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SACRED MEDICINE

A Doctor's Quest to Unravel the Mysteries of Healing

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INTRODUCTION

We are all likely to get sick or injured at some point in our lives, as are those we love. None of us are superhuman, so our frailty will catch up to us one day. Even if you're someone who eats a perfect diet, works out every day, avoids bad habits, follows doctor's orders, masters self-care, gulps down a dozen supplements, and meditates daily, there is no permanent immunity to guarantee you disease- and disability-free longevity. Although the body is brilliantly designed to heal itself, it can also break down, and our fragile psyches and souls might endure dark nights for reasons entirely outside our control.

Sometimes we get sick in ways easy to cure. When we do, we would be wise to use whatever medicine works, thanking our lucky stars that a cure exists. Even curable illness can humble us, stripping us of our hubris and shattering our illusions of invincibility. Such temporary setbacks might give us a taste of frailty and humility, but that brush with vulnerability rarely sticks. We bounce back and carry on with business as usual.

Not so when we get leveled by a difficult-to-cure health condition that hits the limit of conventional medicine's mighty powers and leaves doctors flummoxed and patients desperate. When this happens, you might feel cast aside, adding insult to injury. Some doctors don't cope well with feeling powerless to cure disease. Unwittingly, they might withdraw from patients when their suffering eludes cure, telling them there's nothing more that can be done and leaning away at the moment

they need someone who leans in. Feeling abandoned, disbelieved, isolated, scorned, or viewed as weak might feel even worse than whatever made you ill to begin with.

To stay present, openhearted, and empathetic with someone suffering in ways you can't relieve is no small task for those trained to "fix" people. Some are gifted in this way; some aren't, not because they're not good people but because it makes them feel uncomfortably powerless and vulnerable when, because of their own wounds, they might fancy themselves the opposite. They don't realize that connection heals, whereas pulling away hurts.

For most of us, being chronically or life-threateningly ill or disabled elicits painful vulnerability. As with sucking air over a toothache, we tend to cringe not only because being sick can hurt but also because we feel scared, impotent, helpless, and even damaged. This can evoke shame, as if it's a sign of weakness, or even worse, of moral or spiritual inferiority. We might go into our darkest places, catastrophizing and imagining that the suffering will never end, or if it does, it might end only in death.

This all-too-common situation can thrust you somewhere few would willingly go, down into the landscape of soul, where we encounter loss, fear, disappointment, loneliness, hopelessness, despair, grief, nakedness, and mortality. To those living in a culture that loves ascending, rising up, staying positive, practicing optimism, and revering strength, *down* can be a dirty word. But from the point of view of the soul, down is *holy ground*. When our health outcomes are uncertain, when we've tried what we can to get better and nothing is working, this holy ground can be a portal to healing. Whether we walk through that sacred doorway is a choice that every individual has the right to make because all are entitled to their own journeys. Whether you step into that opportunity, the portal to healing beckons those ready to cross that threshold.

Perhaps you are ready, or maybe you stand at the threshold, wondering. This book gives you ways to approach that threshold, whether you choose to tiptoe across or cannonball into the deep end.

Many books about health focus on offering hope. They tell you rare but inspiring (and difficult to prove) miracle stories. Yes, grounded hope is good medicine for combating despair. Hope can give you a boost that lifts you over a hump when you can't bear to walk even one more step uphill. Indeed, this is a book about hope because some patients who feel hopeless do get better when they're finally provided the right treatment. I'll be offering you some of these medicines, which your doctor was most

likely not trained to include in your Prescription for Health, and it's possible you'll find the relief you've been praying for.

But there are no guarantees. Some suffering cannot be relieved; it can only be borne. In the face of such suffering, there might be no hope. There might be only love to help us avoid bearing our burdens alone.

Although we can do nothing but offer our compassion to those whose suffering cannot be relieved, as a physician, my heart breaks when I see patients suffer needlessly because no doctor told them there might be other options after conventional medicine hits its limits. Over the course of a decade, I set out to discover *what else* might ease suffering if you reach the point when the doctor says, "We've done all we can." For those who have eluded diagnosis or been saddled with a disease that has no known cure, are there medicines that might pick up where conventional medicine leaves off? Might there be tools in the world's medicine bag that serve as adjuncts to, or perhaps even replacements for, some conventional medical treatments with dire side effects and without the promise of a cure?

I had a hunch I had not been given the whole picture in my medical training, so I set out to find hope to offer you, dear reader. However, I want to do more than get your hopes up. I seek to offer you opportunities for healing. What does it mean to heal? By definition, it means *to become whole*. This is the work of the soul, this reclamation of wholeness, which often means venturing not only up into the light, so valorized in our culture, but also down into the holy ground of darkness, bringing the two together into something larger than the sum of their parts. As Rachel Naomi Remen—my spiritual mentor and author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*—taught me, healing is different than curing. You can be healed without being cured, and you can be cured without being healed. But when healing happens, a cure is sometimes a welcome side effect. Even when it's not, healing makes you whole, and wholeness might just be the *raison d'être* of human existence.

WHOLENESS IN MEDICINE

Unfortunately, many who claim to promote health fail to realize the importance of wholeness in medicine, focusing unilaterally on the cure while neglecting the value of healing, which impoverishes everyone involved. Narrowing in on the quest for a cure while neglecting the healing process

fractures human wholeness and can cause harm, even if the cure happens. Yet this dismembered approach is built into conventional medicine.

By fragmenting the human body, mind, spirit, and energy field into parts siloed into various disciplines by academia, medicine suffers from this reductionism. The body is reduced to the biology department and medical school; the mind to psychology and neuroscience in college and psychiatry and neurology in medical school; the spirit to the religion department and the divinity school. The human energy field is reduced to the physics or biology department. And forget about the heart! Aside from the cardiology department, the heart doesn't even receive a place in academia, except maybe in the literature department.

This fragmented approach to medicine goes all the way back to the mind-body dualism of Descartes in the sixteenth century. The split between spirituality and science goes even further back. But what if, instead of separating these aspects of healing into silos, we healed the rifts, housing them together in a medicine of wholeness?

Although the advent of integrative, functional, naturopathic, and osteopathic medicine is changing this picture, it's still true that few mainstream allopathic doctors prescribe anything but conventional medicine to patients. Nutritional medicine, herbs, and supplements aren't usually on an MD's radar, much less medicines from other cultures, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ayurvedic or Tibetan medicine, Indigenous healing and shamanism, or spiritual medicines, such as energy healing or faith healing.

As a conventionally trained physician who has spent more than a decade trying to figure out *what else* helps us heal beyond what they taught me in medical school, I now realize that, although medical reductionism comprises either/or polarizations (conventional medicine *or* natural medicine, doctors and drugs *or* spiritual healing), healing is full of both/and paradoxes (conventional medicine *and* natural/spiritual healing).

Perhaps you, dear reader, have approached your own health care in black or white. Maybe you've always thought optimal health comes only from following your doctor's orders—but now you're struggling with a physical or mental health issue your doctor can't seem to solve. Perhaps you've gone the other route, avoiding doctors, drugs, and surgeries altogether and always relying only on natural approaches—yet now you're wrestling with something your naturopath, chiropractor, and acupuncturist can't seem to cure.

As a doctor who took a sacred vow to lean in and devote my life to doing whatever I can to ease the suffering of others, my heart breaks when I see people suffering needlessly because they only know about or are only willing to use the kind of medicine authorized by whatever side of the conventional medicine/complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) divide they find themselves. It can be disheartening to see how much the conventional medicine camp and the CAM camp demonize and diminish each other. Some doctors are skeptical of CAM methods, dismissing them as “unscientific,” mouthing off about how it’s all snake oil, and treating the people who practice or seek these treatments with derision and contempt. On the other side, some CAM providers or people who use them fall into an “antimedicine” camp, avoiding doctors at all costs; holding reality-denying, antisience beliefs; feeling betrayed by conventional medicine; and fearing the legitimate damage it can cause. The problem is that when we polarize into camps, we miss out on symptom-relieving or even curative treatments that might be on the other side of the divide. Then people needlessly suffer and die. Why do we do this? Because far too many people stubbornly care more about being *right* than being *healed*.

This is not a book about who’s right and who’s not; it’s a book about healing. When healing happens, you might even find you don’t care so much about which camp is right. You care about easing suffering—using *whatever works*.

BRIDGING THE CAMPS

My life path has situated me smack dab in the middle of these two polarities. I am a doctor who loves science and is in awe of what modern medicine can do. I trained at fancy universities, such as Duke and Northwestern, and was fully indoctrinated and stubbornly dogmatic in my adherence to the conventional medicine camp as a result of both my academic training and my physician father. But my worldview shattered by the time I was thirty-six. I wound up leaving my job at the hospital not only because I became disillusioned and “morally injured” by the limitations of conventional medicine and the US health-care system but also because, by the time I was thirty-three, I was a patient taking seven drugs for a variety of health conditions my doctors couldn’t seem to cure, and I was afraid I might not live to forty.

In 2007, after becoming a mother, losing my father to cancer, getting fed up with life in the hospital, and feeling hopeless about my medical issues and suicidal to boot, I quit my job as an OB/GYN and embarked upon a journey to discover *what else* helps us heal. I stepped out of the silo of what I was taught in medical school. This took me down a path of exploration beyond conventional medicine—mind-body medicine; psychoneuroimmunology; natural, integrative, and functional medicine; bioidentical hormones; supplements; acupuncture; Qigong; food as medicine; yoga; meditation; all kinds of spirituality; Indigenous healing; energy medicine; dance; creativity; and, ultimately, trauma therapy as it relates to curing illness.

Unlike some doctors who leave medicine and rebel against their training, turning their backs on what they learned and entrenching themselves in the CAM camp, I never lost my respect for the life-saving aspects of conventional medicine. Even though I had my eyes wide open to the limitations and potential dangers of my profession, and I no longer believed it was the *only* medicine in the medicine bag, I neither turned my back on it nor joined the other camp.

By the time I was fifty-two, I had spent fourteen years studying and practicing conventional medicine and another fourteen years studying and practicing everything else along the health, wellness, psychology, yoga, and spirituality gamut. I found just as much shadow in that world as I did in the world of conventional medicine, if not more. You might say I've been a doe-eyed devotee of both camps, but I've also been disillusioned by both. I'm sort of a unicorn but also a bit of an unusual expert in both camps. I know from direct experience that both offer gems and garbage. Both can wow us with miracles or horrify us with malpractice, ethics breaches, criminal acts of fraud and corruption, and even violent crimes, such as rape. This makes me incapable of idealistically lauding either camp as the panacea that will cure all that ails you or unilaterally demonizing, disavowing, or blaming either camp. In other words, there's light and shadow in all medicines, and your job, dear reader, is to educate yourself, practice discernment, and make wise choices about which tools from the world's medicine bag will serve you best. This book will help you learn how.

I started perceiving medicine not as black or white but as the kind of both/and you might experience if you've ever looked at one of those Gestalt images. You know the black-and-white image that looks like either two black facial silhouettes gazing toward each other or a white vase? Depending on how you alter your perception, you can see the two faces or you can see the

white vase, but it's practically impossible to see both images simultaneously. You can almost hear the two camps of medicine arguing.

"It's two black faces, asshole!"

"No, you idiot, can't you see? It's so *obviously* a white vase!"

Both are right, and both are wrong—because both have an incomplete view of the whole picture.

Some people approach medicine the same way. But make no mistake about it: Limiting how you approach health care to one camp or the other could prevent you from having the best possible health outcome, and as I said, it would be heartbreaking if you continued to suffer needlessly. As someone standing on the bridge between camps, I can see both the two faces and the white vase—and I'm here to help you expand your perception too. Especially if you or someone you love is wrestling with a mental or physical illness your conventional or CAM providers have not been able to help you cure, *this book is for you*.

I'll tell you a story about the health-care providers I teach in the training program I founded almost a decade ago—the Whole Health Medicine Institute (WHMI). I started WHMI as a kind of Medical School 2.0. In the beginning, it was for medical doctors only, to teach physicians everything I was learning about the camp of healing we didn't hear about in medical school. But so many healers with letters after their names got insulted! By making the program exclusively for MDs and DOs, we inadvertently triggered a long-festering wound among the naturopaths, chiropractors, acupuncturists, therapists, energy healers, nurses and nurse practitioners, midwives, and physician assistants. Our exclusion criteria needled all their inferiority complexes born of a hierarchy in modern culture that tends to put doctors at the top and undermine the value of what all other health-care providers offer. Not wanting to exclude anyone genuinely interested in Whole Health, we decided to allow anyone who wanted to learn this material to enroll as a student. To avoid setting up an internal hierarchy, we didn't even put any letters at the ends of names on student nametags. We decided to be the "camp of no camps," a bridge between them that recognizes and honors *all* medicines. We figured that everyone was equal and had something of value to offer, and we were all here to learn, heal, love, and accept each other and to humble ourselves before the mystery of healing.

A curious thing kept happening. All our students were healers of some sort, but many were also patients struggling with illnesses and

disabilities and longing for relief. Doctors with mystery illnesses conventional medicine hadn't been able to diagnose or cure enrolled. So did chiropractors with back pain chiropractic medicine hadn't helped. Energy healers who avoided doctors like the plague got illnesses energy medicine couldn't cure, and TCM doctors found their herbs and acupuncture needles failing to relieve their symptoms. So, in search of a cure—and in close proximity to healers from other camps because they were all students in the same school—many wound up having to venture into what they often considered an enemy camp.

Voilà! A curious percentage of them had unexpectedly good health outcomes that felt like miracles after their own camp had failed to offer relief. This was both a surprise and a wound to their egos. As it turns out, crossing the bridge from one camp to the other—and humbly walking back and forth across that bridge as needed, guided by a symphony of intelligences you can learn to cultivate within yourself—seems to make some people miracle prone. And that is what I wish for you, dear reader, not as a false promise but as a prayer that you might find relief, and that if you can't, your suffering might be carried on the wings of compassion.

In order to make yourself miracle prone, you'll need to let go of seeing your health care in black or white and bridge the camps with a more paradoxical way of getting your health-care needs met. How? By embracing what I call the *paradoxes of healing*. I'll unpack these paradoxes throughout the book, but to show you how much you might need to stretch beyond black-and-white binaries, I'll introduce you to some key paradoxes.

THE PARADOXES OF HEALING

- You can heal yourself *and* you can't do it alone.
- Conventional medicine can save lives *and* conventional medicine is the third highest cause of death in the United States.¹
- Keep an open mind *and* don't be so open your brains fall out.
- Be clear in your intention to heal *and* surrender attachment to outcomes.

- Trust your intuition *and* follow the science and apply critical thinking.
- Believe in magic and miracles *and* avoid indulging in magical thinking and denial.
- Be proactive about taking back your power *and* go with the flow.
- Your disease is not your fault, *and* your healing journey *is* your responsibility.
- Stay hopeful *and* be realistic.
- Lead with your heart *and* use your head.
- Be guided by germ theory *and* terrain theory.
- Your thoughts *influence* reality, *and* your thoughts cannot *control* reality.
- We are one, *and* we are separate.
- Maximize self-help *and* be willing to ask for help and rely on others.
- Seek pain relief *and* feel your pain.
- Fear can cause disease *and* repressing or ignoring fear can kill you.
- We are not our bodies, our emotions, or our identities, *and* we are all those things.
- Identifying with your ego can limit your growth and lead to illness, *and* the only way to grow beyond the ego is to stop demonizing it—befriend it, love it, heal it, and integrate it.

- Follow spiritual guidance *and* never be too certain that you've got a direct line to God.

Take some time with each of these paradoxes, dear reader. Notice if you feel resistance, relief, or perhaps just curiosity. Whatever arises, welcome it. As you'll learn, welcoming your direct experience and allowing yourself to feel it will be a theme in this book, so you might as well start now. While we're talking about feelings, if you're reading this, I assume you're either struggling with the symptoms of a chronic mental or physical illness you haven't been able to kick (or maybe it has even eluded diagnosis); you've been diagnosed with an "incurable" illness, and you're desperate for that proclamation to be untrue; you're supporting a loved one who is suffering; or you're a health-care provider who wants to make sure you're up to date on all possible avenues of treatment for your patients or clients. If any of this is true, then I'll begin by saying I'm sorry if what you're going through is hard. I'm sorry if the camp of medicine you genuinely believed could cure you, your loved ones, or your patients has failed you. I'm sorry if you're in pain or scared or feeling helpless, hopeless, defeated, ashamed, or exhausted from trying to get better. I've felt all those ways, too, and I mean it when I say it's my intention to hold you and your tender feelings with great care as we navigate this journey. If I mess that up, I'm sorry about that too. As you'll see, this is not an easy journey we are about to embark upon. But I hope you will sense through my words that you journey in good company, not just with me but also with everyone else who reads this book, with everyone who has ever suffered illness, and with all people who have devoted themselves to healing themselves or others. This is the human experience, and you are not alone.

EMBRACING THE MYSTERY

The good news is that although our bodies, psyches, and spirits are vulnerable, fragile, sensitive, and prone to imperfect functioning, we are also marvelous creations with healing abilities and resilient capacities not fully understood by doctors, CAM providers, scientists, psychologists, theologians, or philosophers. There are mysteries we have yet to solve, like why some people have "spontaneous" remissions from "incurable" diseases such as stage-four cancer or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection