

The Transforming Power of Illness

Vicki McKenna

Earlier this year I developed shingles. Although it was not a particularly bad attack I was left with severe post-viral fatigue. I sipped foul-tasting Chinese herbs, rested, meditated, and experienced a taste of my own medicine by having acupuncture. I swallowed vast quantities of vitamin pills, thought positively, got in touch with my feelings and in short did all that I could to get well. Some months later, still unwell and by now chronically fatigued, with accompanying symptoms of mental confusion, poor concentration, and memory problems, I was labelled an ME sufferer by my GP. I began to realise, with horror, that this illness was not going to vanish suddenly away.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross writes about the first stage of bereavement being denial and I think this could be applied to the first stage of illness. Certainly for me denial was the immediate reaction to the realisation that I was chronically ill. I have experienced poor health in the past, but sheer bloodmindedness has always seen me through and pushed me on. Suddenly these tactics did not work. If I did too much, my body now rebelled with joint pains, headaches and overwhelming fatigue. I was very frightened, but battled on, refusing to slow down and acknowledge these

symptoms. Weeks of frustration followed in which I realised that my luck had run out and that this time I was not going to bounce back.

My life has dramatically altered. I have had to cut back on both work and play, and it has not been easy to accept that this is how it needs to be. Slowly I am coming to a place of acceptance which I hope will strengthen my understanding of illness — my own, and that of others who experience this crucible of ill-health.

Although I have practised Chinese acupuncture for the past fifteen years, I am, like most of us, a child of 20th-century Western culture and have in the past been treated with allopathic, chemical medicine. Western medicine looks for the instant cure and seemingly works well with acute illnesses; for example bacterial infection is successfully treated with antibiotics. Many times I have longed for this kind of 'quick fix', but sadly this approach is useless when it comes to long term, chronic illness. Western medicine is at a loss when faced with diseases such as ME. Although there are treatments to help ease the symptoms — painkillers for the muscle aches and antidepressants for the accompanying mood swings — there is no instant cure.

Vicki McKenna has worked as an acupuncturist for the past fifteen years and uses this therapy as a tool to enable her clients to work more easily on the issues they bring with them.

The goal of Western medicine seems to be to blast disease out of existence and I think medics feel thwarted and embarrassed at their apparent 'failure' when it comes to chronic illness. This repressive attitude towards sickness comes I believe from our modern culture; there is no place for the weak or slow in the 20th-century scheme of things. Life in the present day is lived at a hectic pace and productivity is the great god to be worshipped. We have to be seen to be achieving at home, at school, at work, in all aspects of life until we reach the (often early!) grave.

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy can bomb and blitz cancer in the battlefield of the sick body. The term 'heroic' applied to surgery invokes the idea that we are valiantly striving against suffering and disease. Illness is seen as the enemy — a thief in the night come to steal away our busy, productive lives. We put the chain on the door to protect ourselves by doubling our doses of vitamin C, exercising frantically and eating fibre morning, noon and night. We suppress the first sign of a cold with a dose of aspirin and carry on with a purposeful air. Illness is seen as a threat to productivity and a sick person as one who is not able to contribute. The vulnerable pack of cards we call 'society' is threatened by illness amid fears it may tumble down. How many times have we experienced the GP hastily scrawling out a prescription so that we may return, post-haste, to work.

The Cartesian view of the universe, the mechanistic, scientific view widely held by medicine today, looks at the body as a machine that can be repaired. And who would not want to be 'fixed' if it meant feeling fit and well again? The instant cure is very seductive. To be healthy is something no-one would spurn, and yet chronic dis-

eases are here and they are not always 'fixable'. Further more there is a price to be paid for this quick-fix approach. When we see the body as a machine that is broken and needs mending, we ignore the possibility that sickness is a cryptic message sifting up through the symptoms of blood, sweat and tears to tell us that we are out of balance in our lives. We ignore this at our peril. When symptoms are superficially alleviated the message is crushed beneath the surface, only to rise again at some future time and place of illness.

Illness can be seen as an opportunity to take stock. In ancient Greece there were temples with rooms to which sick people could retreat to be healed by the gods and goddesses. This was a time of quiet introspection, based on the understanding that illness is a sacred space where inner work can be done so that healing may come from the core of our being. This means that the goal of healing is peace of mind; whether the body is 'fixed' or not is irrelevant. It is a bonus to find the body rejuvenated, but this is not the primary focus.

ME has made me review my life and this has been a painful process. I had polio as a child and needed to overcome my disability in order to be on a par with the able-bodied world. I viewed that world as challenging and felt I needed to prove myself as good as the next (able-bodied) person. An addiction to challenge followed and a pursuit of obstacles to overcome. I strove both for myself and also to contribute to society as mother and as therapist. My attitude was to pack in as much as I could; working, socialising, exercising, it was all grist to my mill, and no surprise to others when I developed ME.

Frustration, fear and despair descended

on me at that time and I felt I would never be able to enjoy my life again. How could I if I was not the capable productive woman I had always been? In my mind there was no room for change: I wanted to get back to that busy life style that felt so rewarding. Slowly I had to face and accept the facts that my catalogue of symptoms was not going to vanish away, and that my old life and identity needed to change.

To see that there is a purpose to suffering is not to romanticise it, but it does make it more bearable and, hopefully, understandable. It seems to me possible that life chooses for some of us to be active, healthy achievers in order for work to be done out in the world. It could also be possible that life chooses for some others of us to be sick in order that deeper work of growth is done on behalf of the collective. I believe that we are all part of a web of life, each a part of the whole. I therefore believe that I as part of you experience this illness in order to contribute to our wholeness. What I have to contribute now is perhaps not as tangible as the work I was able to do when I was well, but I feel that the work of growth is as valid as my previous contribution. I am now able to look at my life with more of an overview and hopefully my insights might help others.

It seems to me that the role of ME in helping to transform my life has been to teach me to let go of old outmoded ways of thinking and feeling and behaving. Attachment to achieving, pushing on through life without regard for mind or body, has placed much stress on my immune system. I have perceived the world as a challenge and myself as a warrior-woman ready to take on the battle it presents. I have seen life as a struggle in which I need to prove myself, an exam in which I

need to come out top.

Of course I do not believe that illness is solely due to attitude. There are many other components involved, both genetic and environmental, but attitude it seems to me is the clincher. I may have a genetic predisposition to ME, but by cultivating a relaxed and easy approach to life I could perhaps have avoided ME's full blown traumas. Slowly I have come to realise that I need to change my perception of life and start to see the world as a place to appreciate, full of potential delight. Even though I may be unwell, cannot work as I used to, I can still choose to live, as the Buddhists say, with an attitude of 'mindfulness'.

Mindfulness involves letting go of old conditioned attitudes and perceptions in order to appreciate what is and so allow the flow of life's energy. How to let go? I think letting go is not truly possible unless it is a movement towards or into another state of being. We cannot let go of the familiar ways of reacting and behaving, however undermining they may be to health, unless we have the promise of a different and better way of being. Gautama Buddha over 2,000 years ago talked of attachment as the root of all suffering. When we hang on to old emotional states such as anger, grief, anxiety or fear, we suffer. Buddhism suggests that freedom from attachment to these states arises when we let go of them and move towards an acceptance of what is. This means the calming of the fearful and frenzied mind so that it may value, appreciate and enjoy whatever life brings.

When we start to trust that there is enjoyment to be found in the small details of life — a conversation with a friend, the warm smell of dinner cooking, the play of sunlight on leaves — then we are letting go

to live in a calm appreciation of this moment. When we do this we are giving the body and mind the chance to deeply relax, and in this space healing can take place. At this point we are flowing with the energy of life, rather than against it. This then is the opportunity of illness: the chance to be mindful of the moment, so that mind and body can heal. Physical symptoms may not vanish away, tissue damage may have taken place and will not heal instantaneously, but a process has started of letting go and relaxing to focus on absorbing the everyday pleasures that are accessible in the here and now.

We are more than our symptoms. We have the awareness to choose: to take the opportunities life presents and appreciate and value the gifts the senses bring. The simple pleasures of walking in the summer rain or sitting by a roaring fire in the depth of winter can be lost in a busy world whose prime concern often seems to be the cultivation of the material rather than the spiritual. For me these pleasures allow me to feel fully alive even when sick and tired.

I am by no means out of the woods of ME and I do not wish to sound like Pollyanna and give the impression that illness is a wonderful thing. Most days I am frustrated, saddened and scared by the symptoms I experience; but the antidote that helps me out of the dark tunnel is there should I choose to access it. Firstly I become aware of and tune in to the thoughts and feelings that I am identifying with, then I let go of them by turning my attention to appreciate something in my environment in this moment. This is a choice still available to me in spite of everything, and through the choosing comes a healing.

This attitude of 'mindfulness' does not

mean ignoring the darker forces of the external world. I am only too well aware for example of the damage done to our immune systems through pollution and the over-use of pesticides. Illness is not an event that happens in isolation — we are all interconnected and we are all affected by poisoned air and water. Appreciative acceptance of our immediate environment cannot mean we avert our gaze from these atrocities and think beautiful thoughts. Instead we determine to ensure that we can value our world even more fully by helping it to heal collectively. This may mean campaigning for organic farming, using a bike instead of a car, signing a petition against the fluoridisation of our water— whatever it takes. The more we contribute to the well-being of the collective and are absorbed in something beyond our own complaints, the more we open to life and heal ourselves as individuals.

ME has given me the time and space to try to understand a little more about the purpose and the meaning of my life. Let me be clear: if I could choose to be sick or well I would wave the magic wand for wellness any day! I have however been dealt this particular hand of cards and I am grateful that it has allowed me to understand the importance and the need to learn to smell those roses along the way. I still take my herbs and vitamins and (gentle) exercise, but the difference is that I now no longer strain to get well in order to simply carry on living my life as I lived it pre-ME. Instead I am able more and more to aspire towards an attitude of acceptance and appreciation of my life as it is. The gifts are there — the comfort of a friend, listening to music, appreciating silence, reading a good book, they all bring pleasure in this moment. And in this moment, healing grows.