

HEAL THY SELF

Lessons on Mindfulness
in Medicine

Saki Santorelli



“Saki Santorelli’s words have the gentle strength of a bird’s wings, beating softly as they gradually bear us aloft. Brave, beautiful, and disturbing, his book reminds us of the healing that conventional Western medicine has all but forgotten. I wish it had been available when I was in medical school.”

MARK EPSTEIN, M.D., author of
Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart

“In prose, poetry, and poignant case examples, Saki evokes for us the mutuality of the healing relationship and reclaims for medicine and all who work within it the wisdom and power of its lineage. *Heal Thy Self* is a clear mirror in which we can find that freedom which is at the heart of all authentic healing and through it reconsecrate ourselves to our work and to our lives.”

RACHEL NAOMI REMEN, M.D.,
author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

“A simply beautiful book. A full body/mind/heart contact between that which is healing within and that, a bit further in, which promotes that healing. A most necessary book for any medical student or healing library.”

STEPHEN LEVINE, author of *A Year to Live*

“This is a remarkable, helpful book. Its genuine and warmhearted teaching gives us a real glimpse of the path of healing. Recommended to everyone, new or old, on the path of life.”

CHARLOTTE JOKO BECK, author of *Everyday Zen*

“Saki Santorelli shows the fruit of his dedicated effort in presenting mindfulness as not just the stuff of meditation retreats and stress reduction seminars. His accounts of everything from counseling a depressed woman to watching his six-year-old daughter encounter a homeless person bring the reader up against basic truths of our lives. It is honest, clear, and very helpful.”

SHARON SALZBERG, author of *A Heart as Wide as the World*

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Saki Santorelli

Bell Tower  NEW YORK

For Rachmana, Chalice, and Felice—

may we continue to unfold in the presence of one another.

*For my parents, Rose and Fred—
thank you for enormous love freely given.*

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.*

RUMI
Quatrain #158 from *Open Secret*

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Acknowledgments

RECOGNITION OF THE interdependent nature of our existence is easily overlooked in the press of everyday life. In my attempts to honor the actuality of this interconnectedness, writing these acknowledgments has been instructional, a powerful reminder to me of the scores of people who have contributed directly and indirectly to this book. I wish to bow to the force of their presence in my life.

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I wish to thank the thousands of health professionals who have participated in our

Professional Education and Development Programs at the clinic or who have attended or residential retreat/training programs in different parts of the country. The presence, energy, and courage you directed toward looking into and speaking openly about your own woundedness, about your original calling to be of service in medicine and health care, and your longing for more authentic, less time-bound relationships with your patients have become an enfolded part of my own life. The traces of your presence run like a river through this book.

In a similar vein, I offer thanks to the first- and second-year medical students with whom I have worked closely during the last twelve years. Your vigilant attention to what first called you to medicine and the anxiety, pain, and indignation you've expressed when facing the possibility of having that calling diminished in the rush of medical education is a mark of your dignity. I am heartened that you honor your calling in such a manner; your dedication is a consistent reminder to me of my own vocation.

With deep respect and appreciation I wish to acknowledge the work of the mythologist Karl Kerényi, who has reinvested contemporary medicine with the archetypal truth of the Greek myth of Chiron—the wounded healer. Likewise, I thank the Jungian psychiatrist Adolph Guggenbühl-Craig for his deep insights into the healing relationship when framed within the polarities of the *wounded healer* and the *healthy patient* existing within each of us. Together, their seminal insights substantiated in the day-to-day world of clinical care, when joined with mindfulness practice, are some of the seeds from which this book has blossomed.

I thank professors Gerald Weinstein, Jack Wideman, Patricia Griffith, and Alfred Alschuler for being ahead of their time while I was a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. My appreciation goes out to the poet Robert Bly from whom I first heard a few lines of the Brothers Grimm story “The Devil’s Sooty Brother.”

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My editor, Toinette Lippe, has been nothing less than extraordinary. She understood the book from the beginning. Both challenging and supportive, her editorial skills coupled with her own grounding in meditative practice brought a discerning crispness and a spacious acceptance to the process that enabled us to work well together. I am happy to have been led to her and to the Random House/Bell Tower family. Special thanks to Mary Schuck, the artist who designed the cover; to Lynne Amft, who designed the interior; to Andrea Peabbles, the production editor who guided the book to completion; and to John Sharp, the production manager who oversaw manufacturing.

Foreword

ON THE EVE OF THE TWENTIETH anniversary of the Stress Reduction Clinic, I am moved by a profound sense of gratitude and pleasure to see this book by my longtime colleague, heart friend, and dharma brother Saki Santorelli emerge in the world, giving as it does a new, radiant, and powerful voice to the work that transpires in the clinic and to the deeper underlying principles and practices that inform and sustain it. I am speaking of the work of mindfulness in all its exquisite simplicity, its vast complexity, and its infinite ramifications of texture, tone, and potential. As you will see within these pages, mindfulness is both an inner and an outer engagement, one that is critical, I believe, to the maintaining and the furthering of what is best in us as individuals and as a society.

We have probably all had the experience of not being seen or heard by a doctor when we presented a problem or concern; of coming away feeling disregarded, unmet, and therefore unfulfilled in the encounter, regardless of the doctor's degree of technical proficiency. At the turn of both century and millennium, medicine is coming to learn that this is no longer acceptable as a norm, and doctors are seeing more and more how a lack of full presence on their part can have deleterious consequences not only for their patients but for their own ultimate well-being as well. And when we ourselves become patients, we are now as a rule far less passive, far more informed, and far more desirous of partnership in the healing process than in past decades. Medical schools have understood this message, and doctors are currently being trained in how to be with patients, in how to listen, in how not to hide emotionally, in how to help mobilize the inner resources of their patients for learning, growing, and healing. While much progress has been made, there is still a long way to go in the rehumanizing of medicine. My hope is that this book will contribute in a major way to the furthering and deepening of this process, and will become standard reading for all medical students and health professionals in training. Saki is intimately engaged in this education through his work with medical students, beautifully captured here, and of course in his work with the people who are referred by their medical doctors to the clinic, where they get the opportunity to participate in their own health care and healing in extraordinary and unimagined ways.

The stories in this book, taken together, have the deepest of implications for the large world of medicine and health care and the mutual relationship between caregivers and patients and its potential to further bidirectional learning, growing, healing, and transformation in us all. The stories beg to be pondered with great care and attentiveness. That should be no problem, because Saki's mind and voice within these pages are nothing less than electrifying, at times bordering on Old Testament prophet, at times much more, embodying the respectful sensitivity of the lover or the pain and embarrassment of being trapped by one's own inevitable limitations and fears and impulses to hide. I have personally experienced the emotional impact of this book firsthand as a reader and I have also witnessed the effect of Saki's writing on hundreds of health professionals when he has read from his

book during workshops we conduct together—at least a quarter of the audience is sobbing, the others sitting in stunned silence, rocked by its emotional power and implications.

Saki speaks with a unique voice in this book. The closest I can come to describing it is to say that, even though it is prose, in its cadence, its images, and its spiritual and emotional impact, it echoes the writing of Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi poet and sage from whom Saki draws so freely in weaving the formative themes of this book. And yet in content and appeal, it is totally contemporary. It speaks in straightforward and commonsensical ways of what is deepest and best and most hidden in all of us by virtue of our humanness, to that which most wants to emerge into the light of day in spite of our fears and our tendency to live in our heads more than in the fullness of our entire being: mind *and* body, head *and* heart, body *and* soul; to that which we sometimes can only hear or see if we learn to dwell in silence and in stillness from time to time, inside and underneath the incessant activity of the mind and the body.

Heal Thy Self is a book of interwoven themes that form one seamless whole out of which emerges a clear and compelling tableau of human dignity, human suffering, human uplift, and what might be possible when the whole is held in awareness and we learn to stand within the actuality of what is. It is about meditation when life is breathed into it, and about life when meditation is breathed into it. It is about the healing relationship between people brought together for that purpose, and it is about the possibilities of a healing relationship with oneself and in one's family, at any age, facing any condition or situation. It weaves with honesty and without inflation or romanticism the experience of our patients going through the eight-week-long stress reduction clinic program with Saki's own experience as teacher, guide, meditator, health professional, and family member. It brings out with utter authenticity and accuracy the heart of what transpires in our patients and in ourselves as instructors as we walk this path together. This is in itself a huge accomplishment and a major contribution to the expanding understanding of what is truly meant and promised by an integrative medicine, by mind/body medicine, by a participatory medicine, and ultimately simply by *good* medicine.

In an earlier incarnation, this book was to be called *Shattered But Still Whole*, and those words convey one extremely moving thread that holds this tapestry together and makes it so compelling. Saki asks over and over again, in many different ways, "What is shattered?" and shows us in different ways that what is shattered is always our diminished view of ourselves as isolated, as separate, as inadequate, as that which so often leads us in fear to, in his words, keep "the fullness of life at bay while we negotiate our way into a safe, thin, colorless cage." Thus this work is nothing less than an invitation to liberate ourselves from the habitual and confining prisons of our own creation, to begin to listen to the inner callings and yearnings of the heart, and to literally cook in the fires of direct experience, and in doing so, to grow ripe and savory and complete in who we actually are.

The practice of mindfulness ranges far and wide and deep within the psyche and the heart. As a liberative practice, it calls us to face and honor the root causes of our individual and collective anguish and suffering, and to observe them carefully as they work on us. For one thing, it asks us to be willing to observe what actually *moves* us, the root meaning of *emotional*

and to learn to stand inside of our feelings in ways that allow us to tap their power to teach and to heal and catalyze growth, and not simply to react and be chronically overwhelmed and imprisoned. Saki breathes life into this critically important domain with extreme skill and subtlety. Daniel Goleman describes the cornerstone of emotional intelligence as awareness of the present moment, really mindfulness. Here, Saki's stories embody and explicate how a "affectionate attention," a term coined by the meditation teacher and scholar Corrado Pensabene can be cultivated and brought to feeling states, however disturbing or overwhelming, with utter honesty and self-compassion, and in this way, contribute to a profound experience of freedom and the possibility of healing wounds, both old and new.

It has been my pleasure to work closely together with Saki for the past fifteen years in the Stress Reduction Clinic. Before that, he was the first intern to come through our program. In 1979, when the clinic was born, it was inevitably identified as my baby. Now, twenty years later, it is hardly a baby and it is certainly and importantly no longer "mine." For, over the years, Saki and our other deeply dedicated instructor colleagues, under his careful and loving tutelage, have taken it as their own and assiduously honed the artistry that it relentlessly calls out of all of us. This book is ample and eloquent testament/testimony to that ownership and artistry.

We have always stressed with our instructors, which means with ourselves, that to teach at the clinic, it is essential that one teach out of one's own meditation practice, which means ultimately, out of one's own unique being, intuition, and experience, coupled with sensitivity for what is happening in the present moment and where things may need to go in one class or another. In this way, just as when different orchestras play the same piece of music or we visit a great poem on several occasions, no two trajectories through the eight-week program are ever the same, yet the curriculum is always the same. One can feel the virtuosity of wakefulness in virtually every word and every chapter of *Heal Thy Self*.

As this book clearly reflects, Saki is a master teacher and mentor. His courage, his vulnerability, his honesty, his passion, his intelligence all echo that mastery. As the current director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and director of all clinical and educational programs at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, his work has profoundly influenced hundreds of teachers of what we now call mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), a movement that has grown to more than 240 programs in medical centers and clinics worldwide at the time of writing, as well as hundreds of young physicians who trained at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. I have personally learned and grown immeasurably from working with Saki, especially in coming to understand in a deeper way the value and the sacredness of vulnerability and in learning to trust the heart's ways and in need to linger and savor key moments. His colleagues, his patients, and his students have been benefiting from his clarity, his subtle sense of humor, his keen eye, and his skill as a storyteller for years. Now the whole world will have a chance to hear within these pages the multifaceted, emotionally intelligent, supremely gentle and merciful voice in all its fullness. Listen carefully. As patient, as doctor, as health professional, as human being. It might just save your life.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.
Associate professor of medicine



Introduction

THIS BOOK HOLDS AS ITS CENTRAL focus the healing relationship, exploring the dynamics of the archetypal connection when cradled within the practice of mindfulness meditation. It is based on the methods developed in the stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center and practiced by more than 10,000 medical patients. These same methods have been tasted, firsthand, by thousands of health care professionals in training retreats across the country, often catalyzing profound shifts in their understanding of themselves, the people they care for, and the possibilities inherent in the healing relationship.

Grounded in twenty years of clinical experience, this book explores the work of mindfulness as a *Way*—an inner discipline for learning to meet and enter with awareness the challenges inherent in taking care of ourselves and serving others. Each section is an invitation—an open inquiry into the domain of mindfulness in medicine and health care. Together they offer specific methods for bringing mindfulness into your life whether you are well or facing the additional strain of illness, or you are a health care professional interested in weaving this inner discipline into the fabric of your life. I have included many chapters that might appear to have been written exclusively for caregivers or for patients. This is not the case. Rather, I have depicted a parallel, alchemical process transpiring within myself as a health care professional and within those whom I serve in the clinic when we are joined in the crucible of mindfulness. As in any worthwhile relationship, we bring out in one another exactly what is most in need of attention and what we are often most unwilling or unable to acknowledge or honor within ourselves. Our shared commitment to mindfulness offers us a powerful lens for seeing just what needs tending and a method for learning the art and craft of working with ourselves and relating to one another. As it has for the people you will meet in the pages before you, I hope that this book ignites within you a deeper understanding and trust in your own inner strength and resourcefulness as well as a keener appreciation for the unique potential embedded in the healing relationship.

Together we will explore the possibility of learning to open when we desire to close down, to face with honesty and caring attention what is unwanted and what we habitually reject of ourselves and in others, to be present to others and join with them when we wish to move away. Approached in this way, mindfulness has the potential to turn the healing relationship into an intentional sphere of lively collaboration and mutual transformation. As a way of exploring the universal, interdependent nature of this journey, I have used my own life and the lives of those whom I have encountered in our eight-week clinic course (sometimes from classes running concurrently). These stories have emerged out of the container of our shared connection. Although the names and other identifying characteristics of the people included have been changed to preserve anonymity (except in two cases where permission was granted to use the real names of Linda Putnam and Ted Cmarada), the events described are accurate and bare of affectation. For both patients and practitioners, participating in such an odyssey involves a willingness to travel like Dante or Persephone into and through the dark unknown.

and only then to emerge into a previously unsuspected fullness.

In writing this book I have borrowed heavily from the thirteenth-century Sufi teacher and poet Jelaluddin Rumi. This is the food I have been raised on for a very long time. Only now am I beginning to savor and assimilate the unseen nourishment. I bow to the American poet and translator Coleman Barks for his fierce, reedlike efforts to become “an ear” and a listening instrument, thus making such sustenance more readily available to all of us.

Just like you, I remain a student, continually finding my way. I am bewildered and endlessly amazed by the mindlessness I encounter in myself, awed by the genius before me and the likeness of those who seek my care and give me so much, and grateful for the countless opportunities to practice wakefulness within the community of my colleagues and those with whom I meet in the worlds of medicine and health care. I am extending my arm to you, hoping that, arm in arm, we can walk together for a little while into this vast, edgeless domain. Every word that I have written was spoken or shouted, sung or whispered aloud a hundred times. Take your time with these words. Whisper and sing them yourself. Say them over and over again, if you wish.

Part One

Convergence



We are all substantially flawed, wounded, angry, hurt, here on Earth. But this human condition, so painful to us, and in some ways shameful—because we feel we are weak when the reality of ourselves is exposed—is made much more bearable when it is shared, face-to-face, in words that have expressive human eyes behind them.

ALICE WALKER
Anything We Love Can Be Saved

The Myth of Chiron

LONG AGO, IN ANCIENT GREECE, the great hero god Heracles was invited to the cave of the centaur Pholos. Chiron, a wise and beneficent centaur and a great master of healing, was also present. As a token of appreciation and hospitality, Heracles brought a flask of heady wine to the gathering. The rich, fragrant liquid attracted other centaurs who, unaccustomed to wine, became drunk and then began to fight. In the ensuing melee Chiron was struck in the knee by an arrow shot by Heracles.

Then Chiron instructed Heracles in the art of treating the wound. But because the arrow had been tipped with poison from the Hydra—a many-headed monster nearly impossible to slay—the wound would never fully heal. Capable of healing others, the greatest of healers was unable to completely heal himself; and, being immortal, Chiron lives forever with the wound as the archetypal *wounded healer*.

Following his wounding, Chiron received and trained thousands of students at his cave on Mount Pelion. It is said that one of these students was Asclepius, who learned from Chiron the knowledge of plants, the power of the serpent, and the wisdom of the wounded healer. It was through the lineage of Asclepius that Hippocrates began to practice the art and science of medicine.

Living Myth

IT'S WEDNESDAY NIGHT AT SIX o'clock, and I'm sitting in a circle with thirty people engaged in the first class at the Stress Reduction Clinic. For the first thirty minutes we talk, skimming the surface, remaining suspended over the deep pool of a yet unspoken but nonetheless shared human experience. And then, shoulder to shoulder, we slip into this vastness.

I ask, "Perhaps you can say your name ... something about what brings you here ... what expectations you have ... what you hope for, as you sit here tonight." The man on my left begins. "My name is Frank. I have colon cancer. I've had surgery ... I've been through radiation and chemo ... But something's not right with me. I know it. I feel it. I feel stuck. A kind of numb ... everyone in my family feels it, too. I want to live my life differently ... with more appreciation." The class becomes still and alert as he speaks. Everyone knows that, in his own way, Frank is speaking for all of us. The faintly audible yet unmistakable collective sigh when he stops speaking confirms this. Frank looks around, perhaps hearing and feeling for the first time never before the reverberating impact and echo of his own words. Hopefulness brightens his eyes as he turns and looks my way. There is a silent nod between us. He closes his eyes, slides deep into the back of the chair, his cheeks wet with the tears of this pool.

Bill is on his left. He shuffles in his chair, leans forward, looks down, then begins. "My kids and I are fighting. There's tension between us a lot of the time. I really care about them. I love my work ... it's a pressure cooker. Now I have high blood pressure. I don't like who I've become." He places his face between his hands, bends forward from the waist, and rests his elbows on his knees. His body seems momentarily enfolded in a wide, primal stillness, his eyes wrapped around years of accumulated memory. Then, drawn back into the room, he reconnects to the faces across from him and declares, "I've got to do something about it."

While Bill is speaking, the woman next to him crosses and uncrosses her legs. Right over left, left over right, unceasingly. Her head bobs up and down, matching the rhythm of her legs. Her hair falls forward across her face. She lifts it back behind her ears three or four times, then speaks in breathy, clipped bursts.

"I'm Rachel." She's quivering, trembling.

"I'm in recovery ... I was clean." She begins to cry.

"For ten months ... three months ago I used again ... I've been clean three months." Now she's sobbing.

"I've just been diagnosed HIV positive."

There's a shudder through the room. We are all sitting together, listening maybe to what our ears have never heard before—at least not at such close quarters—and do not want to hear now. I choose to console Rachel with neither words nor actions but instead to honor her truth by remaining still within the swirling water crashing against the coastline of our hearts. There is a long silence. Eyes look her way, dart my way. Closing. opening. Silently speaking. Filling.

There are twenty-seven more stories to be with tonight. Twenty-seven more people. They know something about why they are here. Yet, as we listen together and speak, the knowing deepens. So does mine. I don't have colon cancer. I am not HIV positive, don't have high blood pressure, am not recovering from a heart attack. Yet I know that I too am addicted to a plethora of habitual emotional and mental states, sometimes obsess about my health, fight with my kids. Sometimes feel shame in the face of my perceived weakness and imperfection. Lose myself in the maelstrom of conditioned history, and know in my chest that there is really no substantive separation between them and me. For now, the present condition of our bodies is different. But behind this thin, temporary veil of demarcation, we are all patients. Patients, as captured in the Latin word *patiens*, whose root, *pati*, points to both our condition and our capacity to "undergo, endure, and bear suffering." This is our common ground, holding within itself enormous potential. If we use it wisely, it can become a seedbed, bringing forth an awakening into the fullness of our lives.

Curiously, in the midst of these unfolding stories I notice a lightness emerging. There is an unburdening here that is not simply cathartic. The most pronounced feeling in the room is not one of heaviness but one of deep acknowledgment. Such honoring is nothing less than an expression of strength and courage that feels akin to a collective rolling up of our sleeves rather than the bursting of an emotional dike that will sweep us away in helplessness and despair. It is the beginning of a relationship.

We are revealing our wounds to one another. We are naming them, but we are not being decimated by them. Quite the contrary. The usual tendency to strongly identify with and elevate "my" pain or "my" problem is slowly being dissolved in the recognition of our collective condition and in our willingness to live together, even for a few moments, inside this shared reality. There is a spontaneous arising of mindfulness—of awareness cultivated by our willingness to hear one another, to sit together without judgment, without giving advice without reaching for easy answers or invoking shallow affirmations. Literally and figuratively we are all in our seats—perhaps more firmly than ever before—attending to and making more bearable our wounds, by sharing, as Alice Walker describes it, "face-to-face, in words that have expressive human eyes behind them."

Although I am the doctor, the teacher, sitting here and listening reminds me that I have once again been invited into a collective work. For me this is essential to remember over and over again. We will have eight weeks to explore this terrain. Eight weeks to step into an intensifying cycle of our lives ignited by our willingness to walk through the door and begin. It is not just *their* work; it is my work too. Each of us is a living myth encompassing both the woundedness of Chiron and the innate capacity to take advantage of adversity and be transformed. Beyond our roles, by virtue of being human, whether we know it or not, we are all walking the universal, mythological journey of the hero. Perhaps our real work, whether offering or seeking care, is to recognize that the healing relationship—the field upon which patient and practitioner meet—is, to use the words of the mythologist Joseph Campbell, "self-mirroring mystery"—the embodiment of a singular human activity that raises essential questions about self, other, and what it means to *heal thy self*.

The Inner Healer

OH, READER...

Whether you are in good health or ill, whether your malaise is expressed in the body or the anguish of the mind, you have in your hands a true story. It is about a hidden treasure, a reminder of your wealth, a call to reclaim the inheritance that is yours. Do you recall the abundance I'm talking about? The gem that was placed inside you long ago. Unseen yet irresistible, it is your essence, the one walking shoulder to shoulder with you even when you imagine that you are all alone.

Can you feel this life within you? Even as you read, maybe you sense its faint stirrings in the soft wateriness flooding your mouth, or in the murmur of the old language spoken deep within your belly. You know those tones, the ones emerging from the doorway where the rib cage meets the hip parts, or maybe that arise in windlike whispers filling your ears in the middle of the night when sleep departs and you are summoned to wakefulness. It is your old friend, an ally that has been with you all of your life.

Maybe it's time for the two of you to be reacquainted, to travel together with fresh presence into the world. You and I are wanderers in search of this inner jewel. Despite all the public relations campaigns to the contrary, despite all of our projected imagining that others have it all together, everyone is doing the same work. Maybe we can travel for a little while as companions. What other choice do we really have, anyway?

In the process called growing up, most of us have been taught to forget this inner presence. The remembering of such an inner radiance is radical. Establishing contact with such aliveness will do nothing less than turn our lives inside out. Is that such a bad deal? Meanwhile, the common conventions of the world maintain our well-oiled sense of separation, offering us thin gruel in place of real nourishment. For the most part, we remain in this fragmenting trance, until we are uprooted by circumstances that tear apart the accustomed fabric of our lives, turning us back on ourselves. Such rending is part and parcel of life. Sometimes it arrives at our doorway in the guise of illness, sometimes in the breakdown of long-standing relationships, in the loss of loved ones, in those middle-of-life eruptions that leave us little choice but to remain isolated and desperate or take the chance and slowly begin dissolving our hard, protective shells.

Fortunately, none of us escapes this reckoning. One way or another we are inextricably drawn into the deep. It is here that we begin to, as the archetypal psychologists put it, "grow down" into our lives. Here that we have the possibility of discovering within us what is most solid and sustaining while slowly learning to embody such presence in the daily round of our lives. Some would call this *Soul*. Call it what you will. Whatever it is, intuitively we know its absence and its presence in our lives. But because this reality cannot be seen, quantified, or described in our usual modes of analysis, it has been dismissed and thrown into the black box of irrationality.

This is a blind spot, a deep flaw in our cultural reasoning, that leaves us, often at the most critical moments of our lives, stripped of cultural credence and support and void of contact with a most powerful ally. Diverted by this societal bias, we turn outward, seeking the intuitively felt source of strength outside of ourselves. When staring into the face of sickness or death, the swift and decisive ending of life as usual in the face of an unexpected diagnosis, or, most commonly, when the full weight of a life half-lived begins to bear down on us relentlessly, reminding us that something is amiss, we often take refuge in outer authority, forsaking our innate strength and healing capacity.

I am not suggesting that when our health is compromised or the continuity of our physical existence is in question we abandon the advice of expert opinion and hard-won medical skill. Rather, I am saying that the power differential between patient and practitioner must be recalibrated if we are to actively reaffirm the inseparable enterprises of health care and human unfoldment. As the myth of the wounded healer suggests, there are two sides to every story. Patient and practitioner are bound together, two poles of an archetypal relationship. Remaining at the surface, we might imagine that these poles represent giver and seeker, helper and helped. But this is not the case. Conceiving it as such is too simplistic, too expedient and soul diminishing. We are each the reflection of the other. Within every health care practitioner lives the Wounded One; in every patient, every sick and suffering human being, abides a powerful Inner Healer. These are the gifts of being born into this world.

The degree to which we reclaim our reservoir of inner strength in the face of sickness, pain, or grave hardship is the degree to which, despite the gravity of the medical condition, whether we live or die, we have the opportunity to touch our undivided wholeness. Perhaps the most fundamental work of practitioner and patient lies in the recognition of the singularity of their relationship. My own experience tells me that this is so. This does not mean that the roles are the same but rather that power and the sense of limitation, irritability and excitement, fear and self-mastery, despair and compassion, sadness and joy, and all the other landmarks of healing flow in both directions.

If as patient and practitioner we are willing to revision our roles, then we have a chance to alter our relationship. In this vision lie the seeds for a new, collaborative, participatory medicine. This book is about this quest. About people who have elected, most often with the goodwill and encouragement of their physicians, to take up the practice of mindfulness and turn back toward themselves as a means of recovering their inner richness. This is my work, too, and in the spirit of full participation, you will find me inside these pages. Most important, my hope is that you find yourself. As in any journey, there is risk; any deepening of character necessitates a loss. Nonetheless, initiating such a journey remains a watershed, an outpouring of unanticipated grace, an indelible opportunity to drink from the deep well of your life.

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