

The Medieval Background of the Healing Arts

by George Franklin

A key aspect of the Wicca tradition is the link between spiritual work and the healing arts. Many who practice the craft are healers, often working outside of mainstream medical orthodoxy.

These alternative practices are often built on older traditions. One source of such knowledge is the medicine of the European High Middle Ages (approximately 1100-1500 A.D.). Often dismissed as a wasteland separating the ancient Greeks and Romans from the modern Renaissance, the Middle Ages were in fact an incredibly rich era. Much of our spiritual and cultural heritage has its roots in these times.

But modern science holds this tradition in contempt. Nowhere is the scorn harsher than around medicine, a field carefully (and profitably) controlled by an institutionally-educated elite. Most western doctors steadily debunk

alternative treatments that threaten the official monopoly on healthcare.

Since the 1960s, however, certain

alternatives have won grudging acceptance. Radical counseling techniques, massage, and acupuncture have all gained at least limited recognition as valid practices.

Far more difficult has been the work of reclaiming our Medieval heritage in the healing arts. So ingrained is the official view of health care that even today herbal remedies are dismissed as "magical potions" and are in danger of being banned by the federal government. And any mention of "alchemy" is likely to be greeted with derisive laughter.

Yet we can learn from our Medieval ancestors. Their conception of health as an internal balance, outlined below, has much in common with modern ecological thinking, and might ultimately change the way we view and treat the human body in as profound a way as ecology has changed our perception of and relation to the external environment.

Healing in the High Middle Ages

In the High Middle Ages, the most common academic view of the human body and its health held that disease was not an "attack" from outside, but an internal imbalance of the "vital humors." This view followed older Greek, Roman, and Moslem traditions. Since the "humors" were thought of as organic components of the body, medicines of the time were primarily organic, and aimed at restoring balance.

Modern histories often make light of such "medicines," citing such things as spiders, wood lice, or cocks' combs among the

Medieval pharmacopoeia. But in the hands of experienced practitioners, organic treatment was a tried and often true method. Skilled use of herbs, tree barks, lichens, roots, and other living substances provided the surest medical treatment of the age. Healing properties of foxglove, willow bark, mint, aloe, lavender, and dill, all confirmed by modern research, were well-known in the Middle Ages.

The administering of organic cures was often accompanied by ritual practices. This interweaving of the

material cure with spiritual and psychological treatment has contributed to our notion of the "incantations" and "spells" associated with witchcraft. Holistic health care was at the core of Medieval practice.

Medieval medicine was community-based. Healers were integral members of their town or village, not an isolated caste practicing medicine for profit. When payment was involved, it was often in the form of barter.

Healing work was often in the hands of women. From peasant villages to princely castles, women were primary caregivers, and were honored as such. Knowledge of practical organic medicine was as important a role for women as midwifery.

Lack of written records prevent our knowing how closely such hands-on healers subscribed to the academic views of health described above. However, it seems clear from the range of their medicines that the human body was seen as intimately connected to the rest of nature.

Change in the Later Middle Ages

Change came from two directions. The first was institutional. As urban society developed in the later Middle Ages, academic, civic and religious authorities (who overlapped to a great extent) began to regulate many traditional crafts. Allied as these institutions were with the male-dominated church hierarchy, it is hardly surprising that women were gradually excluded from training programs and from guild membership. (In the early modern era, such exclusion took on a far more violent tone, culminating in the execution of many traditional healers in the witchcraft persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries.)



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A second source of change was a fundamental shift in the view of the human body. Many aspects of early modern thought (c. 1500-1800 A.D.) contributed to chemical and mechanical explanations superceding older organic views of the body. Early "machines" such as clocks and windmills exercised a fascination over many academic thinkers, helping mechanical paradigms replace the ecological model of nature and the body.

As these more intellectual views gained favor, the expectation grew that "physicians" would be academically trained and certified, further reinforcing the tendency for male-dominated hierarchies to assert control over the healing arts.

At the same time, older views persisted among "uneducated" peasants and journeymen-laborers — elements of European society who were being expropriated from land and craft in these very centuries. Organic views of nature often became associated with rebellious movements of the "lower" classes, giving the owning classes and their intellectual elite yet another reason to emphasize that matter was fundamentally dead — and therefore exploitable.

Modern centuries also saw a shift from "homeopathic" or "naturopathic" orientations to an "allopathic" approach. In the former viewpoint, whole-system oriented treatments are based on working with the body's own processes. Treatments are often similar to the malady. The allopathic model views disease as an attack on the body, and treatments are in opposition to the malady. The alternative orientations are associated with differing sets of values, and the shift toward an allopathic model parallels a general societal evolution toward more competitive, capitalistic values.

Paracelsus & Alchemy

The practice of alchemy has a complex relationship to this change in the view of the human body. Alchemy, like herbal healing, has suffered from the



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ridicule of later generations. Yet in its time it contributed to the progress of medicine, and in our day alchemy is again being studied for its deeper suggestions about the nature of reality.



A medieval apothecary's shop, from a Spanish manuscript

Paracelsus (c.1493-1541) was a Swiss physician who worked in a tradition which combined medicine and alchemy, laying the foundations of modern medical chemistry. The alchemical tradition held that all material substances were alive, and that even metals "grew" within the earth. Paracelsus emphasized that if all material reality is alive, then humans, as living beings, are connected to and can grasp the deepest workings of nature.

The task of the alchemist was to speed up material processes, or to alter them to serve human ends. For Paracelsus, alchemy included all human work which transmuted nature. "An alchemist too is the baker who bakes bread and the vintner who makes wine."

Paracelsus still subscribed to the "imbalance" explanation of illnesses. His novel contribution was to discard the "vital humors" explanation in favor of the theory that the human body is a chemical system. The components he cited were three: sulphur, mercury, and salt. Working from this alchemical

theory of the body, he postulated that mineral-based medicines might be as useful as the older organic treatments in restoring the natural balance, an insight borne out by modern research.

Thus, Paracelsus and other alchemists lent their prestige to more "chemical" models of the body, and actually broadened the medieval pharmacopoeia in the direction of minerals, which are today held to be non-living substances. Yet Paracelsus' deepest belief was that these "inorganic" materials were inextricably linked to living matter. That any part of

nature is "dead" contradicts alchemy's fundamental outlook.

An External & Internal Balance

A common thread of our Medieval heritage (and of many non-Western cultures) is the view that all the world is alive. The human body is inseparably bound to all of "creation," existing in a balance with nature.

Such a view has both conservative and progressive implications. Conservative thinkers (who dominated the official institutions) drew the conclusion that human society also existed in a balance, and that any attempts to "rock the boat" must be harshly suppressed. The preponderance of this view in official circles still colors our view of the Middle Ages as a static era, devoid of innovation.

Progressive thinkers existed throughout the period, however. Dissidents such as Francis of Assisi,

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that, it will begin to ferment.

Rose Water

Pick fresh roses early in the morning. Remove the petals and fill a screw top jar with them. Boil water and pour over the petals. Shake the jar well and let it sit for 24 hours. It is especially nice to let it sit under a full moon. Drain the liquid into a bottle of your choosing. Keep in the refrigerator to increase the longevity.

Summer is the time of the rose. Whether you work with magical oils or not, take some time this summer to meditate on the mystery of the rose. Fill your vases with roses, put petals on your altar and in your bath, drink rose petal tea, investigate the real origins of the rosary, make one yourself out of compressed petals, or make a jar of honey that is infused with rose petals. Rose petals added to any herbal charm increases the power, as what you are adding is power of the Goddess, the Queen of Flowers. This is the time of year to really savor the warmth, sweetness, and beauty of life. What better way to do this than to stop and smell the roses! Have a lovely summer and Blessed Be!

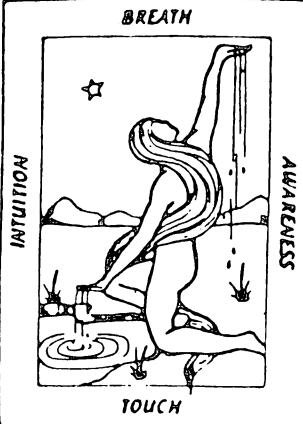
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Wiccan History

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Hildegard of Bingen, Paracelsus, Joachim of Flora and Giordano Bruno called attention to such implications as the natural equality of all humans, the ability of the our minds to comprehend the secrets of creation, and the unity of humans and nature.

Thus, the "balance" seen by medieval thinkers is both external and internal. It is external in the sense that nature — organic and mineral — contains many of the keys to healing, and that closer contact with and deeper respect for nature may yet provide the explanation of diseases that defy current medical understanding. (Environmental sources of cancer are one glaring symptom of the imbalance in our relations with nature. Such sources are still vigorously disputed by the same corporations which control health care.)

But the most dramatic lesson may be the internal balance of the human body. Although we may no longer accept the simple "vital humor" explanation of health, there is no doubt that the notion of "lives out of balance" could go a long way toward explaining the vast number of stress-related illnesses and maladies that plague our society. Integrating this aspect of Medieval thought is a task facing all of us.

Further Reading

- Bonnie S. Anderson & Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women In Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, Harper & Row, 1988.
- Stephen F. Mason, *A History of the Sciences*, Macmillan, 1962.
- Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, excerpted in Giorgio de Santillana, *The Age of Adventure*, Mentor, 1956.