

Symptoms of a sick society

By Ruth Ostrow

"I CAN'T take another moment of it, not another second," I cough to the doctor. Tears are streaming down my face. It's the dreaded flu. The third time this year I've had it. This is the worst bout yet. Crippling exhaustion, continual nausea. In the pseudoephedrine haze of cough medicines and cold tablets, I try to make sense of the world.

My doctor gently lifts my shirt and listens to my chest. "Why do I keep getting sick like this?" I ask.

He smiles gently. I have a special doctor. A doctor unlike any other I've ever been to. He looks at the world not through a stethoscope or microscope but from above.

"We've done all the tests. Medically, you are as healthy as an ox. But I think your body is trying to tell you something. And I don't think you are listening."

"But I've slowed down. I don't party all night. I've cut out the alcohol and bad foods. I exercise daily."

"You exercise like you're about to enter the Olympics. It's how most people are -- ambitious. And our bodies will again and again bring us back to reality. We keep getting sick. For some people it's migraines, for others skin disorders, arthritis, viruses, depression or illnesses that can develop into more serious diseases. We don't take time to just be and our bodies cry out like little children to be noticed.

"I've observed that my patients don't put themselves to bed. They are exhausted from children screaming, household duties, work pressures. But they don't have an afternoon siesta. They don't give themselves permission to rest. They'd rather do anything than take a couple of hours off to sleep. Then I see them in here like you."

Doctors at the Australasian Integrative Medicine Association conference I recently went to tended to agree that sickness is often a way to help people off the treadmill, into a deeper understanding of what pressure and stress are doing to their bodies over time.

Many people are addicted to their own adrenalin and this depletes the immune system. Illness can offer, on many levels, the opportunity for self-reflection, self-nurturing, and for listening to that inner voice we have neglected all our lives.

I recently heard one woman say, without irony, that she was jealous of a woman who got dragged off to jail. "Imagine, alone in solitary confinement, without kids nagging," she sighed, desperate for rest. And I once heard a male friend wishing to have a nervous breakdown so that someone would "put me in a padded cell". It's a common fantasy, this sort of escape, where responsibility is lifted from one's tender shoulders and there is time to read, sleep and recover from chronic burnout.

So I've decided, in my infirm state, to write an ode to sickness. To accept the snot and pain and suffering of it all and do what ancient cultures do: perceive illness as a vital journey towards personal growth. For only by slowing down do we get a sense of how fast we've been running and what damage we've been doing to our bodies, souls and relationships.

According to British author Teresa Moorey in her book Shamanism (Hodder & Stoughton), indigenous cultures like that of the Native Americans consider illness the greatest teacher. Only once someone has had a close and intimate brush with physical illness, mental illness or death can they emerge as a healer of the tribe for it's believed that, in these states of pure vulnerability, one enters the sacred, deeper parts of the soul and emerges wiser, more self-aware and more in tune with the world around.

Another enlightened view of illness comes from revered academic Joseph Campbell who, in his great work Myths to Live By, talks about a dropping down into self that comes from being incapacitated -- mentally or physically. He describes illness as akin to the hero's journey in archetypal mythology -- where the hero goes on a journey into the underworld, has to battle demons, shed layers of clothing, face death (indeed, part of the hero does metaphorically die), then emerge victorious with great clarity.

"Privation and suffering alone open the mind of a man to all that is hidden in others," says one Inuit shaman he quotes.

Campbell says psychological incapacity can take us into a state resembling the spiritual experience. Deeply inward, cut off from the world, the mind starts wandering into mystical or transcendental states as it does during Buddhist meditation or altered states of consciousness described by the great yogis.

My doctor says that in times of illness we release toxins -- both physical and emotional -- from our bodies. As well as feverish sweats and coughing, we cry easily and grieve, as our vulnerability takes us back to times of dependency and childhood. We are forced to deal with the tears, fears and sadnesses we've been running away from, and to heal these things within ourselves.

In essence, sickness is the winter of our soul, a time to rest, regroup and hibernate. And if we let ourselves heal, then a wonderful, fertile, spiritual spring will often follow.

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