

Grace and Grit — *Condemned to Meaning*

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And it wasn't just the general society at large that supplied various stories. Treya and I were exposed to several different cultures and subcultures, each of which had something very definite to say. Here are just a few:

1. Christian—The fundamentalist message: Illness is basically a punishment from God for some sort of sin. The worse the illness, the more unspeakable the sin.
2. New Age—Illness is a lesson. You are giving yourself this disease because there is something important you have to learn from it in order to continue your spiritual growth and evolution. Mind alone causes illness and mind alone can cure it. A yuppified postmodern version of Christian Science.
3. Medical—Illness is fundamentally a biophysical disorder, caused by biophysical factors (from viruses to trauma to genetic predisposition to environmental triggering agents). You needn't worry about psychological or spiritual treatments for most illnesses, because such alternative treatments are usually ineffectual and may actually prevent you from getting the proper medical attention.
4. Karma—Illness is the result of negative karma; that is, some nonvirtuous past actions are now coming to fruition in the form of a disease. The disease is "bad" in the sense that it represents past nonvirtue; but it is "good" in the sense that the disease process itself represents the burning up and the purifying of the past misdeed; it's a purgation, a cleansing.
5. Psychological—As Woody Allen put it, "I don't get angry; I grow tumors instead." The idea is that, at least in pop psychology, repressed emotions cause illness. The extreme form: Illness as death wish.
6. Gnostic—Illness is an illusion. The entire manifest universe is a dream, a shadow and one is free of illness only when one is free from illusory manifestation altogether, only when one awakens from the dream and discovers instead the One reality beyond the manifest universe. Spirit is the only reality, and in Spirit there is no illness. An extreme and somewhat off-centered version of mysticism.
7. Existential—Illness itself is without meaning. Accordingly, it can take any meaning I choose to give it, and I am solely responsible for these choices. Men and women are finite and mortal, and the authentic response is to accept illness as part of one's finitude even while imbuing it with personal meaning.

8. Holistic—Illness is a product of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual factors, none of which can be isolated from the others, none of which can be ignored. Treatment must involve all of these dimensions (although in practice this often translates into an eschewal of orthodox treatments, even when they might help).
9. Magical—Illness is retribution. “I deserve this because I wished So-and-so would die.” Or, “I better not excel too much, something bad will happen to me.” Or, “If too many good things happen to me, something bad has to happen.” And so on.
10. Buddhist—Illness is an inescapable part of the manifest world; asking why there is illness is like asking why there is air. Birth, old age, sickness, and death—these are the marks of this world, all of whose phenomena are characterized by impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Only in enlightenment, in the pure awareness of nirvana, is illness finally transcended, because then the entire phenomenal world is transcended as well.
11. Scientific—Whatever the illness is, it has a specific cause or cluster of causes. Some of these causes are determined, others are simply random or due to pure chance. Either way, there is no “meaning” to illness, there is only chance or necessity.