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## **Lessons from the Body**

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As an internal medicine physician, I have spent my professional life listening to messages from the body. In fact, the practice of medicine depends utterly on what the body has to say. Let's consider two cases.

Barbara Cummiskey developed symptoms of multiple sclerosis in the 1960s as a fifteen-year-old high-school student. Although she was an athletic gymnast, she began to struggle physically. She managed to graduate high school in 1968 and enroll in college, but was unable to complete her studies because of increasing disabilities. Her disease progressed rapidly. She had two respiratory arrests in the early 1970s, contracted pneumonia, and required recurrent hospitalizations. One of her lungs collapsed in 1980 and she required a tracheostomy. She lost urinary control and required an indwelling bladder catheter. She further lost bowel control and an ileostomy was performed. Her vision deteriorated and she became legally blind. By 1981 she was given six months to live and was enrolled in hospice care. She became bed-bound, developed severe contractures, and was curled in a constant fetal position. When she could no longer swallow, a feeding tube was inserted into her stomach. She was dying. When death appeared imminent, her family and her doctor agreed there would be no CPR or other heroics to prolong her life.

On June 7, 1981, her tragic story was aired on WMBI, a local radio station. During the program, prayers were requested for her and other terminally ill individuals in the area. Listeners responded enthusiastically and flooded the station with bags of letters.

The same afternoon, with visitors in her room, Barbara heard a male voice say, "My child, get up and walk!" Her visitors were astonished when she jumped out of bed, removed her oxygen, and stood on her legs for the first time in years. She was no longer short of breath without oxygen. Her vision returned. Her parents entered the room. She appeared transformed. Her mother looked her up and down and exclaimed, "You have muscles again!" Her amazed father waltzed her around the room.

That night, a Sunday, she went with her family and friends to church. She walked from the back of the sanctuary down the central aisle to the front. Everyone knew she had been close to death. They were shocked.

The next day, Barbara went to the office of Thomas E. Marshall, MD, her internal medicine physician. Dr. Marshall said:

I thought I was seeing an apparition! Here was my patient, who was not expected to live another week, totally cured. I stopped all her medication and took out her bladder catheter, but she wasn't quite ready to have the tracheostomy tube removed until another visit. No one had ever seen

anything like this before. That afternoon, we sent Barb for a chest X-ray. Her lungs were now perfectly normal, with the collapsed lung totally expanded with no infiltrate or other abnormality that had existed before. I have never witnessed anything like this before or since...

Her case is reported by Dr. Marshall in physician Scott J. Kolbaba's 2016 book *Physicians' Untold Stories*.

In the 1990s I was peripherally involved in the investigation of an equally startling case dating to the 1950s, which was being revisited by a reporter for *The Washington Post*. I had written the book *Healing Words*, and the reporter wanted my opinion. The case concerned Ann O'Neill, a four-year-old girl suffering from acute lymphocytic leukemia. Ann was hospitalized in the University of Maryland Hospital in Baltimore. She was close to death. Her burial gown was prepared and a priest had administered last rites. She was given only hours to live.

Unwilling to give her up, her mother, with the help of several Catholic nuns, bundled her up and took her to a local cemetery, where Elizabeth Ann Seton, a revered Catholic nun, was buried. Ann's mother and the nuns laid her at Seton's tomb and prayed that she would be healed. Then they took her back to the hospital.

Several days later, all of Ann's blood tests were normal. She gradually recovered and was discharged from the hospital. Nine years later, a bone marrow biopsy was performed, revealing no indication of any lingering leukemia.

In both cases, a profound healing of a near-lethal disease occurred following healing intentions from outsiders. In both instances, the healing intention was prayer, an endeavor whose main characteristics involve compassion, caring, and love, commonly offered from a distance. Evidence has surfaced over the past few decades suggesting that the physiology of humans and nonhumans can be modified by these interventions.

Whatever you call it, the bottom line is that the thoughts of one caring individual can positively influence a sick individual at a distance, even when the recipient is unaware of the effort. Distant healing has been demonstrated in scores of laboratory studies in the past few years, and systematic and meta-analyses affirm that the effect is real.

Currently the majority of medical schools in the United States have formal coursework exploring these findings. This indicates that we are moving toward a postmaterial view of human consciousness—consciousness unconfined to the individual brain and body, and capable of exerting distant, nonlocal effects. This perspective sees consciousness as fundamental—not produced by the brain, or derived from anything more basic.

This view has been affirmed by some of the most influential physicists of the twentieth century. Max Planck, the founder of quantum mechanics, observed, "I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness." Erwin Schrödinger, another Nobel Prize-winning physicist, agreed: "Although I think that life may be the result of an accident, I do not think that of consciousness. Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For consciousness is absolutely fundamental." More recently, mathematician-philosopher David Chalmers

stated, "I propose that conscious experience be considered a fundamental feature, irreducible to anything more basic..."

The implications are enormous. If consciousness is nonlocal, as evidence suggests, then it is unbounded and is infinite in space and time. If consciousness is unbounded in time, it is eternal and immortal; and if it is unbounded in space, then it is omnipresent, unitary, and one.

The recognition of unitary consciousness is ancient. It is also modern. As Schrödinger put it: "To divide or multiply consciousness is something meaningless. The category of number, of whole and of parts are then simply not applicable to it." And as the eminent physicist David Bohm observed, "Deep down the consciousness of mankind is one. This is a virtual certainty...and if we don't see this it's because we are blinding ourselves to it."

When bodies respond to the healing intentions of distant others, it affirms our unity and connectedness with one another. This permits a reformulation of the golden rule, from its customary "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," to "Be kind to others because in some sense they are you."

The human body, sensitive to the love, compassion, empathy, and healing intentions of others, and in cahoots with all other minds that are themselves infinite and eternal: What greater lesson than this?

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