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Let Us Take Our Hands Off Heads And Hold Them Together

by Archibald Stuart

Mankind has always sought relief from illness, stress, and suffering. In the past, people lacking other solutions have resorted to spirituality seeking to intercede with God to bring about relief and healing. As knowledge of biology, physiology, pathology, psychology, and the social sciences grew tremendous skills were developed to relieve illness, pain and suffering including mental and emotional illness and stress. In this process society has become more secular and involvement in spirituality has declined. Recently religions in an effort to counter this have resorted to various forms of healing ministries. Much of this seems based on the theology that we can manipulate God's action by intercessory prayer, blessings and other rituals, I see little evidence that this works and it raises a very fundamental question of to what extent we can claim or seek power over God. Surely a loving and caring God does not need to rely on our prayers and petitions. To claim power to influence God distorts our relationship to God and leads us to claim divine power that is self serving and leads to exploitation and fakery.

Also to seek divine power to heal specific individuals to the exclusion of others is a very selfish act. One wonders what God is to do for the lonely and lost for whom no one prays. Also it raises the question of to what extent does the success of these intercessions depend on how many do it and how often. This also raises question of to what extent we believe that God's spirit works in supernatural ways, that it is some external power that can be brought into the world when we ask to overrule the processes of both health and illness that God created. Do we expect God to perform miracles, to heal cancer infested bodies, broken spines, and brains damaged by strokes?

There is in the treatment of physical and mental illness what is known as the placebo effect which is that persons sometimes get better when given a placebo that contains no treatment drugs. This is generally understood as a form of psychological treatment that draws on the power of expectation and hopefulness. Much of the same effects can be produced by the use of psychotherapeutic techniques by physicians and others

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that aid healing by relieving stress and releasing hormones that increase immunity and improve physical functioning. Siegel in writing about this advocates the use of techniques such as employing a positive hopeful approach, understanding and accepting the meaning of the experience to the patient, and giving patients some control over their care and treatment. Success

often depends on how much confidence the patient has in the ability of the physician and others using these techniques to be helpful. Siegel claims that the use of psychotherapeutic techniques can be helpful in healing illnesses such as cancer and heart conditions as well as mental problems. Researchers are studying the relationship between mind and body in order to determine how effective the use of psychotherapeutic techniques can be in treating various physical and mental conditions when used exclusively or in conjunction with drugs and other forms of physical treatment.

Rather than trying to invoke God's powers to heal don't we need to see what the God of Creation and the High and Mighty Ruler of the Universe is already doing.

There is some evidence that the same psychological healing can be produced by the use of intercessory prayer and other forms of spiritual healing that also draws on the power of expectation and hopefulness. Success often depends on how much confidence the person has in the healing powers if clergy or others using spiritual healing techniques. This raises questions as to what extent success in spiritual healing can be attributed to psychological factors rather than as an expression of divine intervention. Before healing can be attributed to the use of intercessory prayers and other spiritual processes there needs to be real evidence that this cannot be attributed to psychological and other factors. Clearly concern for the emotional and psychological needs should be

included in the care and treatment of all sick and disabled persons that could include the use of understanding, acceptance of feelings, empathy, positive reinforcement, and the involvement of the patient in treatment decisions. It should be noted that no one in using psychotherapeutic techniques advocates deceiving the patient as to the seriousness of the condition or the likely prognosis.

Further the belief that we can invoke God's power to heal can lead to the belief that illness and suffering are an expression of God's judgment on persons who lack the proper relationship to God. An example has been to treat alcoholics as sinners who can be saved by finding a new relationship to God. Also healing ministries lead to a focus on results and take our focus away from the chronically ill and handicapped who cannot be healed and who above all need our loving care. A good example of this was the recent action of the U.S. Congress to restrict Social Security benefits to alcoholics and drug addicts in the apparent belief that treatment is available and can cure all who seek it and hence all who are not cured should be punished for not seeking treatment. The fact is that no society has succeeded in curing more than a fraction of this population, especially those who are poor and socially deprived. Refusing to care for these persons seems based on a belief in a God of wrath and vengeance rather than a loving and caring God.

My own opinions regarding spiritual healing were shaped early in my life. When I was only twelve my father was stricken with Lou Gehrig's disease. His physical functioning including his ability to use his limbs and to speak completely deteriorated and he dies in less than two years. During that time an aunt who was a

Christian Scientist periodically paid a Christian Scientist practitioner to come to read passages from their book that he left for my father to read. At the time my feelings about this were and from the perspective of sixty years remain totally negative. Clearly God does not act in this way and I saw it as very unloving, if not mean, to build up hope in my father that he would be healed in this way. I think that for the practitioner to pretend that he had healing powers and to accept pay for this was exploitative. What would have been more helpful would have been to prepare my father and us for his coming death. Losing a father just at the time when my brother and I were approaching manhood was very traumatic and affected our later lives. We could have benefited if God's spirit had moved and uncle or another male to be a loving and caring father figure during these years.

Rather than trying to invoke God's powers to heal don't we need to see what the God of Creation and the High and Mighty Ruler of the Universe is already doing. God has given us life, growth, creativity and love but has also given us decay, loss, fear, anger, suffering, and eventual death. Don't we need to have faith in a loving caring God who shares in our suffering and gives us the promise of the Resurrection, of eternal life and God's continual love. Don't we need to believe that God is actively involved in the world in working God's purpose out and ask what God's purpose is in creating our lives and ending them in death and to approach this in the spirit of the line from the Psalms incorporated in the Burial Office; "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord". This involves accepting what God has given us and is doing rather than asking God to act in ways we think

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God should act by begging for God's healing powers. Eugene Patterson expresses this when he writes: "The assumption of Spirituality is that always God is doing something before we know it. So the task is not to get God to do something I think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that I can respond to it and participate, and take delight in it".

Hence, our ministry to the sick and suffering should reaffirm our trust in a loving God who is caring out God's purpose for us. We need to believe that the Gospels teach us that God comes equally to all of us and that no one should claim special powers to invoke God's healing. We should rather believe that God has created us to be God's servants and instruments of God's purpose and that God's loving and healing spirit works through us. We need to believe that just as God gives as life, suffering, and death, God has also given us knowledge and skill to use in healing those in need. Hence, a healing ministry should seek to reaffirm our belief in fulfilling God's healing purposes by doing all that we can to relieve illness, suffering, stress, fear, and anger. In doing this we should take our hands off the heads of the sick and suffering in seeking to invoke God's healing power and rather hold hands with them in a spirit of love, compassion, empathy, and concern. In doing this we need to remember that all that medical care can do is to halt the disease and disabling process so that the body can continue its God given life sustaining functions.

Some make the point that our relationship to God is one of mutuality and hence we should ask God to meet our needs and to expect that God responds in some way. Mutuality

does not involve asking others to do what we want regardless of their powers and purposes. I believe that the mutuality in our relationship to God is that God asks for our love and adoration and that in return we ask God to inspire us with God's love and knowledge of God's purpose for us. Hence, we should use prayer, meditation, and worship for renewal, to remind ourselves of the needs of the sick and suffering throughout the world and to ask that God's spirit work through us in ministering to their needs. The spirit of what is being discussed here seems captured in Eucharistic Prayer C of the Book of Common Prayer that reads: "Open our eyes to see Your hand at work in the world around us, Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only and not for strength, for pardon only and not for renewal".

This same thinking can be expressed in more humanist terms. This would see God as being in this world and not as some external supernatural force that can be brought into the world when we ask for it. This would think of God in less objective ways and more as a force or power that has created the world and the physical and organic laws of nature that govern it. It would also see God expressed in the power that humans have through their knowledge, feelings, and actions including the power to treat illnesses and relieve suffering. How we use that power is determined by our beliefs in a hierarchy of values that give purpose and meaning to our lives. This in turn may be shaped through our interpretation of Christ's life and teaching and the teachings of those we regard as prophets. Thus there is no power to heal and relieve suffering other than the power of natural laws and the power of our own knowledge, skills, and actions. Our

task then is to reaffirm and clarify our values regarding our own responsibilities for the provision of health care both individually and collectively when community actions are needed.

In our healing and caring tasks we need to remind ourselves that Christianity is about the value of community, about love, sharing, and supporting others. Hence, one disturbing aspect of seeking to invoke God's power to heal is the notion that it is just about God's relationship to the sick and suffering individual, rather than God's relationship to us for a community that needs to be a part of God's purpose in caring for the sick and suffering. We need to see the challenge in doing this, in striving to serve the physical, social, and emotional needs

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of all persons. We need to help the sick and suffering to understand what is happening to their physical bodies, feelings, and emotions and to accept what treatment can and cannot do to help them. Often acceptance can relieve anxiety and worry and give the suffering a feeling of peace. We also need to be with them in recognizing the fear, anger, and depression that illness creates. Usually what is needed is a spirit of empathy and understanding and to use our loving, sharing, and support to help them feel less

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angry, fearful, and depressed. Often it is helpful for the sick and suffering to share what is happening to them with others in similar circumstances as part of building a loving supporting community. As Alcoholics Anonymous has shown mutual support groups can be a key element in the healing process.

Finally, we need to help the sick and suffering to renew their faith in a loving God that cares about them and offers them the promise of eternal life and God's continuing love. A couple of years ago I was faced with an operation to remove a cancerous prostate gland that involved exploratory surgery to determine if the cancer had spread. In facing this I did not pray that the cancer had not spread, but rather that I have the strength to accept whatever was found. This requires a strong relationship with God and that I have faith in God's loving purpose for me. This spirit of acceptance and renewal is beautifully expressed in the Serenity

machine be disconnected. They then surrounded the bed holding hands with each other and told their brother that they loved him as he breathed his last. Surely God's loving spirit was working through them as they accepted God's loving purpose for their brother, expressed their love for him, and supported each other. I wonder how viewers would have reacted, if instead they had brought in a priest to pray for and anoint their brother.

Also recently I was at a meeting of an agency whose executive director was being forced to resign because she had been diagnosed as having breast cancer, possibly life threatening, and needed surgery. At the close of the meeting she asked several persons to give a prayer for her. Afterwards I wondered what prayer I would have given if she had asked me. I think that I would have wanted to say: "Dear God we commend this Thy servant to Thy never failing care and love and ask that Thy Holy Spirit working in us

tally ill, and the addicts rather than abandoning them. Especially this should include social action to see that the community through both the public and voluntary sectors provides healing and caring services to all who need it. It was tragic that the organized churches did very little to support legislation for universal health care and raised no protest to legislation that would deny Social Security benefits in the form of basic food, clothing, and shelter to alcoholics and drug addicts. We need to ask whether our efforts to invoke God's power to heal individuals blinds us from seeing what a loving and caring God calls on us to do for all persons as instruments of God's purpose.

Organized religions are experiencing a declining membership in most of the world. The tendency has been to respond to this by doing what is popular. The healing ministries are offered in response to a popular demand from the sick and suffering and their families and friends to invoke God's power to heal. However, as has been stated, this seems theologically superficial, less questionable. This in turn makes religion seem superficial, less certain what its theology is and hence less of a force in the lives of individuals and the community. Rather it would seem that the mission of the churches is to help us recognize real theological concerns in what is happening to us as individuals and as a community and to help us to face what theology we are actually using. We need to help to explore in depth what our theology actually is such as how do we believe that God's spirit works in the world, does it work through us in fulfilling God's purposes or do we actually believe that we can and should invoke God's spirit to do what we want God to do, to shape God's purposes to our own purposes and needs?

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Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference".

I recently saw a very moving example of this on television. It showed an actual family whose brother had AIDS, was unconscious, and kept alive by a breathing machine with no hope of recovery. Understanding this the family asked that the breathing

may make us ever mindful of her needs and ever ready to support and sustain her and her family in the difficult days that lie ahead".

Clearly the mission of the church should be to foster a healing community that is committed to doing all it can to serve the physical, social, and emotional needs of others. This especially includes caring for those who cannot be healed, the aged, the chronic physically and men-