological mastery as an omega point of sorts, an epiphany towards which all of history has been moving, and the culmination of all previous human aspiration. But others, while acknowledging the immense creativity embodied in contemporary technological civilisation, view present developments as relative and contingent expressions that have been won through the negation of earlier accomplishments, and at the cost of a potentially ruinous disregard of both existential and environmental consequences.

Regardless of what position one may hold, it has become clear that we live in a nodal time, a time of great change, a time that has been described by physicist and cultural critic Fritjof Capra as a turning point upon which our collective future pivots.

It is in this light that the present changes occurring in the practice of medicine in the West should be seen. Although Jan Smuts coined the term “holism” less than a hundred years ago, holistic principles have informed the human understanding for thousands of years. The application of these principles was evident in the medicine of ancient Egypt and Greece, and continues to underlie many Eastern and traditional systems of medicine in the present day.

Throughout the time that rational scientific epistemologies have progressively altered the knowledge base, shaped the education style and determined the clinical standards of biomedicine, the modalities of complementary medicine have quietly carried the holistic understandings that had been largely overshadowed by the great successes of a new scientific medicine based upon reductionist principles. These holistic understandings were based upon a synthetic rather than an analytic approach to matter, life and mind. They were reflected in a therapeutic approach that placed a high value on the relationship between physician and patient, and that sought to enlist in whatever manner possible the inherent healing capacities of the patient.

The presence of complementary medicine is now well established within Western communities. It is supported by numerous patients, is increasingly attracting the attention of many students and educators within biomedicine and, as evidenced by the entry of many of its modalities into university environments, has won the active support of policy makers. There is no turning back. What is the true significance of this phenomenon? What are the likely consequences of this extraordinary social development in the lives of those who take on the role of healer and those who seek out their services? What does this mean for the future of medicine?

The holistic sensitivity accepts that human reality includes our physical bodies, our mental capacities and our spiritual aspirations. It also recognises that we are integrally connected with each other, with the natural and man-made world, and with the subtle energetic fields within which we live move and have our being.

As holistic understandings begin to be more widely explored and accepted by those who would become healers, the practice of medicine will inevitably change in character. Many of those quoted throughout this text offer substantive insight into how the application of holistic principles can find expression in a therapeutic environment.

Although there will always be a place for the more powerful technological elements within biomedicine, particularly in such areas as diagnostic testing, surgery and emergency medicine there is yet much work to be done in developing a deeper knowledge of how patients can be helped to help themselves in their own healing. The presently clearly marked boundaries between physician and patient may well begin to soften with the realisation that ultimately, we are to become our own healers.

A growing realisation of the reality of interconnectedness will necessarily broaden the base of medicine from its predominantly personal and biological focus to one that

further encompasses the role of mental influences, social pressures, and environmental realities on our health. This in turn will bring to attention the fact that individual health is but one facet of the radiant jewel that constitutes living reality. Our own health cannot be separated from that of our families, our communities and of the planet itself.

The rise of complementary medicine and the holism that it embodies represents, among other things, a healing force within the healing profession itself. It offers perspectives that can provide balance for a system of medicine that has become highly dependent upon increasingly expensive technological interventions in the treatment of disease. It offers a timely and needed reminder that the work of the physician needs to embrace not only a mastery of disease and its treatment, but also an equally deep knowledge of the nature of health, and the many means whereby it may be actively supported and strengthened.

The modalities of complementary medicine have already seeded the newly emerging landscape of twenty-first century medicine. Their influence will continue to nourish the desire for a restoration of the human dimension to the historical mission of medicine. They will continue to provide well-seasoned methods and insights for the creation of health-based paradigms of healing. And they will further the integration of holistic principles into our understanding of what medicine is and should be.



The ideas that have been explored in the preceding chapters represent an expression of many of the perennial values that have driven the mission of medicine regardless of time and place. These values call attention to principles that transcend the technical capabilities of any given era. They relate, rather, to the subtler dimensions of healing alluded to in such notions as the integrity of body and mind, our connection with natural forces and spiritual reality, and the power latent in healing relationships.

These ideas have been explored through the voices of representatives of a number of modalities of complementary medicine. Each of those represented both teaches and practises their chosen modality. As educators, they are committed to developing an articulate and communicable knowledge base of their respective discipline. As practitioners, they participate in the concerns and experiences of their patients, and are witness to both the effectiveness and limitations of their own particular approach. Operating outside of the biomedical mainstream, they are also privy to the frustrations and disappointments of many who have sought and failed to find hoped-for relief of their symptoms and conditions through more conventional means.

Despite the great diversity in their training and educational experiences, there is consistent agreement regarding the central differences between their own approach and that which they identify as being more characteristic of biomedicine. It is hoped that the notions discussed throughout the preceding chapters do honour to the depth of thought and genuineness of intention of each respondent.

Those who have served as educators in the arena of complementary medicine, particularly during the latter decades of the twentieth century, have done so with a keen awareness of the historic nature of their activity. Their work was accomplished with very little institutional support, and was long overshadowed by the marginality of their position within health care. Yet their constancy and perseverance enabled the progressive creation of an informed and competent body of practitioners whose healing work within the community has sounded far more loudly than any polemic.

The dedication of generations of practitioners who have quietly worked outside of the biomedical mainstream, often under suspicion and disdain, has borne its own fruit in the present day. As the spirit of holism begins to infuse the practice of medicine in the Western world, we come ever closer to that healing that is needed at all levels. The wheel of medicine now turns towards a commitment to those principles that further the health of individuals, of society, and of the planet as a whole.

## ENDNOTES

1. Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, p. 164
2. Thomas Berry, *The Ecozoic Era* (Presented at 11<sup>th</sup> Annual EF Schumacher Lecture, October 1991, Great Barrington, Massachusetts). Viewed at <http://www.schumachersociety.org/lec-tber.html>, p. 6
3. K. Alster, *The Holistic Health Movement*, pp. 172-173
4. Paul Ghalioungui, *Magic and Medical Science in Ancient Egypt*, p. 153
5. Vincent Di Stefano, "Towards Regeneration", *Australian Journal of Medical Herbalism*, 1990, vol.2, 3, pp. 55-8
6. Steven Fulder, *The Handbook of Complementary Medicine*, p. 39
7. Catherine Zollman and Andrew Vickers, "ABC of Complementary Medicine: What is complementary medicine?", *BMJ*, 1999, vol. 319: pp. 693-6; "Alternative Medicine", (theme issue), *JAMA*, 1998, vol. 280 (18): pp. 1549-1640; "Alternative Medicine", (section), *Med. J. Aust.*, (1998), vol. 169, pp. 573-86
8. Bruce Wilcox, A Aguirre et al., "EcoHealth: A transdisciplinary imperative for a sustainable future", (Editorial), *EcoHealth* vol. 1, pp. 3-5, 2004. See also Tony McMichael, "The Biosphere, Health, and Sustainability" (editorial), *Science*, vol. 297, 16 August, 1093, 2002
9. Thanks to the late Greg Ah Ket for alerting me to this story.
10. Thomas Berry, op. cit., p. 3
11. Union of Concerned Scientists, *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity*, (Issued November 1992), Viewed at <http://www.ucsusa.org/ucs/about/page.cfm?pageID=1009>
12. Thomas Berry, *The University: Its response to the ecological crisis*, Paper delivered before the University Committee on Environment, Harvard University, April 11, 1996. Viewed at <http://ecoethics.net/ops/univers.htm>
13. See EF Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful. A study of economics as if people mattered*; Barbara Ward and Rene Du Bos, *Only One Earth: The care and maintenance of a small planet*; Rosalie Bertell, *No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a radioactive earth*.
14. K. Alster, op. cit., p. 44
15. Mike Saks, *Orthodox and Alternative Medicine: Politics, professionalisation, and health care*, p. 108
16. Rene Dubos, "Hippocrates in Modern Dress", in David Sobel (ed.), *Ways of Health: Holistic approaches to ancient and contemporary medicine*, p. 216.