



Mary Ann Chance,  
DC, FICC

Submit inquiries and galley  
proofs to:

Mary Ann Chance, DC, FICC  
Editor, Chiropractic Journal of  
Australia  
P.O. Box 748  
Wagga Wagga, NSW 2650  
Australia  
Tel: (61) (2) 6922 4466  
Fax: (61) (2) 6926 2556  
E-mail: [chance@wagga.net.au](mailto:chance@wagga.net.au)

# Healing The Body, Healing The Spirit, Healing The World:

## The Wellness Paradigm As A Metaphor For Securing Our Future

As in the Chinese curse, we live in interesting times. We have access to more wealth than any generation in history, yet the majority of human beings on this planet still live in grinding poverty. We can communicate instantly through cyberspace between continents, yet most of us never bother to speak to our next-door neighbor. No sooner had modern medical intervention made smallpox extinct worldwide than HIV/AIDS took over as a rampant killer that knows no boundaries. We can transplant a heart to save one person's life, but seem to lack the will to unite the hearts of all people to save the human race. We do indeed live in interesting times.

The theme of this paper is healing; however, we will only be discussing health, healing and wellness in very broad terms, and only as a metaphor for solving some of the social dilemmas facing humankind.

When most people think of

healing, it is in terms of combat—fighting cancer, killing germs, eliminating pain, conquering disabilities, stamping out childhood diseases, and so forth. It is true that modern medical techniques have been very successful in the wars they have waged in many of these areas, and scientific research, by solving age-old riddles, has helped to save countless lives that would otherwise have been lost prematurely.

But there is also a down-side, one might even say a dark side, to the seeming miracles of modern medicine. For one thing, the dollar cost of many procedures is so high that even in affluent countries, not all people who have problems that these technologies might help can afford them. And in the poorer countries, where thousands of people die every day even from diseases that are curable or preventable with a few cents' worth of intervention, they are out of reach for nearly everyone.

High-tech medicine also yields unintended side effects ranging from the uncomfortable to the fatal. These complications, which often have a high cost in terms of quality of life, also add significantly to the dollar cost of health care, because they require further intervention, and account directly or indirectly for a high proportion of hospital admissions—up to 75% according to some studies.

Perhaps the worst part, however, is that overmedicalization of western society has had a disempowering effect on people, encouraging them to abdicate their personal responsibility and freedom of choice in favor of “experts” and “magic bullets” in the mistaken belief that they hold all the answers and that mother wit and common sense are outmoded.

It has also led us to have false expectations of instant relief and rapid, complete resolution of health problems. We tend to forget that analgesics and some other drugs only mask symptoms and that true healing takes place in the same manner and at the same speed that it did a thousand years ago.

Alternative healthcare disciplines, including newer ones such as homeopathy, naturopathy

and chiropractic and ancient ones such as Ayurvedic medicine and Chinese traditional medicine, approach health care in a very different manner. Rather than fighting the disease or overwhelming the symptoms, their goal is to normalize the physiology of the person so that it will be able to deal adequately with challenges to its integrity. This kind of approach tends to be more empowering, because in most cases more active participation is expected of the patient during treatment and in the recovery process.

The natural health movement at the turn of the century created an awareness of sound nutritional principles and the importance of exercise and fresh air to the maintenance of good health, but it is only in recent years that the value of eating certain foods and other self-help strategies in preventing serious diseases has been acknowledged by orthodox medicine.

It is interesting to note that more than a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, advised: *Do not neglect medical treatment when it is necessary, but leave it off when health has been restored...Treat disease through diet, by preference, refraining from the use of*

*drugs; and if you find what is required in a single herb, do not resort to a compounded medication. Abstain from drugs when the health is good, but administer them when necessary.*

Obviously there are circumstances in which drugs, surgery and other heroic measures will be necessary, for example when the body's defenses have been destroyed or the challenge is overwhelming. And we should be grateful that these miracles of modern science are available to us. But it is dangerous to rely upon them to the exclusion of following the rules of moderation and health maintenance, most of which are a matter of personal responsibility not requiring intervention by a health care professional.

Health care workers are also becoming increasingly aware that when intervention is necessary, a wholistic approach utilizing complementary strategies and procedures from various alternative systems as well as orthodox methods tends to produce more favorable results with fewer complications than more radical therapies by themselves.

'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed out that: *The science of medicine is still in a condition of infancy; it has*

*not reached maturity, but when it has reached this point, cures will be performed by things which are not repulsive to the smell and taste of man; that is to say by aliments, fruits, and vegetables which are agreeable to the taste and have an agreeable smell.... So long as the aim is the readjustment of the constituents of the body, it can be effected either by medicine or by food.*

He affirmed that: *There are two causes for sickness, one is material, the other spiritual. If the sickness is of the body, a material remedy is needed, if of the soul, a spiritual remedy.* And also that negative emotions undermine health, when he stated that: *... the most necessary thing is contentment under all circumstances; by this one is preserved from morbid conditions and from lassitude. Yield not to grief and sorrow; they cause the greatest misery. Jealousy consumeth the body and anger doth burn the liver; avoid these two as you would a lion.*

Though there are numerous resources available to help us to heal when we are sick or injured, maintaining wellness should always be our goal, and wellness is fundamentally a personal responsibility. There

is no magical system or technological whizzbangery that will allow us to thrive—or even survive for very long—if our diet consists mainly of junk food, and we smoke cigarettes, become intoxicated regularly, avoid exercise, stay up half the night watching television or surfing the net, give in to negative emotions and ignore early warnings of illness. We have a responsibility to be well.

The same general principles can be applied to the health of our community life. We spend untold millions fighting crime, drugs, road accidents, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual harassment, racial vilification, illiteracy and dozens of other social problems that have multiplied at an alarming rate during our lifetime. But even so our communities become more violent and more dangerous with each passing year.

Certainly we need law enforcement, professional input and institutional support, but it is becoming abundantly clear that these problems will not be solved just by building more jails, increasing the size and powers of the police force and hiring more social workers any more than building more hospitals, training more doctors and

subsidizing medical care will succeed in solving our health crisis, because we are addressing only a part of the problem. We need a wholistic approach here, too. If we look beyond the ultimate effects and focus on the needs and motivations of the people concerned and the dynamics of relationships, it is not difficult to see that there are fundamental issues of moral education, conflict resolution and motivation at the root of these problems that need immediate attention, not just by the institutions of society, but also at neighborhood, family and personal levels if we are to make real and sustainable progress.

For example, just as it is our responsibility to protect our personal health, we have a responsibility to perfect our inner life and character and ensure that our attitudes and behavior are conducive to harmonious relationships and order in the community.

It is also our responsibility to systematically teach virtues and values to our children by precept and example so that they in turn can become responsible adults. We each need to ask: What standards do I set for myself? What kind of role model am I for my chil-

dren? What standards and boundaries do I set for them? How are they enforced? How consistent am I in what I say and do? Are the virtues and values inculcated at home being reinforced or undermined at school and out in the community, and if they are being undermined, what am I doing about it? Do I pray for my children? Do I pray with them?

Furthermore, individual initiatives have a vital part to play in reversing the alienation that has come to characterise modern society. Do I belong to a service club? Do I do voluntary community work of some kind on a regular basis? If I see a need or problem in the community, do I seek to work with others to address it? Do I write letters to the newspaper or phone a radio chat show expressing my horror or dissatisfaction? Do I gossip to my friends about how awful it is that nothing is being done about it? Or do I do or say nothing, but seethe inwardly about how unpleasant and uncaring my community has become? Have I spoken to my next-door neighbor during the past 7 days? Did I say more than hello? Last time I heard that a neighbor or friend or co-worker was sick or in trouble, did I offer help or support of

some kind? When I walk down the street how many people do I speak to or at least make eye contact with? If the tree roots from next door are tearing up my driveway, is my first impulse to talk to my neighbor about how to solve the problem, or to lodge a formal complaint with the city council, or perhaps to creep into their yard at night and poison or ringbark the tree?

Most of us could probably come up with a pretty impressive list of things we could easily do to make our neighborhoods or even the wider community a better place to live simply by conscientiously applying the Golden Rule, which is a thread running through the teachings of all the world's religions.

And perhaps a very large part of the problem with ourselves and our relationships with other people, is that we have turned away from religion. I'm not talking about not belonging to a church or not going there much if you do. Religion in the sense that I mean it here is not about buildings or congregations or movements. In fact, spirituality may be a somewhat better term, though it, too, tends to conjure up images for some people that don't apply here, either.

Religion, or spirituality if you will, in the sense I mean it is what you personally believe in the depths of your soul about a higher power and the purpose of human life. If that page is totally blank for you, if you do not spend at least part of each day reflecting on what is written there, or if what is written there is significantly different from how you live, you can safely conclude that you have turned away from religion, even if you scrupulously observe all the outward forms of whatever religious system you nominate on your census form. Never mind the rationalisation about time, money and other so-called practicalities. If we neglect our inner life, or if it is incoherent with our outer life, we are making ourselves spiritually sick, and we are poisoning our relationships and the life of our communities. So this is not a once-a-year job, or a Sunday job, or a sometimes job; it is a daily responsibility. Like eating and sleeping and showering. And one which needs to pulse through our lives constantly. Like breathing. That is perhaps why Bahá'ís are enjoined to pray every day. In fact Bahá'u'lláh has prescribed certain obligatory prayers, the simplest of which is said between noon and sunset: *I bear witness, O my God*

*that Thou has created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify at this moment to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.*

Focusing even once a day on spiritual values—if we really focus and don't just mouth the words—can help us to reorient our lives and exercise a profound influence on our outer attitudes and how we respond to the day's events.

Marriage counsellors often advise couples never to sleep on an argument. It is just as important for individuals not to sleep on poor choices or on words or actions they wish they could take back because they were hurtful or at least incoherent with their deepest-held beliefs. In the Arabic *Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh counsels:

O SON OF BEING!  
*Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.*

When it comes to the wider world, we are faced with problems of infinitely greater com-

plexity, magnitude and difficulty, for not only is there the same kind of breakdown in moral values that threatens to destabilize individual communities, but also the deeply entrenched political, economic, religious, ethnic and racial conflicts that divide nations and peoples and regularly erupt as human rights abuses, wars, terrorism, and genocide. Of course, wars and injustice have existed throughout human history, but over the past century, the world and its peoples have become so interdependent that conflicts and economic crises in one part of the world threaten the security of the whole planet. Because of this, problems and situations are emerging that people have never faced before, and the strategies that worked quite well for past generations are powerless to deal with our present difficulties. Furthermore, the technology of warfare has become so deadly that now it is quite possible for just handful of individuals to wipe out the entire human race in a relatively short time. So establishing world peace, which used to be regarded as a mere utopian dream, has suddenly become a matter of survival requiring our urgent attention.

Twice this century, the nations

of the world have attempted to forge a world political system that can secure for humanity the possibility of peace, justice and prosperity.

Ninety years ago, the horrors of the war to end all wars—World War I—led political leaders of the time to establish the League of Nations. Though the League was unable to avert a second world war, it represented a breakthrough in the concept of collective security, and a first decisive step toward world order.

The United Nations, born of the cataclysm of World War II, has survived for more than 50 years, and during that time has provided an international forum of last resort and stood as a noble symbol for the collective interests of humanity as a whole. The UN has demonstrated humanity's capacity for united action in health, agriculture, education, environmental protection and the welfare of children. It has affirmed our collective moral will to build a better future and revealed the human race's deep-seated compassion in providing assistance to people in distress. And in the realms of peace-building, peace-making and peace-keeping, it has blazed a bold path toward a future without war.

Yet the overall goals set out in the Charter of the United Nations have proved elusive, and its establishment has so far not ushered in the era of peace and prosperity for all as its founders had hoped it might.

More than 100 years ago, Bahá'u'lláh anticipated the global society that is becoming a reality today and proclaimed principles and laws to guide mankind through the chaos we are now experiencing, and to usher in what He referred to as the Most Great Peace. Many of those principles seem fairly obvious to us now, but they were quite revolutionary at the time.

The pivot around which the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve is unity. For example, He taught that the foundation of all religions is one and enjoined his followers *“to consort with the people of religions with joy and fragrance...for association is always conducive to union and harmony, and union and harmony are the cause of the order of the world and the life of nations.”*

Another central principle is the oneness and wholeness of the human race, and Bahá'u'lláh's writings provide guidance on how this spiritual reality can be

translated into a peaceful, orderly world civilisation.

Sixty-three years ago, His great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who served as the Guardian of the Faith from 1921 until his passing in 1957, summarized the needs of the present age and articulated the vision embodied in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh in these words:

*“Unification of the whole of mankind is the hallmark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life...”*

*“The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds, and classes are closely and perma-*

*nently united and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs, and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus toward which the uni-*

fying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will co-operate and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be co-ordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

“National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding, and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral and spiritual life of the entire human race.

“A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.”

In that statement, written in March 1936—before the United Nations was established, and even before World War II had erupted—we have a coherent vision of what a sustainably peaceful world, capable of fostering and supporting an advanced and advancing civilization might look like. It identifies some of the habits and attitudes which keep us stuck in an unproductive, self-interested, adversarial position—habits and attitudes that all of us will have to change. And it describes processes and institutions necessary to its development and security.

The Bahá'í International Community has long had consultative status with the United Nation, and in 1955, during the first decade review of the UN Charter, offered a submission which included this statement to the United Nations, based on ideas articulated nearly a century before by Bahá'u'lláh:

*The Bahá'í concept of world order is defined in these terms: A world Super-State in whose favor all the nations of the world will have ceded every claim to make war, certain rights to impose taxation and all rights to maintain armaments, except for the purposes of maintaining internal order within their respective dominions. This State will have to include an International Executive adequate to enforce supreme and unchallengeable authority on every recalcitrant member of the Commonwealth; a World Parliament whose members are elected by the peoples in their respective countries and whose election is confirmed by their respective governments; a Supreme Tribunal whose judgment has a binding effect even in cases where the parties concerned have not voluntarily agreed to submit their case to its consideration.*

The submission also argued for the limitation and gradual elimination of the power of veto which was originally conferred on the 5 Permanent Members for the purpose of preventing the Security Council from authorizing military actions against a Permanent Member or requiring the use of its forces against its will—a power that has been misused repeatedly ever since.

Forty years later, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community issued another statement, entitled *The Turning Point for All Nations*, which reiterates some of the points made in its earlier submission and recommends other ways to redefine the role of the UN within the emerging international order through such strategies as appointing a Commission to study borders and frontiers, committing to a universal auxiliary language, and extending the jurisdiction of the World Court, and ways to release the power of the individual, for example by promoting economic development, protecting fundamental human rights, advancing the status of women, and emphasising moral development.

While peace-making and prob-

lem-solving at this high level may be far beyond the scope of people like us, its ultimate success depends not just on world leaders, but on a wholistic effort involving every one of us in much the same way as the health of community life does. Laws need to be made and institutions established to ensure order and to protect the rights of people, but it is impossible to legislate goodness. That is a matter of free will, and is therefore our personal responsibility. And our attitudes, our motives, our behavior and what we teach our children have incalculable power to help or harm the development of a peaceful world society. By doing our utmost to blot out from our hearts and minds every trace of prejudice and ill will...by obeying the laws of a just government...by treating our fellow humans with kindness and respect...by being just, honest and trustworthy in all our dealings...by resolving our interpersonal conflicts through consultation rather than confrontation...by seeking truth independently and dispassionately... by serving the interests of others before our own...we have the capacity to heal the world at cellular level, as it were.

No one alive today can deny

that our world is in crisis. And to borrow again from the Chinese as I did at the beginning, I understand that the character for “crisis” is a combination of two other concepts: danger and opportunity. We may be able to do nothing directly to solve the crises in Kosovo, Malaysia, or East Timor, but we still have the power—and the responsibility—to choose how we respond to our own challenges and how we conduct our daily lives. We have the power and the responsibility to teach our children to be tolerant, loving, just and trustworthy. And we have the power and the responsibility to choose whether we will give in to the danger of our times and cringe in fear of what tomorrow might bring—or instead seize every opportunity that comes our way to heal our own spirit and every heart within our sphere of influence. What will our choices be?

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