

Illness as Messenger

When Jesus encountered a man blind since birth, his disciples asked, “Master, who sinned, this man or his parents for him to be born blind?” The question betrays a belief that illness is a punishment, the result of some short-coming or sin. The assumption that being holy is the guarantee of good health and that poor health is the result of some type of spiritual failing is one that lurks within the hearts of most of us. In light of this, Jesus’ answer is revealing. “Neither he nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:1-3).

Jesus’ answer implies that there may be a purpose, a higher meaning, to illness that is not always evident to us. Larry Dossey, author of *Healing Prayer: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, writes, “On balance, this case warns against equating spiritual and physical health, and cautions us against attributing shallow, superficial meaning to illness.”¹

One aspect of nurturing the soul involves careful observance of how the soul manifests and reveals itself. It is the intent of all forms of care to alleviate suffering, but in our haste to do so we must not overlook what is being revealed in the symptoms or suffering. Shaun McNiff, one of the leading innovators in the field of creative-arts therapy, reminds us that “In treating physical injuries or illnesses, we know that symptoms, however uncomfortable, often function as messengers. They have stories to tell about how we live our lives and how sensitive we are to the needs of the body.”²

An authentic spirituality is at home in and at ease with the body. We need to become attuned to the language of symptoms and of illness in our bodies and give to each symptom the time, care and attention that is required. Interpreting the messages of illness requires that we be patient. The quiet and rest that are so often required in order to allow the body to heal itself can provide time for discovering the inner meanings and messages of illness.

Prayerfulness and patience can transform the experience of illness, leading not to resignation but to an active acceptance of it as a natural part of life. This transformation makes it possible even to develop an attitude of gratitude during illness.



*I see the darkness
I have been fighting
is the purpose
of my life.*

Samuel Beckett

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1. Dossey, Larry. *Healing Words*, p. 15.
 2. McNiff, Shaun. “Angels of the Wound: Re-visioning the Crucifixion as a Lesson in Soul.” in *Nourishing the Soul*, p. 170.