

Illness as Punishment. “You have the flu? How did you get it?” The simple medical answer is: “I was attacked by a flu virus.” Ah yes, but what did you do that gave the virus the opportunity to attack you?

There is always a way to wring at least a little self-blame and guilt out of an illness. Perhaps you haven’t been eating well, taken the right vitamin supplements, kept your stress level down and your immune system up, or simply avoided others who have the flu.

It’s easy to extend the list of possible causes in a spiritual direction: You’re sick? You must have done something to separate yourself from God, spirit, good karma, or the life-sustaining force of the universe, and now you’re paying the price. The link between misconduct and medical consequence is built into the very language we speak. Words such as “blind” and “sick” not only describe a physical condition but also point metaphorically to doing something wrong; when critics of a political policy deem it “blind,” for example, they are not saying that its adopters are *physically* injured or compromised. Etymology often is revealing – the word “ill” derives from the Middle English “ille,” meaning evil or wicked.

Humans have of course some agency in determining their own health; negligence can lead to a medical condition. Illness is not a form of *punishment*, however, although that association exists in many languages and is embedded in the world’s mainstream cultural and religious traditions. Judaism and Christianity commend kindness to those who suffer, but the sympathy is often compounded with disapproval. Torah, for example, links piety to health and links impiety to suffering and death: “If you do not obey the Lord, your God ... the Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, illnesses with burning fevers” (Deuteronomy 28:22). Jesus admonishes someone he has miraculously healed, “Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you” (John 5:14).



Peter Bruegel’s The Blind Leading the Blind illustrates the biblical link between blindness and sin, “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” The figures here are represented as having medically identifiable eye diseases, ranging from cataracts to corneal leukemia. Invisible to these men is not only the church in the background but also the lovely white iris in the ditch.

The Qur’an similarly asserts that human beings are responsible for their own misfortune:

“Whatever of good befalls you, it is from Allah; and whatever of ill befalls you, it is from yourself.” (Qur’an, *Surah an-Nisa'* verse 79). This approach can be found in some Buddhist teachings too – according to Sogyal Rinpoche, “Whatever is happening to us now mirrors our past karma.”

A Counter Tradition

None of these faith traditions attributes *all* illness to wrong thoughts or actions; the illness and poverty visited upon Job, for instance, are not caused by anything he has done, and God admonishes Job’s friends for assuming that somehow he must be to blame for his suffering. And, while it’s easy to find religious texts that attribute illness to sinfulness and portray God as a punitive figure, they contain as well a counter-tradition that associates illness not with divine retribution, but with inherent human vulnerability: our lives are fragile as blades of grass (“Alles Fleisch ist wie die Grass,” in the words of Brahms’ requiem, quoting the Bible), and illness should be met with compassion and all the support we can give.



17th century European humanism (Spinoza, Grotius, Milton, Donne) called into question the age-old link between illness and wrong-doing. In Rembrandt’s “Hundred Guilder Print” (1648), the artist represents those who seek to be healed as burdened by their illnesses, but not as morally flawed or wicked.

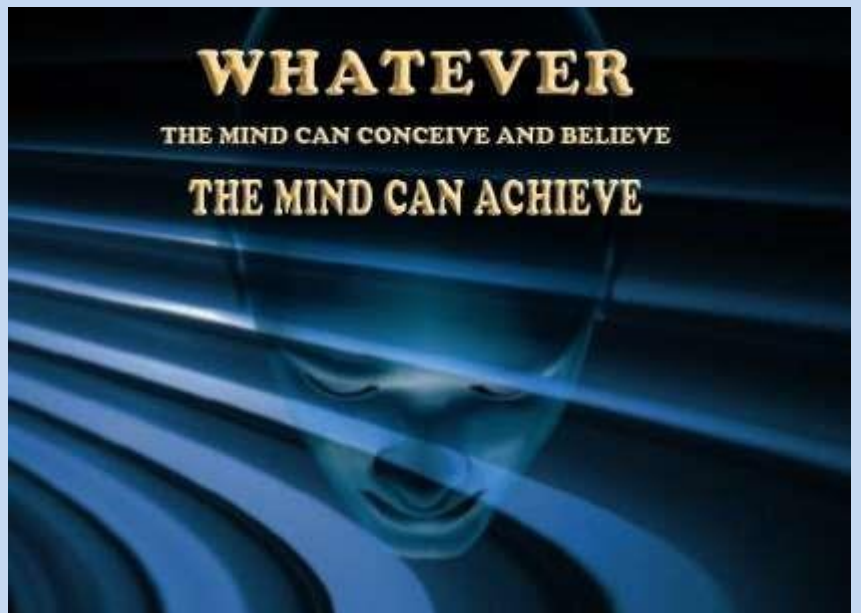
Acknowledged here is what it means to be an embodied being: the human body is astonishingly resourceful but also vulnerable—it is never shameful, never “fallen” due to the “wages of sin,” as scripture (*Romans* 6:23) has it. Buddhism too may approach health and healing in a humane way, recognizing that aging and illness, like birth and growth, are integral to the human condition. Our bodies are subject to laws (“*niyama*” in Pali) that do not depend on human purpose, will, and action (karma). Illness, then, is not blameworthy any more than health is praiseworthy. Like the proverbial eddies in a river and passing clouds in the sky, we arise, inhabit the world for a brief time, and then vanish. Yet we can make the most of that “brief time” and cherish this wonderful thing called life!

Illness as Personal Failure

People who are moderately healthy are apt to assume that in the normal course of their lives and, despite missteps here and there, they are doing their part, and life will continue to meet them halfway. When serious illness strikes, however, and this assumption collapses, our ability to respond in a thoughtful way may get hijacked by the way we feel inside: somehow life/destiny has condemned and cast aside the one who has fallen ill.

It's no surprise that a traditional philosophical/religious view, holding that mind and body are separate entities and that the former should control the latter, falls subject to the picture: "you are to blame for whatever befalls you." Self-reproach is built into the traditional Cartesian binaries of mind and body, self and other, health and sickness, reward and punishment. But does the seemingly humane alternative, which discards the conventional dualism of spirit and flesh in favor of a more holistic view, necessarily lead to more charity and forgiveness? Or might it actually intensify negative self-judgment and guilt?

Indeed, if body and mind are one, then does not a "fault" in the body signify a fault in the mind as well? Thus we arrive at a perspective not so far removed from the punitive ideas of the past: something is profoundly wrong with those who fall ill; removed from grace, they fall and fail. This view of illness is in keeping with a culture that regards health and happiness as the inevitable outcomes of an optimistic frame of mind. Faith is packaged as a promise to overcome human limitation altogether and becomes, as it were, a magic carpet that sails over the human condition and conveys the believer to a land of boundless wealth and health. "We are Creators of the Universe," proclaims life coach Kate Corbin, "Quantum Physics takes a spiritual perspective in which there are no separate parts, in which everything is fluid and always changing.... As we focus our thoughts on what we want to attract, we can literally call into existence whatever we desire."



A valid insight — that we need not resign ourselves to the status quo but can hold out hope for fundamental personal and social transformation — may get twisted into a mirage of counterfeit expectations.

Such spiritual counsel is commercially successful, but how well does it work? Barbara Ehrenreich, acutely perceptive in her book *Bright-sided*, has pointed out that the United States, homeland of the prosperity and happiness gospel, accounts for two-thirds of the global consumption of antidepressants and is ranked twenty-third among nations in self-reported happiness. "How can we be so surpassingly 'positive' in self-image," Ehrenreich asks, "without being the world's happiest and best off people?" In the United States, "land of opportunity," neither mainstream nor New Age religion solves life's problems for most people.

The flip side of proverbial American optimism is this country's repudiation of those who do not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Success rather than failure, health rather than illness, are thought to result from sincere effort and the right mindset. So being ill, like being poor, gets blamed on a failure of individual initiative.

Jimmie Holland, a psychiatrist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York quotes a patient: "I know I have to be positive all the time and that is the only way to cope with cancer – but it's so hard to do. I know that if I get sad, or scared or upset, I am making my tumor grow faster and I will have shortened my life."

Dr. Holland comments: "How did this phenomenon of blaming the patient for the disease come about? It undoubtedly is related to the fact that cancer has been a mystery for so long, as to both cause and cure. When we know little about something, we become even more frightened by it and develop myths to try to explain it ..."



Medical Science and Us

Over the past several centuries, we have brought many illnesses within the scope of medical science and have come up with effective remedies. So why would anyone today attempt to account for illness in terms of destiny or retribution? One reason is that so many chronic physical conditions still baffle the medical profession and leave patients feeling helpless and puzzled. Viewing illness as a kind of punishment is one way of bringing it within the scope of explanation and possible control. We human beings are infinitely resourceful meaning-making machines, and quite willing to stretch the imagination beyond the confines of medical science in pursuit of answers. Moreover, even when medical science *can* give an account of a medical illness, that story is, in a way, ultimately unsatisfying, because it doesn't tell us why a *particular* person falls ill. Suppose for example that my doctor reveals to me that my current symptoms are due to a cancerous tumor that is beginning to ravage my body. This news just raises the next question: why have *I* been cursed with a body inclined to fall prey to such ravaging? Even if my cancer was environmentally caused, I still don't understand why *my* body in particular – I certainly didn't *choose* the one I've got -- has proved vulnerable. No matter how elaborate any explanation may be, it halts at the doorstep of the question: "Why me?" (Philosophers may say that this unanswerable question is nonsensical, but that won't stop patients in hospital beds from asking it.)

Wrestling with this question, the mind sometimes comes up with a facile answer such as "Somehow, I deserve this." The connections we make between illness, responsibility, and self-esteem are often conflicting, even tortured, ones. To be sure, understanding our own contributions to illness may sometimes help us find a way to get well. And our own agency is collective as well as personal. For example, humans are poisoning the environment to the point that increasingly it endangers us —hence we "reap what we sow." Karma, understood as an account of *social* consequences, expresses the same insight. But when we regard ourselves individually as tainted or cast into a spiritual shadow, then our search for meaning is stretching beyond its plausible reach.

Mindfulness and Illness

When one falls seriously ill, one may yet retain (or discover) a sense of gratitude — for health care received, the company of others, a past that has sometimes been rewarding.

But illness can also lead us to feel terribly alone, bereft of community, of protection from harm, of belief that the future holds any promise at all. What can be done? We take the hand of a beloved, walk along a beach, meditate in a cathedral, or play with a child. Such responses don't signify resignation to a medical condition – or, for that matter, to any unacceptable situation in the world around us. Many *Tikkun Magazine* readers will be familiar with the famous first verse of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer," written during World War II:

Vast and life giving universe, grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the
things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Less well-known is the prayer's second verse, adapted as follows:

Living one day at a time, taking, as wise sages of old
have, this fallen world as it is, while acknowledging the
distance between this and our true potential, may I be
reasonably happy in this life, within this mysterious
cosmos, abiding in this understanding as long as
consciousness allows.

Amen.

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