

BOOK REVIEW

'Spirituality, Healing and Medicine: return to the silence'

By Professor David Aldridge

London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2000)

I warmed to this fine book, both for the subject matter and its sanity. In the twenty-first century, we are now said to be emerging from postmodernism into the new 'post-secular' era. Books like this reveal why. On the first page David Aldridge writes: 'The natural science base of modern medicine, which in turn influences the way in which modern medicine is delivered, often ignores the spiritual factors associated with health'. In seven cogently written chapters, he then proceeds to explain what those spiritual factors might be and expands in detail on their relevance to health care. In the process, he dissects commonly held but erroneous or incomplete (and therefore inadequate) assumptions with philosophical precision. What is revealed serves usefully both to educate and enlighten the mind of any well-meaning practitioner of health care.

David Aldridge is Professor of Qualitative Research in the Faculty of Medicine at Witten-Herdecke University in Germany. He presented a delightfully cogent, audio-visually well-illustrated and inspiring paper on a related topic, the therapeutic effects of music, at a joint meeting of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group and the Royal Society of Medicine at the RSM earlier this summer. He is at pains to make clear that he is not proposing spiritual healing as an alternative to modern health-care delivery. He is suggesting that some patients and practitioners will want to express their understandings of health, illness, recovery and treatment in terms which are spiritual, as well as physical, psychological and social. He writes, for example, about 'making sense of adversity'. As we see in the book, many authors relate spirituality to finding meaning and having a sense of purpose in life. Arguably, these are among essential parameters of psychological health.

The book is worth its cover price for the second chapter alone. There are sections on 'Science and Religion as Ways of Knowing', 'Spirituality and Religion in Medicine', 'Meanings', 'Transcendence', 'Vital Energy', 'A Postmodern Perspective', 'Belief in Action', and 'A Challenge to Science'. It is difficult to summarise the wisdom contained here. I admire the author's occasional blunt honesty. He writes for example, 'Even within modern medicine, we have difficulty in defining health'. It is important to realise that health is so much more than the simple absence of symptoms.

Another chapter is devoted to Religion, with a section on 'Spirituality and Religion'. Here Aldridge persuasively writes, 'Despite immense developments in medical technology, there is still a need for a contact with the sacred at times of sickness, birth and death. Religions offer narratives related to such events that raise them beyond the instrumentality of technological circumstance to sacred

moments. While medicine strips such occurrences to the routine procedures of daily life, religion restores a sense of awe and wonder to living’.

As Aldridge describes it, in order to be healthy physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually, we humans need a rich symbolic life. In a later chapter, he encourages us to learn and make use of a ‘vocabulary of healing’. How we talk about healing, he says, is important, even though it is difficult to apply a spiritual vocabulary intelligibly, because we are losing the use of certain terms. ‘An understanding of (words like) grace, transcendence, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and sacrament are vital for accompanying our patients through the processes of living, suffering and dying’.

This is a rich and rewarding book, though application and discernment are both required to get the best from it. Stylistic erudition sometimes renders it unnecessarily obscure. Chapter four, for example, is called ‘Lifestyle, Charismatic Ideology and a Praxis Aesthetic’. What does this mean? It turns out to have something to do with what counts as illness, and therefore also what counts as health and as treatment.

Here Aldridge quotes Cecil Helman: ‘Consultations between doctors and patients are embedded within a particular time and place, in a particular physical, social or cultural setting. That is, each consultation is embedded in a particular context. These contexts are important, because they shape what is said in the consultation, how it is said, how it is interpreted, and how it is acted upon’. ¹ He again helps us reflect meaningfully on our previous assumptions, inviting change and maturity of thought and practice, for our own benefit as much as for that of our patients. With perseverance, even the more obscure points eventually become clear, so that the effort of interpreting the occasionally diffident prose is amply repaid.

Psychiatrists familiar with John Swinton’s remarkable ‘Spirituality and Mental Health Care’ ² will naturally seek out and absorb the wisdom of this excellent companion volume, covering different but closely related ground. Many discerning health care workers, keeping abreast of developments in human spirituality relevant to our inter-related professions, will want to read it too. The true bonds, holding us all together, are after all spiritual in nature.

Reviewed by Dr Larry Culliford

¹ Helman, C. (1986) “The Consultation in Context.” *Holistic Medicine* 1,37-41

² Swinton, J. (2001). *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: rediscovering a forgotten dimension*. London: Jessica Kingsley

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