

I am drawn to the historical history of physical, spiritual, and mental healing practices, and how its practitioners altered methods throughout history as collective knowledge improves. In my research, I became familiar with a type of spiritual healing called “pranic healing.” Pranic healing is meant to channel and control the energy stemming from a person’s visible physical body and an energy body, or chakras, which are centers of energy. I found many different representations of the chakras, all of which were colorful and circular. After studying the chakras, I decided that I wanted to create a tangible depiction of the throat chakra. I chose the throat chakra because it is supposed to be the voice of the body. If the throat chakra is out of balance, it can affect the health of the other chakras. When it is in balance, we can express ideas, beliefs, and emotions.

It is important to always have the ability to express yourself and use your own voice. It is the mark of a healthy human being. Healing is the process of making whole or sound again, so I decided to make a quilt out of repurposed fabrics from a thrift store. I wanted it give the materials a new meaning and purpose. My quilt offers a sense of comfort as well as a sign of spiritual healing.

Julia

Healing practices for humans claim a rich and varied history, and I want to understand this perpetually-adapting world. But why is healing important? There is sickness within every family, and mine is no different. My grandfather was diagnosed with dementia seven years ago. Dementia is not a specific disease, but a general term for a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life. My grandfather is a marine biologist with a PhD from Harvard. He is intelligent and experienced, but now he has trouble buckling his own seatbelt. His sickness has made him frail and disconnected. His motor skills and ability to speak are fading fast, but his long-term memory is still quite intact. My cousins and I call my grandfather Pop, and the last time I got to visit my grandparents, I asked if he remembered the nickname I always used to tease him with. “Hey Poppypeed,” I said casually. My grandfather playfully glared at me as he had done a million times before, and to my amazement we had a short, almost normal conversation before he started struggling with his words again. My grandparents live in Connecticut, and I visit them less than once a year, so he is significantly less himself every time I see him. I know, rationally, that he is the same man I’ve known all my life, but this painful disease has put a wall between him and everyone he loves. It is heartbreaking when your own grandfather can’t even say your name. My grandfather is not going to get better; his dementia, which doctors say is Alzheimer’s disease, is only going to get worse. But that makes me all the more determined to understand healing, and what it means to humans. There are three kinds of healing that I want to focus on: physical, spiritual and mental.

What is healing? How have healing methods altered throughout history? What is faith healing and why is it still practiced? How do animals aid human healing? Healing is ever-present in our lives, and I want to explore the many ways it is expressed. I am interested in how we arrived at what we consider “modern healing.” Healing should be a collaborative process shared between doctor and patient. Because of how we are raised, and what we are told, we all have our own version of what healing means. However, that shouldn’t stop healing from being a study, prompted by trust and backed by communication and research. Why should anyone trust a mystical being more than hard, proven facts? Unfortunately, the only thing that doctors and scientists can do is present the facts. People have the freedom to interpret the truth about healing however they want.

Physical Healing

I consider medical treatment to be one of the most effective ways to promote physical healing. Medical intervention in critical situations saves countless lives every day. Historically, physical healing was mostly based on irrational beliefs. Bloodletting,¹ trepanation,² ingesting mercury, and “cannibal cures”³ are all of examples of healing methods that were popular in the past, but were based on no research whatsoever. While bloodletting was encouraged by the prominent Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen, it was based on their belief that the human body was filled with four basic substances - yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood- which needed to be kept in balance to maintain proper health. It is theorized that in the time of trepanation, people believed that the sick and mentally ill were possessed by evil spirits, and the surgery was a necessary procedure to heal the patient. Others believe that trepanation was an attempt to relieve headaches, epilepsy, abscesses and blood clots. Mercury was called “quicksilver” by second century Chinese alchemists, who believed the substance increased

¹ the withdrawal of blood from a patient

² a hole drilled or scraped into the skull

³ elixirs made of human flesh, blood, or bone

vitality and the lifespan. “Corpse medicine” (History.com), a mix of human flesh, blood, or bone taken from the deceased, was a very common practice for hundreds of years. The Romans believed that the blood of a fallen gladiator could cure epilepsy, and in 17th century England, King Charles II drank “king’s drops” which were made from crumbled human skull and alcohol. These methods were not based on research, science or fact, and were not successful.

Today, physical healing is based on science and the anatomy of the human body. To understand today’s medical world from an insider’s point of view, I interviewed Miriam Keegan, a nurse in charge of the Opiate⁴ Treatment Outpatient Program (OTOP) at San Francisco General Hospital. Her clinic distributes methadone to heroin addicts. Because almost all of the addicts are poor and homeless, the clinic also offers counseling, showers, tests for HIV, TB, hepatitis, STDs, and referrals for housing and medical care. According to Keegan, methadone heals patients because, although it is more addictive than other opiates, it is long-acting and it blocks the opiate receptors in the brain, which stops cravings and prevents withdrawal. Because methadone lasts longer than heroin, it gives addicts a chance to get a job, go to school, and live relatively normal lives. Methadone is legally prescribed, which prevents addicts from having to chase the drug and commit crimes while doing so. Keegan says that not all of their patients come in daily for methadone. The best clients earn “take homes,” which means they come in every thirty days or so to collect their methadone for the month. They earn take homes by giving random urine samples that are drug free, and either going to school or working. The OTOP is helping addicts fix their lives and heal themselves, and by letting them earn take homes, the clinic is also returning their independence.

This terrific program promotes honesty and healing, which is more than most people would do for drug addicts. Medical healing and hospital environments are an extremely important type of healing. Doctors and nurses heal their patients physically, but as seen in Keegan’s example, they also often provide services that extend to the overall improvement of the patients’ lives. Healing is much more than curing someone of an illness. Healing involves trust, collaboration, and honesty. Positive, effective healing starts with simple concepts. Clinics like Keegan’s are promoting healthy living and the kind of healing that all hospitals should strive for.

Spiritual Healing

The belief that prayer or the ministrations of a single healer can cure illness has been popular throughout history. “Miraculous” healing has been commonly attributed to a wide variety of techniques, grouped together as “faith healing” (Quackwatch.com). Evangelical healers would call someone on stage from a large audience and apparently heal them with nothing but a small prayer ceremony. People who believe in faith healers put all of their trust into the theory that prayer can cure them of illness, and often refuse to seek medical treatment. This often leads to their death, for which healers are almost never held accountable. Why is this method still allowed to continue when it has been proven not to work?

A more spiritually-focused type of healing today is “pranic healing.” Pranic healing is based on the belief that every person has two bodies: the visible physical body, and the energy body. “Chakras,” non-physical sources of energy, are an important part of the energy body. Chakras control and energize the vital organs of the visible physical body. Some chakras are even supposed to be sites of psychic abilities. The activation of certain chakras “may result in the development of certain psychic faculties” (Pranichealing.com). Many people believe in spiritual

⁴ Opiates are narcotic sedatives that reduce activity of the central nervous system, decrease pain, and induce sleep

healing, but there are many unexplained and unproven claims that accompany all variations of it. Although spiritual healing is still prevalent today, western scientists and doctors are starting to prove that it doesn't work. This is often done by following up with patients who have claimed to be cured by faith healers. Scientists who conduct these experiments almost always come back with the same result: no actual healing was done.

Evangelical healers claim to be able to cure believers of any range of diseases. However, once the supposed treatment is over, the healers do not follow up with their patients to confirm that they are really cured. No science is involved, and when the healers are unable to cure their patients, the blame usually falls on the patient for not having enough faith. The belief that faith can heal them of a terminal disease often inhibits a patient's motivation to seek actual medical attention as well, which, when the faith treatment inevitably doesn't work, results in the patient's death. All the while, the patient is either laboring under the impression that they are being healed spiritually if not physically, or that their own lack of faith is the reason that their condition isn't improving. This raises the question, why is faith healing still allowed in lieu of medical care?

Faith healing has been proven numerous times to be "nonsense," so why are these so-called healers allowed to continue their cruel trade? When a faith healer discourages a patient from seeking necessary medical attention, and the patient dies, shouldn't that healer be held responsible for the person's death? There are countless accounts of parents being convicted of manslaughter after their child dies because they refused to get them medical care and instead relied on faith healing, but what about the healers themselves? They should be held responsible, especially in cases where the patient wasn't given an alternative to faith healing or made to believe that seeking medical care was wrong. According to an article written by Stephen Barrett, M.D., Minnesota surgeon William Nolen attended a service orchestrated by Kathryn Kuhlman, the chief evangelical healer in the early 1970s. After recording the names of twenty-five people who had been marvelously healed, he was able to conduct follow-up interviews. Overall, not one person with disease had been helped by the healer (Quackwatch). This is just one of many examples of people who, after investigating the reports of faith healers, have found that their methods don't work.

What more proof do people need? Clearly, are there two main motivators for the people who seek help from evangelical healers: a very strong belief in their religion, and faulty word-of-mouth. Hearsay is this biggest driver of people's confidence in faith healing. Nolen proved that faith healing includes no degree of scientific inquiry or research, which is what healing should always be based on. Despite all of the proven reasons faith healing doesn't work, which seem very obvious to some of us, it is still fairly prevalent today. So why is faith healing still allowed, even with all of the moral and scientific objections to it? Believers of faith healing argue that it only works if you have no doubt about god's abilities. According to a website I found on religion, "Our physical and emotional suffering is magnified when we fail to see any possible good resulting from our sickness. When we concentrate on what God can do through our illness, it keeps us focused on God, instead of our difficult circumstances" (Allaboutgod.com). Apparently, faith healing requires a full belief and commitment. Focusing on their god gives a person some mental relief when their physical health is in peril. This type of healing seems much less far-fetched. If a person puts all of their mental energy into their belief in a god, and they know that others are praying for their recovery, it is very possible that they are healed mentally. I have no doubt that faith gives many people comfort and peace of mind when they are in a difficult position.

Where someone chooses to put their faith is their own business, and for some that involves putting their trust in prayer instead of medical care. Faith healing is just that: putting your faith in something you can't see and trusting that you will get better. Healing can hold very different meanings to people, but it touches everyone.

Mental Healing

Mental healing is very important to sustain. How can one be expected to heal in any other way if they are mentally ill? Historically, mental illness was treated in a variety of disturbing ways. In the 1840s, people suspected of being mentally ill were placed in psychiatric facilities that closely resembled jails. Once they were sent to the facility, patients were treated badly and not given the choice to leave.

In the 1930s, practitioners began trying experimental therapies to deal with mental illness. Methods included lobotomy,⁵ insulin-induced comas,⁶ and more. These methods were painful and cruel and although they worked for some patients with severe illnesses, they were not overall successful (Dualdiagnosis.org). Today, we understand so much more about the human brain than we used to. There are many ways to sustain mental health, and one example is animal-assisted therapy. Animals can help humans in many ways. Research shows that taking care of animals helps people of all ages develop skills like responsibility, self-reliance, and empathy. These skills are built through the process of the person learning to take care of a living thing that cannot take care of itself. When someone takes responsibility for something else, they stop putting themselves first and learn to work in collaboration with others. Pets also encourage companionship, love, and healthy relationships. Animal-assisted therapy is something that has become quite common today. In the late 1970s, scientists began researching why it is that animals seem to be so capable of healing humans. According to Rebecca Johnson, a nurse at the Research Center for Human/Animal Interaction, spending time with animals can increase people's amount of the hormone oxytocin, which helps us to feel more happy and trusting (NPR). This research proves that animals don't just affect animal-lovers, but that there is an actual chemical reaction in our bodies that makes us more inclined to spend time with them.

I have been around animals all my life, and can confirm that they have helped me enormously. When I am around animals, I feel calmer, more focused, and more open to ideas. I am a very strong believer in all the things animals can do for us. I know from personal experience how much better a person's life can be when they spend time with animals. How, specifically, can animal-assisted therapy help us? Cathy Coleman, a speech therapist for the Northern Virginia Therapeutic Riding Program, uses a horse in her therapy sessions with nine-year-old autistic Ryan Shank-Rowe. Coleman says that since Ryan started horseback riding, his speech has improved noticeably. When Ryan is horse-riding, he is more alert, engaged, and he processes and talks more (NPR).

Animal-assisted therapy has been proven to work. How else do animals benefit people? One of the first things that comes to my mind when asked how animals help humans is service animals. A service animal means any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks

⁵ a surgical incision to the prefrontal lobe, the part of your brain responsible for "executive functions." These include the ability to differentiate between conflicting thoughts, determine good and bad, future consequences of current actions, and social abilities

⁶ insulin injections led to a few hours of low blood sugar levels. Insulin is a hormone that pulls sugars from the blood and stores it in the liver. When blood sugar levels fall significantly, the brain cannot remain conscious and the patients go comatose

for the benefit of an individual with a disability (ADA). Seeing-eye dogs, hearing or signal dogs, medical response dogs, and social signal dogs. Besides the basics of helping them with tasks that would be otherwise difficult, service animals also provide disabled people with a sense of independence and companionship. Because people with service animals don't need to depend on others, they can heal in the sense that they can feel normal. Animals can sometimes heal people where other humans can't, and because of that, they offer a tremendous resource. It is crucial to pursue all avenues of healing because no one way is going to help every person. Everyone is different, what doesn't work for one person might just save the life of another. Isn't it significant that animals can save lives? There is always more to be learned and discovered. Animals offer us that option, and those who grab it are building our future.

Healing, whether it be physical, spiritual or mental, is the process of making a person sound and whole again. Healing offers a sense of comfort and completion, it is piecing one back together for the better. There have always been misconceptions about healing. Physical healing was once based on the belief that illness was a punishment from a displeased god. The healing process therefore involved various attempts to appease said god, rather than actually trying to cure the patient's sickness. Mental healing was once based on the belief that the mentally ill were possessed by evil. The concept of healing is always changing. It evolves as we do, changing with every new bit of knowledge we acquire. My grandfather for example, is not going to heal. He is going to die of Alzheimer's, but one day humans will have discovered a cure for it. Scientists are working now to find a cure. What we don't understand now, we will be explaining in the future. Humans will keep changing, and healing will too.

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