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DREAMING A NEW HEALTH CARE PARADIGM



Health care. We all need it. We dream regularly about our own well-being. Might our personal dreams also contain comments on the collective situation? I offer four here that seem to.

The first comes from the website for dreams about the presidential candidates that opened prior to the election. It features Obama in the role of turning a huge vehicle around in a dead-end street:

I was running some errands with Barack. Michelle was in the hospital after having a cyst removed, and one of our errands was to pick her up. Barack was driving an SUV and we were having difficulty finding a parking spot near the hospital. We drove down a narrow street with cars parked on both sides, then it dead-ended. It didn't look like it was possible to turn around. I became very tense. I thought, Oh, no, he's going to get very angry and run into all these cars when he tries to turn around. . . . But he very coolly did a 7- or 8-point turn, deftly turning the car around, and we headed back up the street.

The opening lines of the dream suggest that one of the errands the new president has to run is in the vicinity of a hospital, to pick up his wife, who has been a patient. Taking this as a collective image, it points to

the feminine in this country, which has certainly been undergoing a healing process for a long time. The dream pairs the issue of health care with "retrieval of the feminine."

Obama, the new collective leader, drives a big American SUV, which perhaps signifies the bigger-is-better fantasy that has had us in its grip for so long. The American vehicle, symbolizing the way we move about the world, is oversized, unwieldy, self-enclosed, and unsustainable.

The dream then states the problem: how to navigate the narrow street, the dead-end we are in? The driver manages to cope with the problem by remaining calm, not easily irritated, and deftly negotiating a 7- or 8-point turn. This suggests there is no quick fix, but a sensible, careful approach that could take 7 or 8 years.

Early in my practice as a psychotherapist, I had a dream that, in retrospect, seems to describe the underlying shift that our approach to health care needs. It said in words that *the task during this period in history is that "spirit re-enter matter."* I understood that I could help with this in my consulting room.

Nature spirits were banished several hundred years ago, and the resulting view is that matter is inert and the body merely a material entity that functions solely on physical

principles. Our present health care system operates on this underlying premise. Attempts to integrate a psychological perspective into medicine in the past three decades have had only minimal results.

What would it look like if spirit were invited to re-enter matter? A fascinating example appears in the book *Jungle Medicine*, an account by Constance Grauds, a Western pharmacist, of her training in Peruvian rainforest shamanism. She had previously been diagnosed with thyroid cancer and underwent Western surgery, which was relatively successful at the material level. During her shamanic training, she encountered, in trance, two spirit doctors, a man and a woman, who examined her throat area and told her it looked fine; then they proceeded to remove an "energy blockage" in the area. They explained that they were giving her back her voice, which had long been suppressed. Grauds realized that fear of speaking things she knew to be true, throughout her adult life, had constricted the life-force; she understood the cancer to have been a consequence of this psychospiritual block. The cancer surgery had only partially healed her; only when the blocked spirit could re-enter matter was her healing complete.

In 1976, during my training as a healer, I was given a dream that explained how illness and healing are intrinsically paired:

It is about the ancient Greek idea of illness—that it is brought about by the gods, or the Self, or whatever term one prefers; and it can only be taken away by the gods. In this way, illness and cure resemble or mirror each other.

This dream offered a viewpoint radically different from the one I was accustomed to, namely that illness is an aberration to be removed, a nuisance that ought not exist. By adopting the ancient Greek view, I have been able to look upon illness, my own and others, as a mystery that may have a deeper meaning perhaps not comprehensible until healing comes. Grauds was likewise told by the spirit doctors that they represent "the sheer, unbridled healing forces of nature" that all true healers burn to call upon, and that it is they who do the core of whatever healing takes place.

I will close with a recent dream of my own that brought to light a conventional attitude about aging that I had unconsciously absorbed—that it is a downhill course toward lessened vitality, leading to major physical limitations and med-

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ical challenges. I had taken this idea to be gospel, until this dream turned it on its head:

I see my colleague and friend A., who is now seventy and widowed. I am astonished to see that she clearly has more vitality, not less. The dream ends with the sentence, "This is how it should be, life moving toward increasing fullness."

Over the years, these dreams and others have had a cumulative effect on my basic attitude toward health and illness. I now feel both less frightened of illness and more trusting of health as an autochthonic factor I can count on. My fear-based dependence on medical insurance and my use of doctors and conventional medical services have drastically diminished, and my general level of health and vitality have increased. Dreams certainly played a seminal role in this transformation. So did a

six-year apprenticeship with a third-world family living in a wilderness area without medical insurance or services; their natural self-reliance helped wean me from the big-vehicle model of health care.

Though I certainly hope to see health care available to all, I don't think the highly mechanized services that focus only on the material dimension will be adequate. There are medical intuitives who can scan the body as astutely as any machine. I no longer carry inside an image of health care

as a collective vehicle that is at my disposal, but a picture of a prototypical peasant of modest means living in a local community where people tend each other as need arises. Like Prometheus winning fire, we have abrogated some of the god's power and have forgotten the transpersonal aspects of both illness and healing. A true complementary health care approach would invite the material and the spiritual to complement each other.