HEALERS OR HUCKSTERS?
“NEW AGE” HEALERS AND AIDS

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The intolerance of much organized religion has pushed many people with AIDS away from their parents’ religious traditions and toward the spiritual consolation offered by the New Age movement. In the preface to his book Heaven on Earth, Robert D’Antonio sees the “New Age” not as a distinct religion in the traditional sense, but instead as a wide range of metaphysical ideas and movements — ranging from those incorporated by mainstream culture, such as meditation, visualization, environmentalism, and mind-body theories (e.g., psychoneuroimmunology) to the more far-out realms of psychics, channelers and crystals. Faced with a tragedy inexplicable in human terms, people with AIDS increasingly are turning to New Age teachings for spiritual solace and meaning. But beware: oftentimes, these teachings have dangerous and painful side effects.

HEALERS

The foremost attraction for people with AIDS is the New Age philosophies’ emphasis on love, rather than judgment. In her books You Can Heal Your Life and The AIDS Book, New Age writer-healer Louise Hay encourages people to use “affirmations,” or statements that validate one’s self-worth. For instance, “I love who I am and all that I do. I am the living, loving, joyous expression of life” or “When we really love ourselves, everything in our life works.”

Marianne Williamson bases her spiritual philosophy on A Course in Miracles, a set of books that was supposedly dictated to her through a channeler. In her recent book A Return to Love, Williamson says, “Judgment is not an attribute of God... He cannot think with anger or judgment.” These words of love and acceptance resonate for many people with AIDS, otherwise condemned and rejected by dominant social norms and religion, and often by their own families.

In their stress on self-determination and control over one’s body, New Age ideas have worked in many ways to empower people with AIDS. One of the most hopeful and inspiring messages that people with AIDS get from Louise Hay is that they are not “victims.” The word “victim” implies passivity, loss of control, and helplessness. Hay encourages taking control. She stresses that individuals can, on their own, extend their lives and improve their health, even when already ill. One of her “affirmations” proclaims, “I love myself; therefore I take loving care of my body. I lovingly feed it nourishing foods and beverages, I lovingly groom and dress it, and my body lovingly responds to me with vibrant health and energy.”

Another affirmation states, “I am one with the very Power that created me and this Power has given me the strength to create my own circumstances.” Inspired by Hay’s words and anxious to feel they can do something to help themselves, many people with AIDS make dramatic changes in their lives, ridding themselves of detriments to their health — drugs, alcohol, junk foods, unsafe sex, all night parties, stressful work and abusive relationships. New Age followers among people with AIDS turn instead to holistic methods of healing, homeopathy, acupuncture, and herbs.

When people with AIDS experience physical deterioration, are unable to eat, going blind, incontinent or incapable of walking or caring for themselves, New Age healers again step in and attempt to offer consolation. In The AIDS Book, Louise Hay argues that “we are more than our physical bodies... Our bodies are suits of clothing that our personalities wear... They have nothing to do with our self-worth.”

Attempting to explain away the inevitability of mortality, Hay qualifies her previous claims by saying, “While it is true that we have the power to defeat every type of illness that exists on the planet, it is also true that there is a time to discard our worn-out body.” New Age beliefs intersect with those of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the point of immortality.

Even the medical profession has jumped on the New Age flying carpet with its new field of “psychoneuroimmunology,” a field which provides some scientific evidence for mind-body connections. Psychoneuroimmunology examines the effect of mental and emotional states on the functioning of the immune system.

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Although many people with AIDS have latched onto one aspect or another of the New Age movement, often they find that New Age solutions have a painful downside.

One serious problem with New Age pronouncements on AIDS pertains to the following set of beliefs from Louise Hay: “We are each 100% responsible for all of our experience... We create every so-called ‘illness’ in our body... All the events you have experienced in your lifetime... have been created by your thoughts and beliefs.”

Encouraging people to take charge of their lives and shirk the “victim” mentality is important in the ways described earlier, but to say that people with AIDS are entirely responsible for and can control “100%” of what happens in their lives is to ignore societal, historical, and biological constraints on human behavior. Has a HIV-infected infant, born to a mother sick with AIDS, created her fate? Louise Hay would say “yes,” as she believes that “we choose our parents.”

According to Hay, “What happens to us every day stems from choice... Few people consciously choose dis-ease [sic].” Subconsciously, many people do: they need the dis-ease to fulfill a need.” She goes on to list seventeen reasons why people choose “dis-ease” — reasons like the need for time off, the desire for sympathy, the urge to find out who really loves us, and...
young man close to dying from AIDS — recently told me that he felt like a failure for not trying hard enough to eat all the right foods, think all the right thoughts, and feel all the right feelings. I listened to the sister of another dying young man. She was, naturally, having difficulty facing her brother’s impending death. What struck me was that she could not allow the thought that he might die to even cross her mind, because she believed that the thought itself would cause him to die. I have seen a bereaved lover harbor anger and resentment against his deceased loved one, because he “gave up,” and did not try every remedy being sold to the AIDS community.

Hay expects imperfect human beings, overcome with sickness, suffering, and loss, to somehow exert perfect control over everything they think, feel, and eat. Otherwise, she argues, they are not really committed to healing themselves.

Another flaw in many New Age schemes is the labeling of pharmaceutical medicines as “poisons” in contrast to alternative healing methods. There are few enough treatments for AIDS and the opportunistic infections. To rule out drugs that have been tested for safety and efficacy is a grave disservice to anyone who wants to survive. Why not recommend that people try everything that is available? They forget that the AIDS virus is also a “poison,” and that if AZT or DDC can delay its toxic effects, then discouraging their use shortens life. Moreover, the distinction between medicines and herbs is an artificial one, since many traditional medicines come from herbs.

New Age gurus offer advice and solace, but at a price. New Age workshops can be expensive, as are the required books and tapes. One wonders, at times, how much of the motivation is spiritual and how much entrepreneurial. If the money flows back into social service projects — as is the case with a portion of Marianne Williamson’s profits — then there is less of a problem.

Herbalists, too, charge lofty sums for their products. Most people with AIDS have limited incomes consisting mainly of disability checks; funding a New Age habit can make a big dent in their ability to meet basic expenditures. Herbalists may be getting more than patients from the sales of herbs.

If people choose carefully from among the New Age offerings, they can find spiritual renewal and reduce some of the stress associated with AIDS. However, they must be wary of extreme and simplistic philosophies—especially the presumption that mortals have god-like powers over health and sickness, life and death. These latter beliefs only lead to disappointed expectations, feelings of failure, and ultimately cause more harm than good.

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