

When Sickness Heals

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THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN HEALTHCARE

Siroj Sorajjakool



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*To Kathleen Greider, Christa McNerney, Gerald Winslow,
Wesley Amundson, and Huiling Lee Sorajjakool*

for contributing significantly to my growth in the world
of academia

Pain and joy

*I lost something of myself walking by the sea today,
The thirsty tide drags it all from the dry sand,
swallowing what is nothing and what is precious
in the same careless constancy.*

*Salty brine tugs everything from me, with a
regularity I never can resist.*

*I do not mind the sorrow
gone with the wash of water, glad at pain's farewell.
So joy and pain are forever bound inside
my paradox experience:
Pained to see my joy sliced to shreds
by grievous loss,
joyous when bright happiness
smoothes the razor edge of sorrow.*

*Must pain carve the well of joy?
A marriage and consummation of flint and light:
same elemental stuff, different structure as
coal and diamond are both carbon.
Both pierce and send me to new heights
of understanding this walk by the sea.*

*Without my scarred hand in the painful grasp of sorrow,
my heart does not rise in thankfulness for joy
and without the strong assurance of joy
the stabbing pangs of pain I cannot endure.*

*You knew it was
worth all pain, loss, absence
to gain all joy and wonder,
knowing too well that because
we chose death dark pain over constant felicity
it would cost you all our deep pain
to give us the wondrous joy
of knowing your heart.*

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
1. Spirituality: Toward a Definition	1
2. Religion	10
3. Illness, Meaning, and Miracles	21
4. Illness and the Developmental Task	31
5. Integration in Theology and Religious Symbols	43
6. Spirituality and Integration in Mental Health	55
7. Integration: The Case of Søren Kierkegaard	69
8. Spiritual Assessment	80
9. Spiritual Care	88
Appendix 1. Definition of Terms	101
Appendix 2. Ontology and Spirituality: Raimundo Panikkar, Paul Tillich, and Carl Jung	105
Appendix 3: Diagnosis of Søren Kierkegaard	113
Notes	121
Bibliography	139
Index	145

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Introduction

I remember as a little boy sitting on a rock by Bang Saeng beach¹ staring at my grandfather. Perhaps I was too young to understand, but I sensed that something unpleasant, very unpleasant, was haunting him. He sat on a big gray rock, watching the sun setting and staring into the ocean, lost in his own thoughts. I could see the sadness in his eyes. He was not the usual strong, vocal, and upbeat person that I knew. Except for the sound of wind and waves, he had no words. I was later told that he had lung cancer. He knew he did not have much time left. Looking back, I can't help but wonder what went through his mind.

When something out of the ordinary takes place, we have to take time out to ponder it. Tragedy disrupts the flow of time. Or perhaps tragedy acquaints us with another dimension of time and space, a space to wonder about the senselessness of tragedy, yet to discover meaning within the presence of pain.

Can there be meaning and purpose in suffering, and even in death itself? My grandfather lived in poverty for most of his hard life. Later, good fortune became a part of his reality. Upon learning that the end of his life was rapidly approaching, he was determined to build a house for us, and he personally supervised the building of it until a couple of months before he died. I do not know what went through his mind as he sat by the beach that evening. But I do know that our family would have suffered much more if he had not made that decision to provide for his children and grandchildren. What meaning did he find in the face of death?

Sickness involves more than just the body. Perhaps much more. Leo Buscaglia said it truly, "What is essential is invisible to the eye."² The soul is the very essence of who we are. Meaning is to our souls what air is for our bodies. Hence in sickness there is much wondering, pondering, and cogitating in each person's quest to find meaning. Is it possible

for sickness to bring about a radical change of perspective on life that can result in a discovery of meaning, meaning that brings healing to the soul? Can there be meaning in much pain? Or perhaps the reverse of this question may be posited: Can there be pain without meaning?

In the following pages I set forth a theory supporting the possibility that sickness can bring about changes in existential meaning and thus offer healing to the soul. This theory explores the developmental tasks that individuals with severe illness go through in relation to the place of religion and spirituality in their experience. My ideas have grown out of ten years of teaching spiritual care to students at Loma Linda University, particularly to second-year medical students. During this time I have struggled with the literature, research, theology, students' reflections, and experiences of patients and health-care providers in the context of my efforts to conceptualize the relationship between spirituality, religion, and health, and to offer a model of spiritual care consistent with this emerging conceptualization.

I was initially interested in research on spirituality and health that indicated the numerous benefits of church attendance, prayer, meditation, scripture reading, and religious values, among others. Deciding to take a more proactive approach to the topic, Bryn Seyle, my research assistant at the time, and I decided to explore the place of spirituality among breast cancer patients. We were amazed to discover the complexity of the nature of faith and its implications for healing.

Analysis of the transcriptions of our verbatim interviews with these patients showed us that those with great faith in God's intervention actually took longer to recover emotionally, while those who saw cancer as just random reality coped better and recovered faster. This led to my renewed interest in the theological and philosophical literature that directs believers toward the role of nonbeing (referring to the negative elements in life such as illness, sorrow, misfortune, and death) in the journey of faith. I was also drawn to reflect on the meaning of religious symbols that point in this direction, such as yin and yang, labyrinth, alchemy, the goddess Kali, mandala, and others. Through this reflection, I learned that the pathway toward healing leads most often through the realm of spirituality and religion.

In this book, I first propose that spirituality is the quest for meaning. This quest is ontological in nature. It is there in a Kantian sense; it is there a priori. Similarly, the sense of transcendence is there at the onto-

logical level as well. These two forces coexisting in one's being define the meaning of spirituality.

In support of this argument I make reference to the work of William James, based on his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, but focus primarily on the work of three individuals: the concept of myth in the writings of Raimundo Panikkar, the religious function of the psyche according to Carl Jung, and the theology of New Being from the perspective of Paul Tillich.

Second, I show that out of these two intertwining forces came religion and religious practices, including rituals and symbols. From this understanding of religion, I argue that illness leads us to question our sense of meaning. That which does not fit into our system of meaning has to be reconfigured and reintegrated. This task is developmental in nature. Numerous studies on the relationship between religion and health show positive outcomes, suggesting that the practice of religion and spirituality enhances health and nurtures one's psychological well-being.⁵

While I am positively influenced by this research, my argument takes a different turn, proposing that, even when there is no improvement in health or possibility of recovery from terminal illness, in a very important way, gaining a sense of meaning heals. In support of this developmental view I cite social science research in this area. Support from theological literature is also cited, particularly the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, and John Macquarrie. Besides theological literature, other religious teachings point to this integration as well, so I will cite a number of religious symbols in various religions, such as Taoism, Hinduism, and others (please reference Appendix 1 for the definitions of unfamiliar terms). Chapter six includes an attempt to apply this concept to the field of mental health, showing that a similar process occurs with those who struggle with mental illness. Taking this conceptual model into the realm of praxis, I explore this process of integration by looking at the life and writings of Søren Kierkegaard that point to the path that led him finally to come to terms with his struggle.

The last two chapters focus on implications for the practice of spiritual care by first looking at the place of spiritual assessment from the perspective of the integrative process and then exploring the practice of spiritual care based primarily on theological and religious understanding.