The Tao of medicine

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The Tao is the essence of Chinese philosophy based on the ancient holy book, Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tzu. It is a spiritual way or meaning. The Tao has to do with soul, acceptance, humility, healing, nonviolence, compassion, and balancing the qualities of yin (feminine, dark, and receptive) and yang (masculine, light, and active).

I would like to share some thoughts on the Tao of medicine and the need for a renewal of medicine's soul. For many years I have cherished the works of one of my mentors, Dr. Hugh Stephenson (professor of surgery emeritus at the University of Missouri School of Medicine): “First, I'm a human being; second, a physician, and third, a surgeon.” As a medical student, I observed how Dr. Stephenson's patients loved him and how he got to know them personally. It was therefore no surprise when he gave this answer to my query about why he had such low morbidity and mortality rates: “You are very careful when you cut on a friend.”

Another of my mentors, Dr. George Engel (professor of medicine and psychiatry emeritus at the University of Rochester School of Medicine), also exhibited a human dimension of medical care. He demonstrated the importance of accepting the sick individual and listening to his or her story in such a way that he established a healing doctor-patient relationship. In addition, his biopsychosocial approach to medicine represents competent and compassionate care.

I have extended Engel's model to include the soul, which Plato thought was related to the heart and essential for health. What concerned Plato in ancient Greece is still true: “... the great error of our day in [medical] treatment [is] that physicians separate the soul from the body.”

Medicine is currently a business going by the name of “managed care,” and (although it's hard to believe) physicians are actually assisting patients in committing suicide, an act viewed as bad karma by all world religions. Clearly, medicine's soul is under attack. What are we to do? Our own healing and that of our profession must involve integrity. Integrity implies spiritual wholeness. What is the Tao (or the way) that can lead medicine back to integrity? I suggest that we follow the way of Sir William Osler, whose words are as timely today as when he spoke some nearly one hundred years ago: “The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.”

The Tao of medicine is the mystery and art of medicine, which encompasses its heart and soul. The Tao of medicine involves finding meaning in life, in wellness, in illness, and in death. The Tao of medicine is all about healing, which means to make whole; it includes a spiritual dimension—the words healing and holy both derive from the same Old English root, hal. How can we actualize the Tao of medicine and develop a balanced middle way? Again, Osler points us in the right direction: balance the knowledge of disease and its cure, and a knowledge of yourself. The one, special education, will make you a practitioner of medicine; the other, an inner education, may make you a truly good [human being].

Furthermore, Osler, that ageless Taoist sage of medicine, suggested that we develop a philosophy “... in which the joy of living and the joy of working are blended in one harmony.” Isn't it time to renew our ancient and modern roots and reconnect with soul for ourselves and for our profession? Only then can we fully realize the Tao of medicine.

The key is to take the middle path—as did Lao Tzu, Osler, Stephenson, and Engel—and proceed through the dark valleys of managed care and the mountainous peaks of impersonal technology. During this time of crisis in medicine, it is illuminating to find that the word crisis in Chinese is represented by two characters: one for danger and one for opportunity. We need to be careful, but know that there is hope for ourselves and our profession. The possibility exists of emerging whole from this difficult time of massive change. We can progress into the future as better individuals and wiser physicians. The solution is to balance yin and yang, art and science, service and economics, and end up with a truly humane system of medical care that is fair and available to all—one that promotes healing and is integrity-full.

References

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