

Both new medicine and old medicine help us heal

Heal: to make sound or whole. Medicine: the science and art dealing with the maintenance of health, and the prevention, alleviation or cure of disease. These are definitions we can live well with: heart, mind and body.

“I’ve got to tell you about what happened when I was with one of my patients . . . I remembered why I became a doctor.” said John, an MD recalling the moment he stopped reading the chart and calculating what to do next to “treat” the problem and just looked into the eyes of his frightened patient and truly listened to her. He began to hear and get a sense of the suffering in her words, gestures, and tears. She had a



Students practicing mindfulness meditation in a stress-reduction course.

healer willing to be genuinely present with her. As the moments unfolded they both sensed the power in simply sharing experience; a healing for both of them. Over a long career he had stopped caring and now something had shifted back. In a stress-reduction course he had begun to practice mindfulness: to simply be with the direct experience of life moment-to-moment. Breathing, sensations, thoughts, emotions, physical movement and ease all experienced in the moment they occur. Midway through this stress-reduction course he remembered how to be a mindful, healing presence, to be whole for his patient and to know once again his original motivation to be a physician and healer.

Emily is a teacher who had suffered mood and pain disfunction for many years and then began studying mindfulness and gentle yoga. At the conclusion of her course she wrote, “The body aches and discomforts that the medical doctors couldn’t even explain, much less fix, this practice has alleviated.” The simple practice of being attentive to the experience of moment-to-moment life had a dramatic and healing effect.

What’s going on here? It’s nothing new. It’s perhaps as old as mankind. We have always suffered in the face of illness and trauma; heart, mind and body. We’ve always



**BRANT ROGERS RYT
MARIE PIELAGE PT**
HEART, MIND & BODY

sought ways to heal in all these dimensions. Chronic pain or illness touches everything: mood, social life, physiology. Our modern, technical medicine offers miraculous treatment options for acute disease but for more subtle or long-term disfunction and illnesses it can often miss the mark. The age-old practices that John and Emily experienced can be a powerful complement to modern medicine. Being mindful, learning to attend fully to the experience of moment-to-moment life weaves the fractured parts of us back together. Long-term this can have a profound effect on our capacity to be whole, to heal and stay well.

Physicians are beginning to acknowledge this in profound ways. The new documentary film *The New Medicine* explores how this is being implemented across the country. In his review of the film, the well-known Dr. Mehmet Oz writes, “Watch this program and it will change your life.” During her interview in the film Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen of the UC School of Medicine and a survivor of eight surgeries for chronic illness says, “I am in the business of reminding

people who are ill that their wholeness is different than their physical health, reminding people who are physicians that their wholeness has the power to have a much greater effect on people who are ill than their expertise can have.”

This is not an indictment of our doctors who do so much right, instead it’s an invitation for all of us to practice being more attentive to the direct experience of living. Walk with a willingness to feel the air, see the colors. Eat, and rather than devour, savor the nourishment. Feel the miracle of this life sustaining breath. When challenged in a encounter with another person

practice genuine listening and being present to the whole of that person. Feed your hunger to be whole and to heal; heart, mind and body.

Brant Rogers is a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) instructor and yoga teacher (RYT-500). Marie Pielage, PT is a licensed physical therapist and yoga teacher. They are husband and wife and own and operate Yoga Hillsboro & The Stress Reduction Clinic. For more information call 503 640-6006 or visit www.yogahillsboro.com

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