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Healing Across Cultures: Learning From Traditions

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Abstract

The health and wellness of an individual are reliant on the integrated effects of mind, body, and spirit. This triad is precariously set within a backdrop of the environment, our earth. Western cultures often seem to disregard this holism, especially this fourth component, in its considerations of wellness as described by modern medicine. This practice is unlike that of many of the traditional cultures in the world. These cultures focus more on balance in the context of environmental respect. Varied cultures share remarkable similarities in their healing modalities, especially considering the relative isolation from one to another—evidence that there is much truth to the healing knowledge they possess. We are not disconnected from the natural world in terms of health, but dependent and interconnected within ourselves and to everything around us. Social change is required to assure that the practice of modern medicine evolves to incorporate this integral aspect of health and wellness, and this can be done through partnerships with traditional healers.

There is a growing demand for wellness and earthly responsibility. It is time to appropriately learn from age-old societies and their healing traditions for they do have answers we are seeking in sustainability and harmony, environmental stewardship and planetary respect, and holistic health. For thousands of years our ancestors have known the secrets of long life—this knowledge needs to be preserved through the apprenticeship of future generations. We propose a collaboration that develops mutually beneficial learning partnerships combining modern medical knowledge with the wisdom of traditional healers around the world.

Introduction

Healing traditions are as age-old and diverse as humanity itself. The diversity of these healing traditions is in part attributable to compartmentalized and largely isolated cultural evolutionary processes in the context of a need for health and wellness. In spite of this relative isolation, however, there is a remarkable degree of similarity in healing practices, beliefs, and founding principles when comparing rich and varied cultures throughout the global community.

There are several themes regarding cultural traditions on health and wellness that illustrate the understanding that the health and wellness of an individual are reliant on the integrated effects of mind, body, and spirit. For decades, numerous scholars in the United States have emphasized the value of the connections between mind and body which can produce health and wellness responses (Chopra, 1993; Benson, 1975; Weil, 1995). In recent years there has been a growing interest in the impact of the spirit and spirituality on one's ability to heal oneself, as well as a trend toward exploring the mind-body-spirit philosophies (Ables, 2000, Gallup & Lindsay, 1999). This triad of health and wellness phenomena (i.e., mind, body, and spirit) is securely set within a backdrop of a fourth component not given nearly enough attention, that of our environment. This seems to be well understood by cultures that embrace a stewardship worldview, and largely overlooked by western cultures and modern medicine. A healthy environment powerfully enables healthy and harmonious life-ways and is a necessary component in holistic health and wellness.

Ecological systems theory describes the dynamics of our ongoing interaction with our inseparable environment. Each part of a system affects every other part as well as the system as a whole (Hutchison, 2003). Persons each day inevitably impact the environment and are, in turn, affected by the environment. This dynamic relationship is self-sustaining as people depend on the environment as much as the environment remains viable due to human care and trust. This reciprocal relationship, endemic to both ecological and social systems theory, helps the individual to be cognizant of the effects of such obviously negligent behaviors as littering and pollution on the health of everyone in the community. Individuals are often blamed for bringing on or contributing to their illnesses by omitting or avoiding a healthy lifestyle in their own selfish sphere of influence. However, such a mindset involves blaming the victim without being mindful that the environment, to which others contribute, has a tremendous impact on health and wellness of all people. The media can be viewed as another environmental factor that influences individuals' attitudes about health and wellness, sometimes to their detriment because they may be steered inappropriately for one reason or another. They are often directed away from traditional healing practices and holistic ways of thinking and problem-solving. There must be a greater awareness of the importance of protecting nature, the basis of our creation and the embodiment of our growth and sustenance.

Traditional cultures embrace stewardship worldviews, meaning that they perceive themselves as the 'care-taker inhabitants' of the land—not the owners. They view the land as a precious resource that nurtures life, promotes good health, and educates those willing to learn from careful observance. In turn, they choose to live in a harmonious and sustainable fashion that not only honors but also protects their natural habitat. This perception of the environment is in direct contrast to the anthropogenic worldview of dominion over the natural world. This worldview is characterized by the values and beliefs most Western cultures ascribe to in some form. It has allowed for 'land ownership' and other policies that have led to encroachment, abusive practices, and a basic disconnection from our natural world. This disconnection is the source of many problems

including, those afflicting many modern medical health and wellness views. The continued separation of the individual from their natural habitat falsely devalues existence in healthy ecosystems, and overshadows his or her full understanding of such crucial matters as environmentally derived illness, unsustainable and damaging food production strategies, and spiritual imbalance.

While modern medical practice has led to definite benefits in their own context, there should be more concern with the balance between the natural world and human health. There is no human health without environmental health as they are inextricably linked (Pesek, 2003).

In the context of humanity, modern medicine is in a fledgling state. Presently, it is focused mechanistically and biased to Western worldview with a business underpinning, and, as such, it continually evolves toward a model of treatment of illness when it should be focused more on prevention of illness.

Traditional Healing and Sustainability

There is a reawakening of traditional healing and stewardship worldview ideals internationally. The modern-day phenomena of the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) and embodied Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) markets speak powerfully to this reawakening based on the need for traditional healing philosophies and environmental correctness.

The LOHAS is a \$230 billion dollar market force (and growing quickly) which describes a U.S. marketplace for products and services that interest consumers who value holistic health, the environment and conservation, global social justice, personal growth (i.e., spiritual development), and sustainable living (LOHAS Journal Online, 2005).

Presently within LOHAS there is a powerful demand for CAM. CAM, as defined by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, is a group of diverse healthcare systems, practices, and products that are not presently considered part of conventional modern medicine (NCCAM, n.d.).

The number of visits to CAM providers now exceeds, by far, the number of visits to conventional primary care physicians in the U.S. (WHO, 2002).

There are several important reasons that have led to the expanded use of CAM practices in both global and American societies today. In an increasingly multicultural Western society, various ethnic groups highly value and trust alternative medical practices that they perceive as distinctive to their cultural identity. Also, the age of information has allowed for a careful analysis of healing modalities that are available—the Internet has been a tremendous resource for inquisitive minds.

Traditional Healing Trends Worldwide

Many of the various and independently evolving cultural healing modalities are still being employed effectively around the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, at present, more than 80% of the world's population relies on traditional healing modalities and herbals for primary health

care and wellness (WHO, 2002). In the U.S., some 25% of all prescription drugs are derived from plant sources and of them most were discovered because of their prior use by traditional healers (WHO, 2002). In fact, the world market for herbal medicines based on traditional healing knowledge was estimated to be \$60 billion in 2000 (United Nations, 2000). In most developing countries, traditional herbal medicine is certainly the norm. Traditional healers deliver front running and successful care internationally (WHO, 2002). For example, Malaria poses a global problem; there are over 1 million fatalities—most of them young children (WHO Roll Back Malaria Department, n.d.).

Surveys conducted by the WHO Roll Back Malaria Program in 1998 showed that in Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Zambia, more than 60% of children with high fever are effectively treated at home with herbal medicines since they are easily accessible and cost effective (It should also be noted that much western malaria medication stems from plant-based compounds of origin based on indigenous knowledge [Vongo, 1999].)

Another example of a paramount public health concern is HIV. It has been viperously infiltrating areas of the developing world and it is decimating peoples of Africa. Current resources in thwarting disease progression are allocated to non-efficacious modalities in dealing with the malady. WHO has shown that over 33 million people are living with HIV/AIDS worldwide, and that most Africans living with HIV/AIDS use herbs to obtain symptomatic relief and to treat opportunistic infections; so much so, in fact, that UNAIDS is advocating for collaboration with traditional healers in AIDS prevention and care in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 1999 and Burford, 2000). This novel approach undoubtedly will have positive benefit via culturally relative education and prevention.

We need a concerted, global effort in utilizing these data to effect positive change with regard to medical disease prevention through the use of innovative and mutually beneficial symbiotic interactions with traditional healers and other health care providers. Furthermore, these practices will support culturally relative healthcare and education, and facilitate the development of more environmentally harmonious healing practices and ways of life for all.

Learning from age-old cultures is significant to many areas in our lives. Where would humanity be if we spent all this time rediscovering the wheel or repeating the mistakes of our forefathers? This idea surely applies to our discovery of new ways to treat and prevent illness.

The Maya communities of Central America (C.A.) lead a traditional lifestyle in the rainforest and they maintain intact traditional medical systems as part of their culture today (Treyvaud-Amiguet, 2005)—a culture that has successfully used nature to treat primary and complex ailments for more than 4000 years.

Currently, there are groups of traditional Maya healers in Belize and Guatemala, C.A., who are working together to employ their traditional healing knowledge toward the conservation of their healing heritage and rainforest surroundings (Pesek, 2006). In an age when the toxicities of Western drugs and modern medical treatment of symptoms (not underlying problems) are increasingly questioned, and when more and more people are using viable natural alternatives, the Maya medical heritage, as other traditional healing knowledge,

must not only be documented, recorded, and saved, but also used as a tool for an interesting form of “advancement”—we can and must learn from traditional healers. As mentioned, much has been derived from traditional healers already. We must find a successful marriage of benefit (including revenues) based on their knowledge and conservation of our world’s natural places (e.g. rainforests) and the deep cultural traditions contained therein (Pesek, 2003) for a myriad of significant global and human benefits.

Other examples of populations living close to the land and struggling to protect the natural environment can be found among the people living along the Appalachian mountain chain in the U.S., an area extending from western New York to northeastern Mississippi. The Appalachian people have resided in this region for hundreds of years, but Native Americans had inhabited parts of the region for centuries themselves before European settlers arrived. Appalachian people hold firm beliefs about their ability to maintain their health and prevent or cure illness. They tend to take a holistic approach to healthcare, using combinations of traditional healing approaches to health and wellness as derived from their Native American cohabitants generations ago. They are inclined to use mainstream medical care only when necessitated by acute symptom management.

Across the world, traditional healing is still prevalent in India. Thousands of years ago, Indian scholars identified the art of healing. In many of their ancient writings, Auyurvedic (or traditional Indian) healers communicated thousands of ways for healing a person’s body, mind, and spirit. For example, the Charaka Samhita is believed to have arisen around 400-200 BC. It is thought to be one of the oldest and the most important ancient authoritative writings on Ayurveda (a healing practice that reveres nature in healing, originated thousands of years ago, and is concerned with the integrated healing of mind, body, and spirit). Unlike modern medicine, elements in nature are integrally incorporated into their approaches.

The Indian healing practices of Ayurveda and astrological methods go back more than 10,000 years (Valiathan, 2003). The Ayurvedic form of healing enriches the qualities of life of a person through the different sensations of intuitive feeling, sound, touch, vision, taste, and smell. Much like the Appalachian mountain people, Native Americans, Mayas and others who embrace stewardship worldviews, elements of nature are very much incorporated into healing practices of the people of India.

Cross-culturally, there are several themes which are consistent within traditional healing systems. For example, we all possess innate healing capacities, healing occurs from within in the context of healthful life-ways and ecosystems, we can learn from nature by careful observation of (i.e., listening to) the plants themselves (e.g., morphologic and physical features, energetics, habitat associations).

Through mindful study, nature also teaches us how to keep fit. For example, from housecats to lions on the Serengeti, felines always stretch in different poses as part of their daily routine. We now know that by doing so, our mobility and flexibility can be improved—something essential to us all.

In ancient times, people always learned from and worshipped nature, our earth: the sunlight, the water, the fire and the wind. Spirituality and healing have always been a combined tradition. Even today in Hindu, Native American, and Appalachian cultures, nature worship is uniformly present. Oral traditions of healing oftentimes have thousands of years of history and, over time, have brought to the forefront some of the prominent healing techniques of today. Some Far Eastern traditions can appreciate noble lineages in different forms of healing reaching back over 10,000 years. While learned medical systems are generally practiced in towns and cities, oral traditions are still quite common in villages. These belief systems and practices are passed on from one generation to another.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Cultures around the world have practiced the healing arts for thousands of years, and they still practice these holistic forms of health and wellness. There are so many strengths in the understanding of healing approaches across cultures, as well as lessons for how we as a society can survive in harmony with nature. Natural and herbal health practices have been used successfully as evidenced by cross-cultural congruency and stories of health and wellness passed down from one generation to another. Younger generations must be encouraged to take a vested interest in learning the healing traditions and practices of those aging family members still alive and able to share their wisdom. This intergenerational interaction can further inspire many younger and middle-aged individuals today who, in ever increasing numbers, believe in the extensive benefits of complementary and alternative medicine.

The authors propose a holistic collaboration in developing mutually beneficial, cross-cultural educational opportunities combining modern medical knowledge and practice with the methods and wisdom of traditional healers around the world. This will ensure economic viability of their ideals, propagation of traditional healing knowledge to both younger generations and an interested global audience, promote cultural relativity, and develop fresh revenue for the preservation of our world's natural places and the deep cultural traditions therein.

To begin this collaboration the authors have begun the development of a series of Healing Across Cultures courses, colloquia, symposia, and field experiences, and programming which bring together nationally and internationally known scholars, complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, students, and traditional healers of rich and varied cultures to interact educationally in presentation, roundtable, and healing circle (i.e. small groups) formats.

By developing the knowledge of traditional healers in a mutually beneficial exchange of wisdom and practice, all global communities can reap rewards through not only the development of holistic collaboration and innovation in healing, but also the generation of economically viable outlets for cultural self-empowerment and ecological integrity.

This approach to global health and wellness will provide not only ways of healing ourselves as nature had intended, but also a reawakening to the benefits

and health-giving resources of nature's bounty. Along with this newfound awareness will emerge an inevitable respect for maintaining the environment that nurtures the world—people, animals, and plants. The growing realization of the intricate connections among mind, body, and spirit in the context of our natural world is long overdue within modern society. Our understanding of healing across cultures sets us on a path that can lead only to a better sense of self within the context of the universe—a more and more appropriate idea as we increasingly discover ourselves as a global community.

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