

The Cutting Edge of Life and Death: A Surgeon's View
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Purpose

- Where is God in the work in healthcare, in the experience of being ill, and of being a healer?
- What attitudes toward healthcare derive from a Christian perspective?
- What is the relationship between scientifically based medicine and Christian faith?

Spirituality and Academia: A Difficult Relationship

- Jesus: Praises God who has “hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and has revealed them to infants”. Matthew 11:25
- Paul: “Knowledge puffs up” I Corinthians 8:1 “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” II Corinthians 3:6

Scientific Culture of Healthcare

- “Hard” Science: molecular medicine; evidence-based medicine; NIH-supported mechanistic studies of disease
- “Soft” Science: public health, history of medicine, medical ethics, spirituality and medicine

Hospital vs. Church

- Largest building in the city
- Where life begins and ends
- Its practitioners wear long robes and are granted unique authority and access to confidential information
- Trusted by society to care for its needs equitably

Medicine's Roots

- Shamanism, witch doctor: ritual/prayer
- Hellenistic influence: Hypocrates, Galen medicine as craft based on reason
- Judeo Christian influence: carried on ministry of Christ
 - Hospitals: idea of Christians
 - Nursing / Florence Nightengale
- Secularization of medicine / scientific basis
 - Evidence-based medicine

Scientific Medicine

- Threat of losing personal focus
- Threat of ignoring the spiritual aspect of human life
- Threat of economic efficiency
- Limitations of scientific medicine (myth of Tithonus who fell in love with goddess Dawn, and asked her for eternal life but forgot to ask for eternal youth; he aged, but she didn't. He finally asked for death.

Outcomes Research

- If medicine is solely about outcomes, the entire enterprise is futile – just delaying the inevitable. – Daniel P. Sulmasy, *A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts*, Georgetown University Press, 2006.

ICU Care as a Pit Stop

- ICU care is modeled after the care racing “pit stop” model of efficient care. Everyone has a job – except to care for the person.

Medical Technology

- Patients' need for healing are infinite
- Technology is finite
- Technological medicine focuses on the objective disease: suffering may be ignored or unrecognized; diseases cured but persons not healed.

Dickinson

- Get underneath the skin – and the experience with the patient
 - Resist the urge to be callous, superficial, or to trivialize what they do
 - Patient has hopes, fears, loves, and sorrows deeper than any medical imaging device can bring light to
- Life is the healer – not the surgeon; regardless of the sophistication of the surgery, it would not be possible if the body did not heal itself.

Spirituality

- One's relationship with the transcendent
- Many people call transcendent "God"
- Religion=specific set of beliefs about the transcendent

Illness as a Spiritual Event

- Illness disturbs both the body and soul
 - Raises questions of transcendent nature:
 - Meaning
 - Value
 - Relationship

Sickness is Personal

- It is always an "I" who suffers, who goes to the doctor.
- Symptoms are what a patient perceives, and they are subjective

Illness is Personal

- Unrecognized suffering or suffering alone is intolerable
- One becomes a patient when one's suffering is objectified by being recognized as illness

Questions of Transcendence

- Does my suffering have any meaning?
- Do I have any dignity or worth?
- Is my value found in only my social contribution, now limited?
- Upon whom can I depend?
- Can I be reconciled with my loved one before I die?

Suffering

- Definition: an experience that makes explicit a person's actual finitude: physical, moral, social or intellectual.
- **Meaning** a person ascribes to their experience of bodily finitude
- Ultimate meaning of all suffering is death
- Premonition of ultimate dissolution of one's person

Spirituality is the Substance of Healthcare

- Jesus "suffered, died, and was buried." So will you, I, and our patients
- Ethics can make no sense of this
- Science can make no sense of this
- We can ignore the spiritual, but it will be there again in the clinic—suffering

Medicine is Always Both Art and Science

- Subjective and objective
- Science dedicated to relief of suffering
- Finite and transcendent
 - "Healthcare professionals who do not believe in God will be required to seek out some other source of transcendence—nature, humanity, or the good, or something else that transcends patients, practitioners, and their professions—if they are to meet their own transcendent needs or those of their patients." – Sulmasy, *Rebirth of the Clinic*, p. 84

Challenge for Healthcare

- Hold together the truths and health benefits of the best medical science with respect for the person and a high value on dignity of life.
- Acknowledge the limits of scientific medicine and our need for transcendent meaning, value, and relationships.

Healing as Restoration of Relationships

- Jesus often healed in the context of reconciliation
 - Paralytic: “Your sins are forgiven” (Mt 9: 1-8)
 - Disciples about man born blind: “Whose sin caused his condition?” (John 9: 1-40)
 - “Your faith has made you well” (Mk 10: 52)
- Jesus healed at request of relatives (widow’s son, Jairus’ daughter, Peter’s mother-in-law, Mary and Martha’s brother)
- Relationships inside the body + between sick and their families, their communities, their God
Daniel P. Sulmasy, A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts, Georgetown University Press, 2006.

Healing As Encounter

- Finding God in those in need of healing
- Serving God by serving the sick
 - Matt 25: “I was sick and you came to visit me”
 - Good Samaritan

Daniel P. Sulmasy, A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts, Georgetown University Press, 2006.

Healing As Witness

- Christians heal because they are commanded by Christ to do so (Matt 10:1, 7, Mk 16: 18, Lk 9: 1-6)
 - Part of announcing the good news
 - The disciples responded (Acts 3, 5, 9, 20)

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Are We Entitled to Healing?

- All healing comes from God
 - Simon the sorcerer (magician; boasted that he was great) wanted to buy, possess, own the power—and it disappeared (Acts 8)
- Jesus healed 10 lepers; only 1 thanked him (Lk 17: 11-19)
 - Gratitude is the right relationship between anyone healed and God

Prayer and Healing

- “Scientific” validation of prayer for healing
 - Regular attendance of religious services correlates with longer life
 - Randomized, controlled trials of prayer (cardiac ICU, AIDS, alcohol treatment)
- God “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good” (Mt 5:45)
- Prayer is not commanding God or asserting one’s will over God’s. It is not about magically changing the future. The results are God’s, not mine, and part of the “plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Eph 3:9)
- “For orthodox Christians, true prayer enables the final, total surrender of one’s whole being; in this surrender, which culminates in death, one’s life becomes ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Col 3:3). For a person of faith, no other outcome really matters.”
DP Sulmasy, Rebirth of the Clinic, p. 159

Can One Measure a Patient’s Relationship with the Transcendent?

- All 3 Abrahamic religious traditions teach that the way God speaks to the human heart leaves ultimate judgments to God, not to human beings.
- Measuring spiritual awareness, need, distress, religious coping, or death transcendence poses theological problems

Addressing Spiritual Needs of Patients

- God heals patients through healthcare workers, not the other way around. (He is not a tool in our bag).
- Attention to spiritual needs is a moral imperative
- Things to avoid in discussing spiritual matters with patients:
 - Proselytizing
 - Offense

Healing the Dying

- Dignity (questions of value)
 - Intrinsic
 - “Martin, don’t let anyone tell you that you’re not a somebody.” mother of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - Attributed
- Hope (questions of meaning)
- Reconciliation (questions of relationship)
 - Desire for unconditional love

Respect for the Dying

- Show respect and reverence for the dignity of all dying persons simply because they are human
- Share their own hope that meaning transcends the dying process
- Point the way to reconciliation

Clinician’s Focus in Discussion Spiritual Issues

- Repentance
- Reconciliation
- Wonder
- Awe
- Gratitude
- Meaning
- Love
- Dignity
- Hope
- Worship