

# NARRATIVE MEDICINE: FROM SICKNESS TO HEALTH



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Writing is the ideal companion to the soul when life's traumas threaten to overwhelm. Doctors would be well advised to give writing exercises alongside the pills when they see patients. It is a shame they do not. But it can go much further. Take the phenomenon of sick people who publish full accounts of their illness experience, re-empowering themselves through the written word. These are the unheard voices of the patients, revealing the emotional underbelly and the anguish that illness often brings.

'Pathos' refers to suffering and the origin of a disease; 'graphesis' refers to writing: 'pathographies', as they are called, are 'sickness memoirs' which have proliferated in recent decades. They reveal that it is the wound itself that triggers healing and insightful realisations. Without the illness, these insights may be a long time coming. Thus, the awfulness of the experience can be transformed by the revelation of writing a book. Pathographesis is also called 'narrative based medicine.' Some well known examples include: Gilda Radner's *It's Always Something*, Kathryn Ryan's *A Private Battle*, Susan Sontag's *Illness and Metaphor*, Isabelle Allende's *Paula*, Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* and Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*. Some of these illness tales are angry, some sad and harrowing, but all are transformative. Many of them nowadays also contain information about alternative or unusual remedies - the kind that medical doctors rarely give. They also contain ideas about prayer and personal development, helping the authors and readers sometimes to recover, and always to re-align themselves to their bodies and spirits.

These stories are *not* the same as autobiographies. They are examinations of a soul in a diseased body, illnesses reconstructed through words, and even reading them can illuminate and be emotionally healing. When Khalil Gibran spoke of 'self chosen sickness' being the 'bitter poison' with which we see 'the tender hand of the unseen,' we realise that sickness is mysteriously bound up with our soul's purpose in

life. People look for enlightenment through these personal narratives of pain filtered through the barrier of traumatic and terminal illnesses. D.H. Lawrence said after writing *Sons and Lovers* 'one shed's one's sickness in books' back in the 1920s, so these stories did not just begin with the AIDs crisis. For Lawrence it was TB; now it is often Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Loss of Limbs, Asthma, Paralysis and all forms of Cancer - illnesses associated with intense emotional turmoil and psychic stress.

Metaphors are often the key to recovery; discovering the right one for the experience can help the sufferer get a handle on the pain: Illness is a battle, with armies of fighters, or it is a quest, a restitution, a hero's journey, a reconfiguration, a gift, hidden treasure - all these images have a mythic quality. They are formed at the cellular level of the body-mind-spirit, helping to orient the body to its process. Finding the appropriate metaphor does not guarantee full recovery, but it certainly helps to strengthen resolve to overcome the worst.

One explanation is that we are all wounded storytellers in this respect. It is our wounds that mark us as distinct. The stories are 'birthed' through our body's dysfunctionality. The mind is subtly diffused throughout the body, through emotions lodged in each organ and cell. Writing a narrative can release the pain and create a more harmonised re-balancing of those inner energies. By writing about what hurts us, we give voice to what is normally voiceless, and it rescues us from helplessness. Being ill is usually characterised as being passive, a victim, where you are lost or marginalised, knocked around by hospital examinations, invaded by surgeries and chemicals, but new ways of thinking have helped transform sickness into being a gift for which gratitude is not amiss. The act of writing to publish allows the wounded healer to become a wounded storyteller whose story gone public aids others in their struggle with similar illnesses. ﷻ