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Marginal Notes on Natural Medicine

Inviting a group of eminent people from different spheres of life to consider, as a group, the meaning and understanding of such an elementary term as 'natural', here in the context of 'natural medicine', seems to convey (apart from other possible aspects) a measure of uncertainty about the sensible usage of the expression.

The subject of this meeting, as I understand it, is clothed in the implicit question "Does the term 'natural medicine' really express the essence of what we mean by it, or what we want it to mean?"; "Is the term still appropriate in an evident crisis in which the root and origin of the medical profession, naturopathic medicine, is not just trying to justify its own existence, but wishes to be recognized again as the primary natural science, the primary philosophy of living organisms and their well-being; when, as a movement, it wishes to fight the generally accepted belief of being no more than a side-line, a reluctantly tolerated alternative to its modern upshot, the impertinent newcomer, so-called academic medicine?" – the question, as such, betrays some knowledge of the fact that our understanding of the word 'natural', an adjective of the noun 'nature', is absolutely relative, depending on the person who uses the term and his intentions, on circumstantial aspects, preconceived concepts, prejudices or even moods. Besides, the terms 'nature' and 'natural' may refer to the notion of origin, the source of life (*materia*, 'the mother of all and everything'), or to the so-called nature of things (as in the saying 'it's in his nature to be kind'), or to both. Almost too many imponderables to contribute anything sensible to the discussion in a few minutes.

So who am I, professionally a complete outsider, to tell you learned people anything worthwhile about whether the term 'natural medicine' may be good enough to keep as symbolic expression, identification or fighting slogan in the on-going battles with negative, often deliberately misleading comments from 'medical experts' or in the efforts against public misconceptions about its value and its usefulness? A few tidbits will have to suffice.

The most common meaning of the word 'nature' is the totality of unconscious being, as opposed to a conscious human being who is able

to form any thoughts about the other. But since the development of civilization the notion of a 'natural state' of anything, any matter untouched by human hand, has become illusionary. We also speak of 'alienated nature' and see it as a consequence of the Biblical licence granting humans absolute rule over all other forms of life, the absolute right to exploit this world and everything in it, organic or inorganic.

Only recently did we become aware again that this short-sighted selfishness in our anthropocentric behaviour is self-destructive, that the technology, originally invented to protect ourselves against overwhelming natural powers, is destroying our natural habitat and with it finally ourselves and all other organic matter. The apocalyptic vision of a burnt out globe has become real.

In conscious opposition to this realistic prospect, we still refer to the notion of 'nature' and 'natural' as something unspoilt, unadulterated, original or, indirectly, some inherited experience or traditional knowledge handed down through the generations since time immemorial.

Development means change, and changes make us forget what was before. Some wise men invented the phrase 'The Dialectics of Enlightenment' in an attempt to explain how progressive, highly developed societies can regress again to a state of barbarism (the most prominent historical example being the so-called 'Holocaust').

Modern sciences and technological development have changed this world beyond recognition, most of all by creating forms of apperception almost exclusively based on technological models. Modern biology has mainly become biotechnology, which takes its models from classical physics and operates with fixed closed systems. Technical systems are steered and controlled. Living organisms are open systems which cannot be controlled and manipulated in the same manner. Life is no longer understood as the spirit of living organisms, but as mere metabolism.

Modern medicine has adopted the mechanical models from biotechnology. Doctors are treating illnesses and diseases like mechanical break-downs and try to repair patients like car-mechanics motor-vehicles. Psychosomatic inter-dependence is still widely ignored. Professional medical practitioners are trying to deal with human organisms as if they were inanimate objects, not individual living beings

who grow, develop and die and are deeply inter-connected with, and mutually dependent upon, their environment through highly complex forms of interaction and communication.

If I just half understand the motivation for this first symposium on natural medicine, it surely has to do with the concern that this ancient concept of healing now has to fight for its own survival against the brutal onslaught of a generally acknowledged, almost universally trusted modern trend in medicine which is mainly based on positivistic, mechanical concepts and tries to deal with so-called malfunctioning organisms as if they were man-made machines. We refer to 'alternative medicine' as opposed to 'common' or 'conventional medicine': Should it not rather be the other way

round? I suspect that one reason for wishing to have such a symposium was the growing awareness that it is no longer good enough to remain on the defensive, but to take more decisive, positive action.

As a first step towards this aim, which is not at all new, discussions are needed, a process of self-critical analysis to assess the movement's strengths and weaknesses, its triumphs and disappointments, and to consider some of its own tactical mistakes, as well as looking for practical measures of how to deal with the threatening situation. I also believe that one urgently needs enlightened people who understand something about marketing, know about methods of promoting a good cause, how to educate people, to spread the word in a sensible, easily understood manner : to make people aware of the real nature of 'natural medicine'.

Besides, I personally think that it is a good and apt and useful word for expressing the notion that 'living things have an innate ability to heal themselves' and just sometimes need a little help, a gentle push, to bring back the biological balance which we call health.

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