

Health and wholeness

by Neil May 01/09/17

"In fact" said Mustapha Mound "you're claiming the right to be unhappy...not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow... the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind."

There was a long silence.

"I claim them all" said the Savage at last.¹

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health in its broader sense in its 1948 constitution as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." But is this correct? And is it a good definition – is it helpful practically and morally?

What if complete well-being is impossible? Or alternatively what if health sometimes includes or even requires disease and infirmity?

For example, is it healthy not to become ill with grief at the death of your child? Or is it healthy if children do not get childhood illnesses? Is it healthy for an old person to run away from illness and infirmity, rather than accepting them, and ultimately accepting death? Could the idea of being healthy and having complete well-being in fact become a burden to us, forcing us sometimes to pretend to be well and happy, or if we become irrefutably ill, making us feel that we have somehow failed, and are guilty of some personal or moral weakness? By positing such a utopian notion of health, have we not thereby condemned large numbers of people to an unremitting life of "healing", subjecting them to endless scientific or psychological trials and all the anxiety, fear and tedium which accompanies this?

Health, as stated above, is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. But perhaps it is not their absence at all. Being healthy does not necessarily mean not being ill. On the contrary, good health can and sometimes should mean being ill. But this is not the point. To define health by disease is perhaps to ask the wrong question, to go off on the wrong path. Rather it depends on whether or not, and how, we respond to our outer and inner environment, to our world and our soul. Being healthy perhaps means being fully alive to our lives in their fullness. It means responding to the world and our inner state honestly and openly.

In this way being healthy would mean enjoying the benefits and blessings of a time and place, but also bearing the problems and evils of a particular life, and suffering with them. It means being as open to the world in all its reality as is individually possible. This is what gives us character, humanity and integrity, rooted as they are in love and truthfulness. The opposite of health is not illness, but isolation, being closed off from reality and from all those many influences which shape our lives and which we in turn affect and shape.

The consequences of different ways of thinking about health, and of basing policy, funding, social networks and personal aspirations and fears upon them, are considerable. I shall argue that the current definition of health is both harmful to individuals and to society as a whole, and that for this

¹ From *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

reason alone we need to change it. Of course more fundamentally it is perhaps the truth (or lack of it) of our current definition and how it speaks to us, which is the more serious failing.

In order to understand and reclaim the word health from its current ideological dead end, we need to think more about the word itself, and to feel our way into a new sense of it. One way to do this is to look at the origins of the word and those words which are close to it, etymologically and poetically. The word "health", we are told, comes from the Old English *hælb* which means "whole, hale, sound, of good omen".² It is also related to the word *halig* – "holy", which is also related to the idea of wholeness, of "that which must be preserved whole or intact, that cannot be transgressed or violated". The word is also related to the German greeting *Heil*, and the modern English *Hello*, which convey greetings wishing "health, happiness and good luck". It may also be related to the Old English word *hæleþ* meaning "man, hero, fighter".

These connections are worth pondering. It seems at first as though the WHO definition of a "complete state" of well-being (ie as "wholeness") is justified by this etymology. However, on further consideration, it becomes clear that completeness and wholeness, for all their similarity, are in many ways opposed concepts. For something to be complete, it must be finished, and, as such, not subject to further change or interaction, as well as separate and objectifiable. On the other hand wholeness can be understood both practically and philosophically as boundless, and as such constantly changing. This difference appears if you attach the words to "person": a complete person, or a whole person.

A whole person is not a definable entity unless isolated from his/her context. But if isolated, then part of the person will not be present. This is not only a fact in regard to the social or emotional wholeness of a person, but also applies to us biologically, as we are in constant exchange with bacteria, air and atmosphere both within and outside our bodies. Our social, physical and mental wholeness implies or requires relationships with other people, animals, work, even material things, and all of these in turn are in relationship with other people, animals, things etc. In fact, since everything is linked to everything else, our wholeness is intrinsically linked to everything else in creation, not only now but in the past and future. Our individual character derives from this whole, and reflects the whole through our particularity. Furthermore, just as the Whole (of creation) is never the same from one moment to the next, so each individual part of creation, from the smallest atom or speck of dust to every single human being, is constantly changing, and is never the same. If anything were the same even for one millisecond, creation would have ended. So our reality is part of a continual transformation, just as the whole is continually transformed. So we cannot isolate or define the whole either in space or in time.

In this regard, what does the wholeness of a person mean? To what does it refer and how do we judge whether something is more or less whole? It cannot be in regard to completeness, as to how far a person can be considered a finished or separate being, as this would mean to cut them off from their context, and make them less than whole. To know a person as a whole means to understand all the aspects of their life and personality, not in detail necessarily, but how the intrinsic qualities of a person interact with and are shaped by their context, not only in the past, but now, in an on-going manner, changing with the changes of their time. To be whole means somehow to bring all the aspects of a person together into balance, even those aspects which are difficult or which conflict with each other. This is very different from a person as complete, as though he or she were a toy doll or a jigsaw puzzle, made up of definable and finite parts, which fit together neatly.

Perhaps we should consider other meanings of the word "health" to further deepen our understanding of this word. For example, what is meant by health as "of good omen" or "good luck"? These meanings indicate that health is, perhaps, also a relationship of a person to destiny or

² From the Online Etymology Dictionary

fate. Fate is something beyond our control, but which has meaning. It is something which nowadays is not accepted in medical science, but which in times of trauma or accident, we still may resort to, both for consolation or for explanation. It is something much greater than our own lives and in some ways greater than our understanding. It is a very common concept in many traditional cultures and faiths, and is not considered a random force (as in the “luck of the dice”), but part of a greater divine plan, articulated in phrases such as “It is written” or “it is in God’s hand”. Such an attitude can considerably reduce anxiety and anger about one’s condition, whether suffering or not, and allow core values such as love, truth and goodness to thrive in spite of the illness.

We could also try to probe the meaning of health as “holy”, both as “whole” and as “that which cannot or should not be transgressed or violated”. Does this imply that “health” is something of a taboo, or a commandment, that the whole should not be reduced to less than what it is, an injunction that “you shall not make a person separate, you shall not divide them up or reduce them to their parts”, as this dissection violates and transgresses the reality of the whole person and the whole itself. It may be seen that this definition of the whole was a critical part of the attitude to the body in many traditional cultures, where the body is considered sacred even after death, and medical dissection of corpses is forbidden. Or perhaps this “holiness” is a reminder of the mystery and inherent indivisibility and all-encompassing connectivity of health, of the whole person.

Finally, the meaning of health as related to “man, hero, fighter” brings with it the sense of an archetypal Man, of the human in his or her fullness, striving with the world and with fate, overcoming normal limitations, becoming what they were meant to be. All of these meanings have a mythical or religious undertone. They speak of both acceptance of destiny, but also of our duty to fulfil and perhaps, like Jacob, to wrestle with our destiny – to risk our personal and undefined but nonetheless felt wholeness in struggle with the unending and incomprehensible wholeness of God.

With this deeper understanding of the word “health”, we can see now that the idea of health as somehow a discrete and attainable state of purity and completeness in opposition to the world is probably misguided. In fact, health (just as wholeness and holiness) is really about a right relationship to our world and to our souls, a relationship which is marked by acceptance, reciprocity, balance, authenticity, generosity and heroism.

This may sound as though we are asking unreasonable things of ordinary people. Not everyone can be balanced, authentic, a hero in their lives. Or can they? In fact, people show remarkable heroism in their illnesses and treatment even now, but in a way which is often drained of meaning and is actually demeaning to the sick. It is a deluded kind of heroism, which is often invoked in statements such as “he lost his battle against cancer”, as though cancer were an alien force, and not part of the whole, not something which also has meaning. What is often genuinely heroic in people with cancer is their enduring care for others, even in the midst of pain, and their kindness to the doctors and nurses who are often misguidedly attempting to treat them, even when it is causing more physical and mental distress. Transcending this constant intervention to be able to see the further shore and to leave this life with peace and blessing is, indeed, truly heroic.

Much better and indeed easier is the definition of health proposed here as a right relationship. To be healthy does not mean never being ill, protecting yourself from germs, fighting disease, declaring war on cancer, or stuffing yourself with vitamins and Lemsip when you’ve got a cold so that you can still work and party like you were only 20 years old. Being healthy means having the right attitude and relationship to your world and to your self. It is entirely about meaning.

However, this does not imply in any way that all medicine is bad and that all suffering is good. In most cases the reduction of pain and suffering is, of course, a good thing. Indeed, it is suggested that we should adopt this proposed concept of health because it would in fact lead to a huge reduction in suffering and a renewal of true medicine and medical practice. It would reintroduce the idea of

healing as the restoration of balance and right relationships, and all forms of treatment would be directed towards this. Balance is indeed physical, mental and social, but it is not utopian, and it is not involved in warfare against viruses and bacteria. Rather it is living with reality and continually deepening our understanding of ourselves, our world and our destiny.

This is ultimately about the truth of reality itself. The understanding of reality as expressed through modern medicine and our general culture is that it is somehow objectifiable and can be reduced to its parts. Reality is the physical world and this is either inert, hostile or competing with us. This is why we believe we can and should desire to achieve “completeness”, a completeness which is a defence against the forces of the world, which is self-sufficient and isolated or immune³. However, this is not how reality is understood in most traditional cultures or in many people’s personal experience. In much medieval, tribal and mystical thought, the world is not inert and without meaning, but everything within the world has meaning, both in regard to itself, and, importantly, in regard to human beings. Things desire to be understood and to reveal their real meaning. They are a part of a creation imbued with meaning and purpose. They are not hostile or competitive, but desire to be part of our world and to enhance our lives. Human beings are those creatures which have the power to understand this revealed meaning and to enjoy it, and in this sense this is our true intellectual task and destiny.

As such health as a right relationship to the world is not just a statement about respect or balance, but about knowledge. In having a right relationship we learn about the world and we reveal its meaning, a meaning which is implicit in it, and which the world desires to be revealed. In turn this reveals the nature of nature itself and of the creator of nature, as well as our own true nature. In this sense health is fundamentally a spiritual and revelatory condition, and medicine is a spiritual activity.

On the other hand there is sometimes a need for dissecting the world and reducing it to its parts. This also gives us a kind of knowledge and should not be scorned. However, this knowledge only builds up meaning, only contributes to true health, if it is part of the encompassing approach of wholeness described above. In this it is as well to remember the dictum of Asclepius, who lived in Thessaly some 3000 years ago, and whose prescription to healers was “First the word, and then the herb, and lastly the knife”.

This saying is not a decision tree or a flow chart, but a philosophy of healing and wholeness. The word refers partly to the spoken word, used to open our hearts and minds to the cause of our illness and to provide consolation and balm, but it also refers to logos, the Word or cause of creation, spoken and speaking within the cosmos, bringing revelation and spiritual understanding. The herb refers to nature, or creation, and as explained above, this creation desires to be known and in being known enlightens us and also heals us. This is not to scorn physical healing. Indeed, the way that plants (and indeed minerals and other natural materials) physically heal us is another way in which healing can change both our bodies and minds, giving us genuine physical relief as well as increasing our respect and understanding of nature. The doctrine of signatures is one manifestation of this kind of knowledge, but it is present in all healing where we can understand the connection of our selves and our condition to the things of the world. We come to see ourselves as surrounded by healing plants and minerals, to see the force of nature as combining both knowledge and power, and to live in an enhanced and compassionate world as a consequence of this healing.

Finally, however, we sometimes need the knife. In dissecting the human, we also dissect the world, reality, and reveal both the independence and validity of the particular as well as the possibility and presence of evil. The knife does not have to “murder to dissect”, but can be a valid and important part of healing. We have to remember that we are neither perfect, nor perfectible, in this world.

³ Unfortunately one consequence of this is perhaps the current alarming rise in auto-immune diseases.

Reductionist science, surgery, cutting out the evil, repairing the damaged, accepting a reduced body and ability, are all vital parts of a holistic and relational medicine, providing they remain within the overall context and bounds of this approach.

On the other hand, the current attitude to health does not only negatively affect the sick and infirm. It affects and infects all people and all modern cultures. It is itself a cause of great harm, physically, mentally and socially. Some of the consequences of this are the following:

- Over medicalisation –this is the result of considering health to be the absence of disease and infirmity, rather than a state of reciprocity and relationship. It leads to us treating problems with powerful chemicals, when in fact they just require rest and care; giving dangerous drugs to the healthy (in particular inoculations of babies and old people); ignoring the emotional and relational content of illness; finding and promoting medicines for irrelevancies (and thereby encouraging hypochondria and paranoia).
- Anxiety – our definition of health is based on a fear of illness, fear of disability, fear of death and encourages people to worry about alien bacteria, viruses and accidents and thereby to shut themselves off from life⁴.
- Utopianism (perhaps the dominant disease of our time) – we are trying to cure what cannot be cured and to overcome death, as though death were an enemy and anything less than perfection in human ability is an evil.
- Attachment – to what we consider safe and “wholesome”, and avoidance of the “unhealthy”, which in moderation is both a balanced and sane approach, but when infused with anxiety, utopianism and hostility to the world, becomes a dangerous source of addiction and paranoia, leading to the avoidance life in its diversity and fullness
- Misunderstanding of healing – health is not primarily an absence of symptoms, and healing should not make that its priority. Healing is about finding meaning in disease and thereby opening oneself or the patient more fully to the world and to the self. It is vital to understand the root cause of dis-ease in a patient. Medicines should be used to re-establish balance (ease) which will be as much mental, emotional and spiritual as physical. This will lead to the reduction of symptoms and in many cases the overcoming of dis-ease.
- Misunderstanding of wholeness – we need to re-establish a notion of wholeness which is relational, reciprocal, open, dynamic and non-utopian, in contrast to complete, perfected, isolated and static notions which are currently dominant. Wholeness can then become a valid and meaningful aim of all people and of our society.
- Misunderstanding of holiness – holiness is not exclusion but is putting things in their right relationship, and embracing the whole in our individual particular lives. Everything, then, is sacred.
- Loss of meaning – meaning doesn’t mean happiness or success. Meaning only exists in everything or not at all.

The overall consequences of this incorrect view of health are increased unhappiness and dis-ease, as well as huge cost and waste of resources, including the waste of knowledge and good will. We are consequently seeing significant increases in mental and physical health problems at this present time, as well as damage to the environment and to social fabric. These are entirely related, as the way we think about our own health has a direct analogy with the way we think about the health of our world and society, and a direct effect on policy, research and activity. The “wars” on cancer, terrorism and poverty are all part of the same way of thinking, a way of thinking that leads to more, not less misery.

⁴ The increase in anxiety contributes to and underpins the more general anxiety of modernity, which is fed by the loss of traditions and habits of living, the increasing “choice” we have to exert on a daily basis and the over-connectivity of mobile technology.

We have absolutely come to the end of the road in this particular way of thinking about health, and we need to return to a more balanced and holistic pathway, one which was understood in earlier times and still is understood in some non-western cultures and alternative practices. This is not to say that there is no merit or value in modern medicine. Far from it. There are many incredible advances and understandings, as well as wise and compassionate practitioners and healers. However, there is also a lot of harm being done even by well-intentioned people. Modern medicine and attitudes to health need to be returned to and incorporated within the more balanced and holistic approach described in this essay. A new definition and understanding of health and what it means to be healthy must emerge, based upon a new understanding of wholeness and our relationship to ourselves, our world and to destiny. This is the transformation we urgently need, not only for our own health, but for the health of society and the planet.