

The Disease as Oracle: Anamnesis, Diagnosis and Prognosis; Past, Present and Future

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“Disease may bring learning if one is capable of humility. Arrogance shall bring disgrace”
The Oracle of Ifá, Yoruban Tradition in Africa and Brazil(1)

Abstract

Health/Disease expressions are reflective and predictive of the cultural behaviour of the community, as said before by Susan Sontag: diseases are cultural metaphors. Through a more attentive analysis of historical patterns of morbid cultural expressions we can have a clearer picture of the condition of the community, its past and future, as preached in millennial medical traditions through the concepts of anamnesis, diagnosis and prognosis. In this paper we discuss some of the information we gathered in our clinical experience and research about origins of the sexual traumatic history of western civilization producing different health disorders in contemporary society verifiable through our experience in theater and transcultural psychiatry in Montreal, Canada.

Keywords: Disease; Anamnesis; Diagnosis; Prognosis; Oracle; Art of Healing; Transcultural Psychiatry; Trauma; Mental Health; Crisis; Autoimmune Diseases; Immunology; Culture

Introduction

The American intellectual Susan Sontag made a inestimable contribution to medicine when she published in 1978 the world bestseller “Illness as Metaphor”, later, she would also publish “AIDS and its metaphors” [2]. The importance of symbolic and metaphoric values in the cultural construction of health and disease has always been present in human history, verifiable in all systems of knowledge of primeval cultures, with gods dedicated to healing and diseases usually depicted as dangerous unconscious and demonic forces throughout the early narratives of human culture. Those symbolic and cultural learnings from disease entities and healing gods would express the world vision and practices of each civilization and its historical momentum [3].

In modern age, however, the excessive mechanization and reductionism of human psyche led to a society excessively materialistic, pragmatic, where diseases are supposed to be broken parts and engines in a complex machine, nothing more. Symbolic processes have been utterly ignored in the last centuries and suddenly a mental health pandemic falls upon humankind and no one seems to be sane enough to interpret the symbols, as did our ancestor healers, and point to an efficient direction of action that might resolve and relieve the suffering of the most vulnerable individuals inside dysfunctional families and communities. Suicides, homicides, genocide, depression epidemics, wars, invasions, terrorism; we live in a virtually highly connected world but in real terms we experience highly fragmented and tense communities. As in the case of Brazil’s recent political development when a group of lawyers and politicians, all old foxes in Brazilian politics, organized themselves and staged a coup d’état in May 2016 with ominous consequences for Brazilian poorer populations who are historically vulnerable to violent traumas [4].

World in Crisis

In addition to already very high homicide rates worldwide, now an increasing trend announces the intensification of one more contemporary genocide: the genocide of poor people all over the world, poor and vulnerable people, who have no access to clean water, to basic sanitation, to learning how to read and write. People who have been historically massacred and for whom all this unrest and suffering has deeper historical and collective roots [5].

Communities and families have been living in an extremely marginalized environment for generations, particularly in countries marked by centuries of war and colonization: genocide, patriarchal systems of abuse, rape and predatory exploitation of nature, systematic violence against women and children, and systematic occurrence of wars for power and money; for the accumulation of all resources in the hands of a few [6].



Figure 1: Sumerian Solar God Marduk attacks and kills brutally the Goddess Tiamat, depicted in stone.

Origins of Traumatic History

It is necessary to recognize the traumatic nature of this history of oppressed and oppressor, as a pattern in human behaviour, with marked acceleration in the last 5 thousand years, when the first sacred scriptures appeared, creating civilizations stemming from Sumeria, Egypt, Middle East and the Mediterranean. Along with many other synchronicities men started to write and store sacred memories, and reaffirm them constantly, leading to the emergence of fanatic patriarchates and constant war making as essays of domination and rape of other territories and cultures. In our research, this period is key to comprehend the origins of sexual trauma and violence in childhood and family life [7].

We see the archetypal theme of the Solar King Marduk who brutally killed the Goddess Tiamat, represented as a Dragon, repeated over and over again in the images of nature being brutalized by fanatic men, the abuses of children who grow up to become psychiatric patients whom I constantly meet in my work over the last eight years: always the same theme, older men, fathers, brothers, uncles abusing young girls and boys, who later become violent, aggressive, depressed or express obscure deviant behaviours which are manifestations of anger, frustration and fears buried in the family's collective unconscious.

Common Roots of Immunological and Psychiatric Diseases

These unconscious traumas may appear as psychiatric symptoms or as immune-inflammatory diseases. The association of childhood abuse and trauma and classical autoimmune diseases is constantly reported in literature, such as Multiple Sclerosis [8], Rheumatoid arthritis and Systemic Lupus Erythematosus [9]. In the fields of autoimmune diseases and psychiatry there is a majority of women and if we consider this seriously enough, we may find historical and anthropological reasons why women seem particularly under attack of certain immunological and psychiatric conditions. Childhood abuses have been associated to higher mortality [10] and constitutes a major pathogenic factor to be considered and properly addressed by contemporary medicine.

Feminine Trauma from Arthritis to Depression



Figure 2: DyoNises Theatre Montreal.

Working in the DyoNises Theatre in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, with a group of Québécois women, I identified the archetype - affect-image - of the witch/bacchae emerging spontaneously in performances. This image evoked many different characters and stories, Medea, Ariadne, Persephone, the lineage of the feminine as we learned from Jung. I proposed to the group to work with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, known for the richness of the female characters in this play, ranging from the conclave of witches, to Lady Macbeth and Queen Hecate, the queen of witches that Shakespeare alchemically brought into scene to glorify the deep feminine personified by this old archetype of Hecate, the dark goddess, with the power of creative destruction, of giving birth and devouring her own child [11].

As our collective research developed we came to perceive the pervasive and immense importance of the "trauma of the feminine", as we unveiled Shakespeare's universe once more, we found out about the witch-hunt craze that dominated masculine renaissance's affirmation of science and reason, as whole societies were burning old and wise women, in the name of God and Reason, leaving a permanent trauma in western minds, the loss of power of women, the power of healing and cultivating a relationship with nature [12]. Disgracefully, our world society, in the middle of mental illness pandemics, keeps advancing blindly against nature and humankind. New and more radical masculine unbalanced leadership points towards a future of more intolerance and work concentrated on money and limitless exploitation, the return of slavery, under a new fashion [13].

To provide some insight into our process we are including a personal account written by Louise Rosenberg who has been a participant in this project from the beginning and who is involved in her own research using theatre and performative writing as methods of healing (Box 1).

Return to the Goddess Through the Alchemy of Theatre

I never would have thought that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* could teach me so much about myself, my ancestors, my culture and especially my relationship to my body as a woman and the unconscious traumas that lurked beneath the surface of my awareness. Since a young age I have struggled with an eating disorder and suffered from depression, off and on. A lifetime of dieting, psychotherapy and western medicine did not cure me, and my 30 years of social work in mental health have taught me that pharmacotherapy does very little to alleviate human suffering and can in fact create more serious health problems. It is through my encounters with the Bacchae, Agave, Persephone, and later, Lady Macbeth, Hecate and her coven of witches, and other archetypes that we bring to life through our performances and rituals that I have become aware of a past that keeps repeating itself through my own life and the lives of men and women within my culture. In my work I have heard many women complain, as I have, of feeling *cut off* from their bodies and as a result, suffer from all kinds of mental and physical ailments. I have never in my lifetime been sexually or physically abused. But somehow my female body carries memories of traumas that have been passed on through many generations of women before me. As I uncovered the story of *Macbeth*'s witches, and found out that they lived in a time when women were executed and burned for simply being women, I was able to reenact the terror, the rage, the grief, the fear and the suffering that had found its way into my body through some sort of cultural transmutation. I'm discovering that to heal from the past requires its own kind of alchemical process. As I perform their story which is also mine I can begin to heal myself and my own culture, at a time when despite all the freedoms that exist in my society, we (men and women) still suffer from an insidiously persistent fear and hatred of the feminine, inherent in our world where patriarchal values continue to prevail. Through the magic of theatre and ritual I traverse the traumas to reconnect with the forgotten Goddess within. To rediscover and experience the powers of the feminine, dark and light, and to learn how to embody these forces in my relationships with others and with nature is true healing.

I am grateful to the authors who accompany me on my quest such as Jungian analysts Marion Woodman (14) and Sylvia Brinton Perera (15), and feminist analyst and philosopher, Luce Irigaray (16), and to my research director, Luis Adolfo Gomez Gonzalez and my friend, collaborator and healer, Vitor Pordeus.

New research and open mind

We, physicians, health professional and healers, we must open ourselves to methodical research and above all be able to scrutinize research experiences published and being published worldwide through the internet. It is a never seen historical opportunity of information exchange that allow us, today, to access considerable amount of information about experiences virtually from every part and culture of the planet earth.

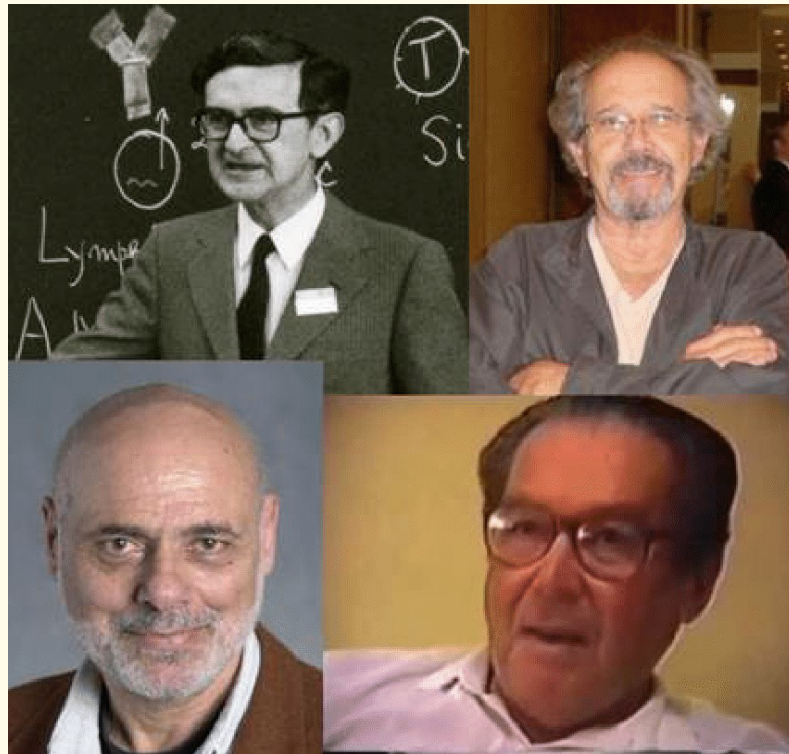


Figure 3: Nelson Vaz, Irun Cohen, Luiz Moura and Niels Jerne.

In the fields of immunology and clinical immunology for clinical medicine, I cite the Professors, Nelson Vaz [17], Irun Cohen [18], Luiz Moura [19], Niels Jerne [20] (this last one won the Nobel Prize of Medicine in 1984) and a long list of ecologic immunologists that point towards biology and ecology as ways to provide network models that may help us to understand the nature of immunological and inflammatory disorders that affect huge parts of human population.

Mind/body in clinical medicine

It has, however, been clinically observed that psychic disorders precede and follow physical disorders. Mental health is a much more sensible thermometer of how the body is going, and it has been shown in international medical literature that real health promotion, means mental health promotion [21] and the state of permanent development of the personality and physical health of an individual, a family and a community. As well has been well documented and debated that emotions play a central role in psychiatric and immunological disorders that may have common roots in abuse as physical and psychological violence [22].

Patterns of Traumatic History and its Mythological Parallels

To reach this level of conclusion and identify the roots of traumatic history being expressed by a morbid syndrome, whether psychiatric, immunologic or both at the same time, will demand of the physician and the health professional a good medical and scientific formation with solid understandings of biology, ecology, evolution, developmental biology [23], basic and clinical immunology [24], anthropology of medicine, philosophy of medicine [25], semiology, art history, religions history, mythology and psychology [26]. We will find the footsteps of great physicians like Sigmund Freud [27], Carl Jung [28], Nise da Silveira [29], John Weir Perry [30] that all of them managed to dive into the human memories, individual and collective, and help suffering men and women to find their pathway of development.



Figure 4: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Nise da Silveira, John Weir Perry.

It will be necessary to consider the oracular value of disease and pain, followed by the understanding that human development is so intricate and unconscious in such a fashion that we culturally express pain in many different and varied ways, and original mythologies express our early and primordial experiences in coping and overcoming pain and distress, with psychic transformations and the evolution of human living [31]. As it has been demonstrated by historical experiences in psychiatry and medicine [32].

To understand the disease as an oracle, as a revelatory information about the future of the community will force us to restore an ancient notion that madness and disease is sacred, because it bears secrets about the society, that reveal our deeper nature, our bad behaviour, our violence and anti-social compulsive behaviour [33]. To pay real attention to the oracle of disease is to observe the expression of real humanity, and the discovery that those pains may bear healing information for those who are humble and are willing to learn maximally from the experience, whereas, for those who are arrogant the disgrace will be inevitable [1].

Improving Medical Semiology

Physicians, health professionals and healers in general may devote time and effort to revisit the field of medical semiology, the study of symptoms and signals of the patient [34], now in a widened perspective, of observing cultural factors, historical factors connecting the history of the individual to his family, his community, his nation and humankind [35]. That's the precious contribution from authors like Jung and Da Silveira that have studied hundred of severe psychiatric patients in light of comparative mythology and found patterns that confirm historical evolution of images, narratives, as well as the evolution of human biology and its body parts and organs evolve historically, expressing simultaneously the mind and the body [36].

Conclusion

Therefore, we, physicians and other health professions must commit our ethics to investigate as far as possible, as profoundly as possible, the history of our patient, including his singularities and differences. We must understand that disease and pain are deep expressions of human nature and that in clinical medicine and psychiatry, many times capricious disease presentations will commonly have roots in human most violent and obscure practices. After 14 years of continuous medical practice, I have identified a pattern of disease, a oracular, revelatory one, that is the persistent occurrence of childhood sexual and violent abuse generally by older males and relatives. I was surprised to verify in published scientific literature the connection to immunological diseases too. I believe it reveals a repetitive and socially neglected pattern of disease that in order to be understood and healed, we'll have to take into account a more comprehensive and integrative vision of health and disease where cultural, symbolic and socio-economic determinants of health may be considered in order to achieve proper and efficient diagnosis that may improve the prognosis of our children and future adults to live a more healthy, respectful, solidary and ecologically self-sustaining society, with less harm and repression for more healing and development. That's what a possible reading of the meaning of the oracle of contemporary diseases might tell us today.

Coda

"The perceivable events which accompany a given percept propose that that percept shall "mean" these events. By some such steps an organism may learn to use the information contained in patterned sequences of external events. I can therefore predict with better than random success that in the universe, organism plus environment, events will occur to complete patterns or configurations of learned adaptation between organism and environment".

Gregory Bateson [37]

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