

Spirituality: A vital element in a systems approach to health and well-being

In 1977 George Engel at the University of Rochester introduced the Biopsychosocial Model as a systems approach to health counteracting the Cartesian dicotomization of body/spirit. Engel's approach asserts that there is not a single system i.e. the biomedical, but that the psychological and the social systems must also be considered when trying to understand the human person holistically. This systems model insists that an individual's health depends on the well-being and integration of the physical, the psychological and the relational and not on any one of these systems alone.

The spiritual is not to be considered another system i.e., the biopsychosocialspiritual, but an integrating force of all three of the systems. The spiritual with its fundamental emphasis on values and personal meanings of those values enhances Engel's model with integral and transcendent dimensions.

Further, we concur with John Hiatt that spirituality as an integrating function for the individual, can help bring the seemingly disparate parts of the personality and the fragmented nature of experience together into a single whole.\* John Carr observes that the biopsychosocial model of understanding wellness has sensitized physicians, health care professionals and those who understand the healing arts to a diversity of variables linearly related, but the model does not provide an integrating framework.\* Spirituality is seen as an integrative force of the biopsychosocial's three systems and as such an important element of these systems' integration and deserving of attention in the art of medicine/

It is essential here to address the conceptual vagueness that is associated with the term spirituality. The spiritual can be described as an umbrella of our non-physical nature concerned with such supreme values a love, meaning, beauty, hope, and truth. Our values, purpose of life, our conception of peace, compassion, personhood, our understanding of death and grieving, as well as our own self-reflection are all expressions of our spirit and are invaluable to our understanding of the spirituality of self and others.

We also recognize the universality of spirituality. Spirituality and religion are not synonymous. Everyone has a spirituality whether he/she is religious, secular, atheist or agnostic. As a preceptor in the Spirituality section of our required Humanities Course in year II of our medical curriculum, I was gratified to have a self-described atheist confide that he was happy to have re-found his spirituality. He considered himself not religious, but vitally concerned with his spirituality and the values and personal meanings so central to his well-being. Many have a secular spirituality described by James Bacik as "a search for meaning in the midst of absurdity, for integration that that overcomes fragmentation, for depth in a culture which fosters superficiality, for purpose in an often directionless world." He says that many people in our secularized society participate in this spiritual search without any direct relationship to a religious tradition.

Having overcome (at least in principle) one dicotomization (i.e. body vs spirit)  
hopefully we will not have to battle another dicotomization  
of spirituality vs no spirituality  
Everyone has spirituality not everyone is religious/spiritual

Since we recognize this universality of spirituality we are committed to support religiously-spiritual students and students with a secular-spirituality to discern and exercise their spirituality in unique and innovative ways.

*"Search for meaning"*

Besides the fostering of human values, spirituality concerns the personal meanings that are attached to experience. For instance, Howard Brody concludes that suffering is produced and alleviated primarily by the personal meaning one attaches to one's experience. And alluding to his experience as a prisoner at Aushwitz, Viktor Frankl wrote: "Again and again we have seen that an appeal to continue living, to survive the most unfavorable conditions, can be made only when one such survival appears to have meaning. That meaning must be realized by this person alone." Life requires a reason to live and Frankl also observed that what often made the difference between those who died in their sleep and those who survived extremes of deprivation and cruelty in Nazi death camps was the ability of the survivors to discover meaning even in borderline existence (Frankl quoted in Buxbaum). What something signifies and how important it is relative to the whole array of a person's concerns, contribute to its personal meaning says Alex Cassell. The understanding of the personal meaning of our experience and of the human values that we hold appears to be vital to our living and well-being. It is this discernment of the personal meaning of our values and human experiences that is one of the major goals of the spirituality curricula used in the training of our medical students and family practice residents. We see these spirituality curricula as an important compliment to medical ethics in the teaching of values, value clarification and the personal meanings of these values in the medical education of physicians. Buxbaum states that too often spirituality has been defined as a pious withdrawal from engagement in the everyday issues of life. The opposite is true, he says, spirituality is the courage to find meaning in the engagement with life and its relationships.

*Brody*  
*Frankl*  
*Meaning*

With the emergence of virtue ethics in modern bioethics (cf., MacIntyre, Foote, Hauerwas, Brody, Gilligan, Drane, Thomas & Pelligrino) the realization of the importance of the character and personal values of the physician are considered essential not only for the holistic professional development of the physician but for the necessity for the physician as an agent of the healing of the patient.

It seems very fitting that virtue ethics reemphasizes the part of ethics that has always been integral to ethics but has, because of the preoccupation with particular actions in ethics, been ignored.. Drane states that throughout history there has been a relationship and indeed a tension between ethos, meaning the inner being of a person and ethos in the sense of habits or customary actions. He goes on to say that the "internal" sense of ethos, as the very being of a person, character or font of actions, gradually was forced into the background. Ethics or moral philosophy became more and more a science of analyzing and evaluating actions and less and less concerned with a person's inner being. (pp.169,170) Howard Brody writes: "We see the principal purpose of a spirituality course in medical school as providing a safe and fruitful opportunity for reflection...The reflection will compliment, and yet differ from, the study of ethical rules and principles or of the psychosocial aspects of medicine."

Virtues in medical practice must be coupled with principle-based ethics according to Pellegrino and Thomasma (p.15) neither one, nor the other, nor both conjoined, guarantee good behavior. Only critically reflective medical ethics and self-critical individuals of good character can offer some hope that history will not be repeated here, they conclude in referring to Nazi genetic practices.

We, therefore, see the necessity of the teaching of values, value clarification and the reflection on the personal meaning of these values in the medical education of physicians. One of the ways that values are taught directly in the curriculum and indirectly through mentoring and example is through the teaching of spirituality in required curricula and in elective seminars. One of the major ways that spirituality complements ethics in the professional development of medical students is in its insistence on reflection and praxis.

### Reflection

Spirituality with its insistence on the personal meaning of our life experience and our ultimate and supreme values, seems to call one to a habitual disposition to act well and to strive for virtue. This exercise demands reflection and decisions of personal conscience. This exercise of the spirit like physical exercise is necessary for the well-being of the professional and those whom he/she serves. Our spirits like our bodies need to be exercised for our spiritual health. The exercise of the spirit, unlike bodily exercise needs reflective exercise or non-physical activity for its conditioning. The exercise of our spirit will demand that we find a place in our chronological business or busyness for reflection...that kairos time that is absolutely essential for the development of wisdom. (The Greeks had two words for time: Chronos {measurable, clock, or calendar time} and Kairos {time that is opportune or favorable and that cannot be measured}). Living too much in Chronos, chronological time, with its urgent demands often eliminates Kairos, reflective time with its importance demands (cf., Covey, Seven Habits...) that are so vital to the continued holistic growth and development of the professional student. We do not think it too exaggerated to "stretch" Socrates by saying that the unreflected life, like the unexamined life, is hardly worth living. If we are committed to the direct teaching of students, through example and the medical curriculum, to be activists who serve and work on behalf of those they are charged to care for, then we must be committed to both teach and personally practice reflective activity being aware that the activist physician must first heal him/herself before offering healing to others..i.e. "physician heal thyself". Thomas Merton, the activist- contemplative described the chronos-oriented activist and not the kairos-oriented activist (i.e. those committed to serve and work on behalf of those they are charged to care for on both individual and community levels, by also caring for themselves) in the following quotation: "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist, fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs; activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands. To commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful". Merton, the contemplative Trappist

Unreflected life like unexamined life is hardly worth living

We are in danger of losing our sanity by non reflection  
Thomas Merton  
non prisoners

monk (victim of a tragic accident in 1968) and his Buddhist Vietnamese monk friend and counterpart, Thich Nhat Hanh, were committed anti-war activists who believed that the essence of their activism lay in their commitment to reflection and spiritual well-being.

The practice of reflection and the exercise of the spirit is offered in our curricula in our Medical College. Students are given the opportunity to choose from a number of reflective activities and encouraged to exercise their spirit regularly through activities such as meditation, T.M., yoga, The Relaxation Response, contemplation, journaling, etc.

The creation of life comes from a power much greater than our own, says Virginia Satir (The New Peoplemaking). She says that the challenge of becoming more fully human is to be open to and to contact that power we call by many names, God being one frequently used. She believes that successful living depends on our making and accepting a relationship to our life force. "Recognizing the power of spirit is what healing, living, and spirituality are all about...I believe that we also have a pipeline to universal intelligence and wisdom through our intuition, which can be tapped through meditation, prayer, relaxation, awareness, the development of high self-esteem, and a reverence for life. This is how I reach my spirituality. We can more easily reach this wise part of ourselves when we are calm inside, when we feel good about ourselves, and when we know how to take positive approaches. I refer to this as being centered....My spirituality equals my respect for the life force in myself and all living things." Satir then goes on to describe the centering exercise that she practices to deepen her experience of spirituality.

Values, so integral to the spirit of personhood, need to be reflected on and practiced. Exercise of the spirit is as important for the human person as is physical exercise. Regular practice of a reflective activity "exercises" the spirit. Pierre Babin ("New Era in Religious Communication") sees the most damaging effect of the electronic culture as the loss of interiority. This student of Marshall McLuhan suggests that a spirituality of the electronic age will try to cultivate the interior life through the practice of silence and meditation. He says that people immersed in the audiovisual culture must learn to listen to their own hearts and be more attuned to the Spirit within.

### Praxis

As important as exercise of the spirit, through reflective activity, is vital to a person's well-being, practice and exercise of the character and the virtues of an individual are equally important for personal well-being especially for students who will be charged with the care and well-being of those whom they will serve. Practice here is that defined by Webster i.e. to do or perform frequently, customarily or habitually and the definition is apropos for the practice of virtue as a necessity for holism and the continued human growth and development of the professional student.

Students who are taught values directly through curricula, by example and the mentoring required in professional development, \* will nevertheless have to be as proactive in the practice of these values as they will have to be proactive in the practice of gaining the knowledge and skill through continued medical education and clinical experience if they are to

meaning:  
easier to  
be busy  
than to  
be  
intimate

Virtue  
"a quality  
that procures  
these  
repeated actions"  
Aristotle:  
"Virtue =  
excellence  
in  
function"

be competent physicians and professionals. Physicians and health care professionals committed to only one system (the biomedical) in their understanding of health care and who consider scientific and medical empiricism as the only criterion of medical competence may not see the necessity of the practice of their values as a commitment to the well-being of their patients. Consequently, they may be seen by medical professionals, committed to holistic care of self and those whom they serve, as less than fully competent in providing holistic health care. The biomedicine's scientific and clinical skill is a "sine qua non" for the competent practice of medicine, but the lack of proficiency and practice of the values of the psychological and social (relational) sciences and skills decry the claim to full competence by the proponent of a "one system" practice of medicine. The deft use of scalpel and surgical technique takes clinical skill that demands repetitive use and practice. Can we demand less repetitive use and practice of our humane skills, like imparting hope and exercising the virtues of love and compassion through intensive listening, to promote healing? Author Stephen Covey observed that character and ability go together and that often when ability lags, the cause is breakdown of character and we would add the breakdown of virtue based on the practice of values and the personal meaning of those values i.e. the spirit of the person.

Virtue, then, is the personal appropriation of values made with the help of reason. Practical reason, in the sense of deliberation and prudential choice, belongs to the very definition of virtue and is crucial for the practice of good medicine. (Drane, p. 164)

Like Plato in *The Republic*, and like Aristotle, Aquinas and Dewey, we believe that virtue can be taught by practice, by example, and even by the study of ethics. \*(Pel/Thom)

The necessity of the practice of virtue is poignantly described by Richard Gula as follows: "To acquire the skilled practice of virtuous living requires training. We must practice virtuous activity so that the virtues become habits, or second nature to us. We become trustworthy by doing acts of trustworthiness; we become altruistic by doing acts of altruism. The way these behaviors become characteristic of the self can be likened to the way one becomes an Olympic Gold Medalist or a musical virtuoso. An old joke says it well: When a visitor to New York City asked a cab driver how to get to Carnegie Hall, he was told, 'practice, lots of practice'." \*Gula adds that, to retain a virtue we must practice it to the degree of which we are capable and that not to exercise a virtue is to weaken our skill at it.

The exercise of our spirit then, is the practice of understanding, owning and reflecting on our ultimate and supreme values and the personal meanings of these values. The integrating function of bringing this exercise into relationship with our physical, psychological and social self is the work of our spirituality which enhances our holism.

In the professional development of medical students spirituality complements ethics through its insistence on reflection on and practice of these values and their personal meanings.

We believe that an important part of the training of the socially responsible activist physician in our medical college is through the modeling of, through example and mentoring, and the teaching of, through the four year curriculum, virtue and character. The teaching of the humanities in general and spirituality in particular through our Center for Ethics and Humanities are important ways for our college to train the physician of character. The CEO of the Fetzer Institute that supports the teaching and research involving body, mind, and spirit