

The Dreambody: A New Integrative Approach to Illness

by Pierre Morin, MD, Ph.D.

Physical, emotional, and spiritual health is a privilege that we often take for granted. Most of us will recognize that privilege in hindsight once our health or the health of a friend or family member gets challenged. At that time, many of us will feel that their sense of stability and peace of mind is threatened. With physical and mental illness comes a questioning of our everyday identity and our goal and purpose in life. Some of us will be forced to reorient themselves, face issues of loss and grief, and search for new meanings. In this brief article I will try to develop the idea that illness can be an opportunity for transformation and growth and introduce you to an innovative mind-body practice called "Dreambody."

There is nothing "good" about illness and no one living in even moderately good health wants to imagine ceasing to be the person they enjoy being. Nevertheless there are some growth opportunities and personal powers that confrontation with illness can trigger. Illness can be excruciatingly painful and difficult and we all hope to be spared some of its pain. But at the same time individuals confronted with health challenges often achieve deep and meaningful levels of psychological awareness. Of course, all of us like our bodies and minds to allow us to live a normal life and to give us some minimal degree of comfort, or absence of pain. Nobody looks forward to being ill.

In Greek mythology, if you were on the road to Athens, the center of all commerce, politics and art, you had to pass by Procrustes and his bed. Procrustes would place you on the bed and cut off any part of you that did not fit. If you were too short for his bed, he would stretch you until you fit. This myth represents what happens to all of us as we go through life trying to fit everyday expectations and goals. Parts of us get cut off so that we may meet certain expectations. To fit in everyday reality some of us disassociate ourselves from the parts that are less consensual, more oriented towards creativity, dreams and spirituality. The diagnosis of an illness challenges many consensus reality views and values. This process may transform our identity and reconnect us with the forgotten parts.

With his "Dreambody" concept Mindell (1984, 2000) developed a treatment modality that addresses the whole person and helps us integrate illness in a meaningful way. He differentiates between the everyday world of practical activities in which consensual views of reality reign and a more symbolic numinous realm that is governed by more dreamlike events. Symptoms are seen as an attempt to compensate the one-sidedness of consensual reality and as a link to the world of sentient experiences. Mainstream views structure our experience of normality, what we perceive as functional or dysfunctional, normal or deviant, healthy or unhealthy. It influences the way we feel about certain group of people (e.g. the elderly) and various types of bodies (e.g. the thin and the obese body, the ill or diseased body). These mainstream value orientations dominate our views about life and act like Procrustes. They force us to marginalize disapproved parts of our personality. Mindell (1984, 2000) proposes a new holistic approach to medicine and body experiences. Together with his colleagues from the Process Work Center of Portland he developed many tools and skills for unraveling the subjective meanings underneath our bodily complaints which I cannot describe here in detail. Illness from this perspective can be viewed as an attempt to fight against Procrustes' one-sided demands. Illness is an opportunity to reconnect with the parts that we were forced to disassociate ourselves from.

It seems clear that Western health sciences offer powerful tools for understanding and treating a lot of different conditions and opens up new possibilities for positive change. On the other hand, dominant scientific and medical language reinforces dualistic worldviews and devalues patients' sense of wholeness. Biomedical materialism got rid of God and the soul and views matter as being inert. It disproved the concept of vitalism, a vital power or life force. This thinking has proved enormously successful for certain purposes in certain areas. But in this disenchanted worldview there is no place for mystery and magic. With the demise of the divine and the numinous realm, with the denial of sentient experiences and our dreaming nature, all our inner experiences, which follow alternative values to those of objective materialism, are marginalized. With the denial of the idea of a force of life that animates our bodies and selves, there is no room for the therapeutic powers within ourselves, which help us regain strength and overcome fatigue and sickness.

In Process Work we offer methods that address emotional, spiritual and physical connections. These methods try to unveil the narrative and meaning behind the often painful or unsettling experiences. They allow us to bring new and unexpected dimensions into the patient's life and relieve the whole family. Meaningfulness can be a helpful adaptive mechanism in the face of health challenges. The uncertainty of illness is replaced with a meaningful explanation and a way out of hopelessness is achieved. We are no longer only a prisoner of our illness and renewed hope may promote the energy for healing. But, the process of finding meaning in an illness, the ability of finding the good in what is a painful and terrible experience, is a privilege that not everybody can achieve. Some illnesses, of course are simply too powerful and pervasive in their impact to be dealt with meaningfulness and hope. These illnesses are stories that need to be told and empathetically heard.

References:

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