

# Editorial

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## **'Energy medicine' and the gulf between body and spirit**

We have reached the tenth year of the 21st century. It badly needs to be a turning point towards a more connected world. As old certainties collapse holists must rise to the challenge of showing the world a new way. A good place to start is our familiar mantra of 'mind, body and spirit' – a unity disguised as a trinity. Neuroscience and psychotherapy are bridging the gap between mind and body, yet the gulf separating body and spirit yawns as wide as ever. Is 'energy medicine' trying to jump that divide and blur that boundary?

From birth to death the body can be a source of pleasure. It subjects us to its drives and its suffering too. As we grow up, everyday life confirms just how tricky the body can be. We soon discover that ancient survival instincts live on there, alongside traumatic body-memories that trigger feelings the conscious mind can't always comprehend or control. Then, as we grow older we learn that the body is limited, unreliable, vulnerable, impermanent; bodies break down, wear out, dis-able us, die.

And so the great religions – whose task is to seek what's eternal – distrust the body, and its instincts. They warn us against enslavement to its anger, sloth, gluttony, lust. The spirit, they remind us is willing, but the flesh is often weak. Spirit and flesh: the north and south poles of dualistic religions that view spirit as definitively non-material. This basic assumption might explain humankind's age-old bewilderment over the body's spirituality. If Freud's Id – human nature red in tooth and claw – resides there, then can the body also be spiritual? Christianity's story reflects this confusion. Should we infer from it that the human body fell from grace (body bad) or, that because spirit took human form we should celebrate our embodiment (body good). Or might it mean that the body is treacherous until sanctified (body bad but can be made good). Parallels between sin and sickness, cure and redemption, 'vital energy' and spirit are obviously there to be drawn. The argument about body and spirit is a version of the long-running 'nature or nurture' debate that surfaces in many spiritual traditions: the body may be a temple they say, but only after purification through self-denial and abstinence.

But not all spiritual paths are pessimistic about human nature. In older cultures where the cosmos wasn't split into either spirit or matter, spirit didn't get a divorce from nature. This is a world alive and sacred, where the body is spirit manifested. Not so long ago our society declared such 'primitive' views ignorant and misguided. Yet naïve though these traditions might seem, their take on Mother Earth and Father Sky seems more valid since science has glimpsed the vast complexity of the cosmos, and the staggeringly intricate web of life the human form emerges from. With a little imagination we may get a hint of this inter-connectedness, and the eternity of organisation out

of which stars and planets evolve, and biospheres spawn life and consciousness. With a little imagination the existence of the body starts to look miraculous! Curious though it seems that stories told by mystics and scientists should resonate and evoke similar awe and wonder, it might help explain why we so often hear the words 'spirit' and 'energy' used as though they were interchangeable.

The blurring of these and other time-honoured distinctions – for instance between mind and body, or biology and belief – is in the spirit of our time. Since the prose of science can't comprehend these ambiguities, the development of integrative medicine will call for more poetry. In which case notions like 'vital energy' will have important symbolic value, especially when we are called on to explain how it feels to fall ill, or where disease comes from, and how it goes away; sometimes despite all expectations. Normal healing processes are something medicine takes for granted. And most doctors would acknowledge that recovery from chronic illness usually entails effort and personal change. Spontaneous remission from catastrophic disease, however, must make us wonder about the way human bodies entangle flesh, mind and spirit. Although such extraordinary cures are not the rule with energy therapies, there have been many documented cases where spiritual healing provoked a 'spontaneous remission'. Yet given that energy therapies involve a powerful blend of beliefs about that entangling, it would be odd if (just as with the mysterious placebo response) they didn't sometimes trigger profound healing processes. While we wait for science to provide answers, the 'energy' language serves to remind us of all that remains mysterious and intangible in healthcare, and of the unfathomable interweaving of mind, body and spirit.

Slowly, our culture is waking up from modern life's dream of individuality and dominion, into a world whose survival may depend on shared visions of connectedness and inter-dependence. With so many of our basic assumptions in flux, we shouldn't be surprised at the popularity of treatments based on the notion of 'life forces' flowing in nature and through living organisms. We must judge for ourselves whether to interpret terms like 'vital energy', and 'spiritual body' literally, for hard science is bound to deny the existence of chakras, energy channelling, and auras as superstitious fantasies. Far more important for medicine to accept that the body is imbued with mind; and for our society to realise – as 'primitive cultures do – that because mind-body co-evolved with nature, they are intimately inter-connected. If these ideas take deep root then techno-industrial medicine may learn to respect human adaptability and connectedness, and chart a more sustainable course.

The developing of an integrative vision of body, mind and spirit is central to holistic endeavour: genes do not shape our destiny, nor can our wellbeing long depend on heroic medical advances, and healthcare thrives best when it values human worth and nurtures the indomitable human spirit.