

HOW TO LOOK AT ILLNESS

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THE NECESSITY OF A NEW APPROACH TO ILLNESS

Life today is full of contrasts, especially in the widely differing views as to the value of life itself.

In some parts of the world everything is done to preserve the lives of weak children, and the State spares no expense to save quadruplets. Institutions are built for old people and those suffering from chronic diseases. A criminal under sentence of death is carefully watched when he is ill and every-thing is done to prevent him from committing suicide.

At the same time the medical profession, politicians and even authorities of the church find it necessary to recommend artificial prevention of birth. [see [note 1](#)] When the question of capital punishment is brought up there are sharply-contrasting opinions in parliament. A prominent bishop among others declares that the best way to deal with people who are incurable is to do away with them by "mercy killing".

In times when such strongly-contrasting thoughts are conceived by people, many of whom have the best intentions for the benefit of mankind, it seems necessary to reconsider our philosophy in regard to birth, life, illness and death.

In illness, as in all other things in life, everything which has a material expression has its spiritual background, and for the welfare of humanity this spiritual background has to be sought. To understand illness we need a new approach, and we have to look more deeply into many problems of life and illness.

As Dr. Rudolf Steiner points out: "The man of the present day would far rather believe that disease is connected only with immediate causes. For the fundamental tendency in the modern view of life is always to seek what is most convenient and it is certainly convenient to go no further than the immediate cause."

In this book we shall try to observe the life of man as a great unity from birth to death and even beyond death in order to learn how illness occurs. In doing so we shall see that illness often brings to the surface important things which otherwise remain hidden, and we shall learn how to deal with illness in ourselves and how best we may understand it in others.



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THE PHASES OF CHILDHOOD

Let us start with the birth of the child. The sight of a newly-born baby may well cause us to ask ourselves, "Can that tiny creature with its undeveloped limbs, rumpled skin and expressionless face can really be a human being?" All we can see physically seems to be so utterly unlike what the child may become. Despite the appearance of the child however, anyone without prejudice can feel that it is strangely beautiful despite its outward appearance, and that there is something which surrounds the child and helps to transform it.

We can indeed say that the baby is surrounded by an invisible part, the spiritual forces which want to become man on earth at a special time and under special circumstances.

In former times it was considered that the unborn were helped by Angelic beings who appeared to the mother in a dreamlike picture; the best known event of this nature being the Annunciation in the New Testament, which has been the subject of so many paintings.

Later, people thought rather of forces coming from the stars as being somehow connected with the child. Man had the distinct feeling that invisible powers ruling the stars worked together with invisible forces hovering around the child. Goethe was one who believed strongly in such an influence of the starry heavens, and in his Autobiography he states clearly that he could not be born before a special star constellation came about. [see [note 2](#)]

We owe it to Rudolf Steiner's teaching that we can again understand the deep connection which exists between the invisible part of man and his visible physical body. This invisible entity is the individual and its soul. Together they gradually build up the physical body, which has to become the right vessel for the personality who is in the process of incarnating.

What a child brings with it to the earth until his birth is greatly influenced by the forces of heredity, the young body containing the visible forces which come from the parents and ancestors.

Now, modern science has invented a complicated theory of heredity and spreads the creed that in a child appear somehow the same qualities which already exist in the forefathers. The theory of heredity seems satisfactory from the standpoint of modern biology, but the truth is that ***only the part connected with the physical body is related to the forces of child's heredity. The other part, man's soul and spirit, belong to the individual, which is unique.***

We can see that ***personality*** cannot be explained only by a theory of heredity when we think of the great individualities in history. Who believes that the mind of Shakespeare, Raphael or Goethe might be nothing else but the product of the hereditary forces of their ancestors? If that were true, nothing new could ever have been created.

Our first consideration in regard to a new approach to illness is that the individual has to unite himself gradually with the body born with qualities arising from heredity and that the spiritual part of man can be hindered in entering into the physical body if this body is weak or hardened. Clearly a person with a paralysed leg cannot always carry out all his wishes. An example of the overpowering of the spirit by a sick body is that of Shakespeare's Richard the Third. An ugly hunchback, he was ruled by his deformed body which drove him to villainous deeds. However, if we are spiritually strong we can largely overcome the deficiency of our body, just as the late Franklin D. Roosevelt overcame the handicap of infantile paralysis.

During the child's first years, then, its inherited body must become transformed into a body suited to the individuality. It takes about seven years before the physical substance with which the child is born is almost totally renewed. To understand this clearly, it must be remembered that the child's body is replaced by a second one — a gradual process, of course, and some parts are transformed more quickly than others.

The surface skin we are born with, for example, peels off very quickly, thin layers being washed off at every bath. The red blood corpuscles, too, are replaced in 3-4 weeks. [see [note 3](#)] It takes much longer before the substance of other organs — the bones for example — is renewed, but approximately in seven years all the substances of the body are renewed. The child then has its own individual body, and physically hardly anything is left of the first body with which the child was born.

Now, it seldom happens that the reconstruction of the whole organism proceeds harmoniously and in

the right manner. We can see this very early in the life of a baby. For example, if the red blood corpuscles are destroyed too quickly during the first days after birth, the child gets jaundice, and this is a rather frequent occurrence.

We must understand that there is a wide gulf between the personality, descending from the spiritual world, and the physical body, originating mainly from the hereditary forces. A conflict of spiritual and physical forces may be necessary to create a healthy balance. Rudolf Steiner has indicated that this struggle becomes evident in what we call "Children's Diseases".

Two extreme possibilities in the development of the child can illustrate what is revealed by the special illnesses of childhood. The child who is overpowered by his physical body, (meaning that the inherited forces have taken possession of the body more than they should) develops a condition resulting in Measles.

During this illness an observant eye can see that the child's organism makes every effort to get rid of something. The eyes are watery and inflamed, the nose runs and the mucous membranes of the mouth and throat are sore, while the skin is inflamed, swollen and puffed.

The illness can become more dangerous if the whole process penetrates still deeper into a particular organ. Then the child may contract Bronchitis or Pneumonia, one of the worst complications in Measles.

In the experience of the writer all young children who contracted Pneumonia were exposed to special conditions which caused them to be drawn much more quickly into their physical development than other children. They became acquainted too early in life with the troubles of earthly life. Living conditions were poor in some cases and in others the children were surrounded by the worries of their parents. Many had to learn things at school for which they are not mature. An intellectual approach to teaching, and such occupations as cinema-going, listening to the radio or seeing television have a hardening effect which prevent the child from shedding the forces of heredity.

The case of one little boy was quite remarkable. Life in his parents' house was everything it should *not* be for a child. Father and mother quarreled day and night, living conditions were poor; money was scarce, and both house and children were dirty. At an early age the boy had Pneumonia twice and then Measles. One could see from the beginning of this illness that he had to work very hard in his organism to bring out what had to be brought out through the Measles. His temperature was very high and it took him much longer than others to get his skin-rash.

Even all this was not enough and he contracted Pneumonia yet again, and this attack he overcame only after great difficulty. After his convalescence one could see clearly that he had gained something through his illness. Quite frequently it can be observed that especially after Measles a child is in a much better state of mind and the personality has developed and become more visible.

When the individual forces break through *too quickly* and therefore destroy the supporting forces which come from heredity the child is inclined to catch *Scarlet Fever*.

During the last twenty years this illness has become less violent. Formerly it was considered to be an illness with frequent complications, but now it is not such a serious matter, severe cases being rare in this country. It seems that personalities reach their goal with greater strength and less resistance than before.

Other children's diseases may be regarded from the same point of view. If in childhood we have to undergo chicken pox, diphtheria, whooping cough, mumps or German measles it means that we suffer because through the illness an opportunity is provided for our future development.

This brings us to the subject of immunisation, or the artificial suppression of disease. If successful at all this does not take into consideration the vital factor that a children's disease occurs for the sake of the child's development. It may create perhaps later in life much greater trouble than the disease itself. Mankind will eventually learn that through the harmonious development which comes from the right methods of education the danger of such illnesses as measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, etc. will become irrelevant, as in the case of scarlet fever in this country.

Immunisation without sound and healthy methods of education results in pushing the growing child too deeply into the forces of heredity instead of helping him or her to overcome these influences in the

right phase of childhood.

THE RELATION OF PUBERTY TO ILLNESS

During the first seven years we should have gained ground, as it were, against the power of heredity in our body. In the period from seven to fourteen a kind of liberation of the soul forces from the body takes place. The climax of this development becomes obvious in puberty and adolescence, the time of difficult crises.

Before puberty we need the authority of our parents or teacher and have to be guided step by step, following the will of the adult. In our feeling life at this age we are strongly influenced by our teacher. If the teacher lacks an attitude of devotion and wonder, similar feelings will be awakened in us in childhood.

During the age from seven to fourteen the moral conception of the educator becomes the support for the growing soul, just as from birth to the seventh year the inherited physical forces help the development of the physical organs.

In this middle period of childhood the individual and personal soul forces are greatly involved in the development of the physical organs. We can see how the child of this age is influenced in his feeling life or by any kind of bodily discomfort. Just a slight indigestion robs the child of the power to concentrate on the smallest task.

Now all this should gradually change at puberty when the power of thinking, feeling and willing should become free from the strong physical influence and turn into forces of personality.

This is the beginning of the time when authority loses its importance. The child wants to get rid of the ideas imposed on it by mere authority and seeks friends, not lawgivers. If this is not understood there will be conflicts and the greater the difficulties under which the growing soul tries to gain freedom the greater the crises.

A considerable time is needed from the moment in puberty when the three soul qualities of thinking, feeling and willing are set free to the time when the individuality becomes master of his thoughts, feelings and will. Development continues actually in seven year periods. At 21, Thinking is penetrated by the individual, Feeling at 28 and Willing at 35.

The difficulty in adolescence is that the way is open for a kind of freedom but the full development of the powers cannot yet be attained. At this period our position can be compared to that of a prisoner who has become free but does not know how to use his freedom. If during puberty we are not strong enough in our personality we may easily fail in life's struggle. Failure reveals itself in such illnesses as hysteria, tuberculosis and schizophrenia which may develop much later but whose foundation is laid during adolescence. [see [note 4](#)] All these illnesses are greatly influenced in their mental aspects by the bodily condition. Thus we are greatly exposed to illness after puberty if at this time we are not handled rightly and do not progress harmoniously, so that we learn to separate the life of the physical body from the soul life.

HYSTERIA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The following are examples of what can happen if a person has not learned to separate the life of bodily activity from the life of the soul.

A woman with several children and one house assistant had such an unfortunate character that domestic servants would never stay long. This mother had a great dislike of housework. On one occasion her house-help was again about to leave and no one could be found to take her place. The mother tried to get out of her difficulty — quite unconsciously of course — by becoming ill. She vomited continually and suffered from pains in the head which were so severe that no drug was effective.

As soon as her domestic problem was solved by the arrival of a new maid, however, the woman suffered no longer from the symptoms which a specialist was quite unable to remove the previous day.

Consider also the case of the wife of a very well known composer who was a singer. When she had to sing in a concert for her husband and she felt the great longing for a particular piece of jewellery which he was hesitating to give her she fell ill and went to bed. She felt really ill and was unable to sing. As soon as she received the desired ring or necklace she was cured and could again sing most beautifully.

Such cases are usually called hysteria and they show how an adult person should not react, for after puberty the soul forces should not penetrate the body in such a way that a person falls ill when he or she finds it convenient. We know that a hysteric strives for the fulfillment of a desire by means of an illness which can be produced.

Unfortunately some people suffer all their lives in this manner because they have not been able to overcome the crises of puberty. In a healthy person such an intermingling between the feelings and the body functions does not occur.

Sound methods of education work in such a way that at the time when the soul forces are set free at puberty the forces of thinking, feeling and willing do not develop in an exaggerated way. For example, a boy may be extremely *intellectual* after puberty and quite fanatical about engineering or chess. The way science is taught today results in a great deal of one-sided intellectualism. A teenager may become absorbed in sentimental *feelings* which if they are not counterbalanced may develop into exaggerated melancholic states or there may be temperamental out-bursts.

Or the cultivation of the *will* may be too strong, so that energy is mainly used for sport, because in this way the adolescent gets physical activity and seeks to satisfy the will force which burns in his soul.

We must be clear that it is when the forces of thinking, feeling and willing are not harmonised that the various diseases referred to may occur, and that such a harmony is essential at this stage of life if we are not to be torn to pieces when we have to face life.

SIMPLE HEADACHES AND THEIR MEANING

Illness in adult life is usually looked upon simply as a great nuisance and as something which occurs more or less by chance.

Take the person who wakes up with a headache. He takes a tablet with some patent name and perhaps half an hour later feels no pain. But soon there may be an uncomfortable feeling in the stomach and later there is tiredness and listlessness and everything seems a burden. The day drags on and after a bad night there is the awakening with an unpleasant heavy feeling. This passes off gradually, but the sufferer can see no sense or meaning in the headache and all its discomfort.

What is the true meaning of headaches and similar indispositions?

Let us take the case of a lady who suffered frequently from migraine. Her heart became easily influenced in its rhythm not only as a result of physical strain but through any excitement. The patient began to live a more harmonious life with regular spiritual and intellectual activity.

She tried to control her thoughts in the way described in Rudolf Steiners' books "*Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*", "*An Outline of Occult Science*" and other works. A typical exercise is to concentrate for a few minutes daily on a chosen object, for example a geometrical figure, perhaps a triangle, circle or an ellipse.

The exercise consists of concentrating with the utmost intensity and without allowing our thoughts to drift on to something else. We try to think of the laws of the triangle, the sum of all the angles, how many triangles we can describe and so on. After some days another subject may be chosen for the development of concentration. This may consist of the construction of a house, a chair or some object or it may be a thought we have read in a book.

The great effort of the soul in the practise of such intensive concentration gradually develops great inward strength with which we can attain the ability to direct our thoughts, so that thoughts will not govern our lives but we will be able to direct them. The greater the achievement of such thought control the more we feel the life of our thoughts to be like the flowering of a plant, and we shall be able then to form our thoughts into living pictures which the soul can grasp. Great poets have had such a

faculty as a natural gift.

Everyone can work successfully in strengthening the power of thought in this way with the most fruitful results in every domain of life. For example, after such work on the mind one may notice a new flow of ideas. It is as if the brain becomes an instrument into which stream the great thoughts of the invisible world. As a good violin becomes the instrument on which the accomplished player can produce beautiful music so the brain becomes open for the thoughts for which it is adapted.

The patient suffering from the headaches worked at the kind of thinking described and as long as she persevered with these efforts she had no further attacks. As soon as she became careless in her thinking the migraine occurred.

The important point is that this lady became quite free from her headaches when her soul activities — thinking, feeling and willing — *worked in harmony*. She cultivated this activated thought life and became free from physical discomfort in the circulation, and her breathing became freer, while all the functions of metabolism improved. Thus a beneficial balance can exist between the working of the head, the rhythm of breathing and circulation, and the metabolism.

MAN IS A THREE-FOLD BEING

This brings us to Rudolf Steiner's important discovery of the three-fold nature of man in regard to soul and body. He showed the connection between the nervous system and our faculty of *thinking*, the equally deep relation between all rhythmical events in the body and the *Feeling* life of the soul, and the third relationship existing between the working of the metabolic system and the forces of *Will*. [see [note 5](#)] Three examples will make this clear.

First, take the case of an old bookkeeper who for many years did no other work but figures and knew the accounts of his firm almost by heart. He became more and more nervous and sleepless and thought of nothing else but his accounts. He lost a great deal of weight and *was* sclerotic before he was sixty. Because the blood vessels, especially of the brain, became calcified he lost his memory, and finally one of the cerebral arteries broke and he died as a result of life-long *one-sided* brain work.

Second, there was the case of another man who suffered from early youth from a chest malformation. As a child he had rickets and the illness left its traces in the shape of the ribs. He became flat-chested and there was really too little space for the lungs and heart. Both rhythms, breathing and pulsation, were greatly dependent on the feeling life in this case. He suffered considerably from worry. Left alone in his house, he dreaded that somebody would come and attack him. His heart would race and he became short of breath. In dreams he was persecuted by wild animals and murderers and often woke up screaming.

This man had a great love of music and it helped him to overcome his fears. Why? The rhythm of the music helped him to regulate the unrhythmical beat of his heart. It could be observed that the feelings were strongly influenced by the condition of the organs of breathing and circulation. This man never could rise above these functions, and towards the end of his life he developed heart failure and emphysema of the lungs, the tissue of the lungs losing its elasticity.

Thirdly, to illustrate the connection between the Will and the metabolic system we can take the case of the woman teacher who, though successful in her work, had the greatest difficulty in making a decision.

When she wanted to change her work she hesitated for as long as ten years before doing so, and afterwards was never clear as to whether she had done the right thing. There was such a deficiency in the Will force that when out shopping she was unable even to decide which cabbage she wanted.

On the physical side she suffered from constipation and indigestion and was unable to digest fat foods. Her condition worsened and she began to suffer with the gall-bladder and liver, becoming so ill that she wandered from one spa to another. The weakness of Will was related to the disturbances which occurred in the metabolic system in the form of the digestive and bladder trouble.

We can see in these three cases how the three systems work in connection with the appropriate soul qualities.

But it should not be forgotten that man is one unity in spite of his three-foldness, and that harmony is necessary in all parts if a person is to be healthy. Many of the minor ailments we contract have no other goal but to restore lost harmony.

In our example of the lady who suffered from headaches we saw that she influenced, through the right kind of thinking activity, not only her nervous system but also the balance of circulation and breathing, and consequently the metabolism. The moment she neglected the practice of her thought life the result was seen in the rhythmic system; the heart became irregular; her mood was strongly affected, and congestion started in the digestive system.

Such a sufferer feels hampered; it is as if all over the body something remains undone. Just as in a post office letters and parcels accumulate when the regular delivery is held up through shortage of staff, so are deposits left in the various organs and this is felt especially in the nerves, where irritation is brought about by the smallest deposits, resulting in the headache.

When the metabolism is affected by wrong thinking, deposits remain in the body which should be eliminated. Less urine is produced and owing to this a decreased amount of salts can be dissolved in the water. Sometimes it is even possible to see this with the scales, for the migraine sufferer weighs more before and during an attack, since substance remains in the body which under healthy conditions would be secreted.

We can see that the great wisdom which rules the life of the body works against illness in a wonderful way. Pains force us to withdraw the use of our sense organs. Take the functioning of the eyes. When the eyes see, matter is split up in the nerve substance in the organs in a subtle way and delicate deposits remain. The pain of a headache causes us to avoid the effort of seeing and we know how much worse a headache becomes if we go to a theatre when the headache starts. The same thing holds good, of course, in regard to hearing.

Relaxation in a dark and silent room brings relief because the deposits are not added to by new ones and can be passed out of the body by the blood circulation and the body fluids. If this is not sufficient the system tries more drastically to eliminate the congestion in the metabolism and there is nausea and vomiting.

We can say, then, that the sick person gets rid of the substances with which he is overloaded; that before the migraine starts the organism has become too heavy, too earthly, and the healing power then tries to free the body from the deposits.

A good deal of truth may be discovered in dreams if we are fortunate enough to read the language of the pictures which occur in them. A man who suffered from migraine for many years had exceptionally good teeth which never gave him any trouble. Yet during the attacks of headache he dreamed continually that all his teeth came out one by one and lay on his tongue so that on waking he believed he was toothless. In these dreams, which were certainly connected with the headaches, the meaning of the migraine was expressed pictorially, the teeth representing the hardening process of the body which becomes ejected.

When the disturbed harmony connected with a headache is restored in a natural way either by the right remedy or by the migraine process itself — and not by narcotic drugs only — the sufferer may feel especially well afterwards and experience a feeling of being new-born after having sunk too deeply into matter. Similar feelings can occur after epileptic fits and in convalescence after some acute illness.

Careful consideration of these facts can affect our whole attitude to illness. We can even be grateful for the pain and may well say to ourselves "Wrong thinking was the cause of the illness. It disturbed the balance of my soul, and upset my bodily functions. I would have grown stiff and heavy in my organism without the headache which saved me from something worse and helped me to be myself again".

The case of the headache illustrates the principle of illness: that the balance in the three systems, nervous, rhythmic and metabolic is disturbed.

Often illness does not reveal itself before the organism makes the effort to correct the disturbed harmony, as in the case of simple headaches. What we regard as illness can actually be a healing process.

“COLDS” AND THE GERM THEORY

Many diseases are caused by the danger that the body may become too hardened, and some of the various “colds” belong to this type of illness.

A cold is often nothing else but the fact that the external cold of the air, water, or wind is allowed to penetrate into the physical body. This cannot happen without damage because life means for a human being to exist as an individual and he can do so only if he is not too much affected by the external influences.

Usually a person's reaction against cold from outside is to bring the warmth of the blood to the spot where the external cold must be counteracted. If the warmth is not strong enough in the body, then the outer coldness penetrates the whole system. A part of the external world, the realm of the bacilli, finds its way into the different organs.

The organism starts to resist the intruders and the struggle is revealed in different ways.

Fever, perspiration and coughing are symptoms of the battle. A running nose gets rid of many substances inside, which would injure different organs if they had to remain in the body. This applies to a nasal cold, sore throat, bronchial catarrh, bronchitis and pneumonia.

The efforts from within have to be particularly strong when the illness is as serious as pneumonia. There is a high temperature and inflammation in the lungs. The organism tries by the congestion of the blood, the swelling of the tissues and finally by the formation of pus to free itself from the foreign bodies, which have penetrated. For the germs are foreign bodies in the human organs.

A splinter of wood which slips under the surface of the skin is a dead foreign body. It causes usually a complicated process at the place of its penetration. At first an inflammation takes place through which the tissues become looser and under formation of pus an abscess can develop. As soon as it breaks an opening towards the surface becomes possible and the splinter can emerge. Naturally the whole procedure is more complicated in a pneumonia; for the bacilli which are the foreign bodies in the human system are not merely a dead splinter but substance in which is life, with special laws of growing and spreading.

In modern medicine some success has been achieved in dealing with diseases due to the invasion of the body by special germs. All remedies such as the sulphonilamides (“M. and B.”), penicillin, streptomycin, aureomycin, and others, are used for the purpose of killing or weakening germs. This is the method which is used when we regard illness as something coming from outside — something which occurs purely by chance.

The other way is to try to discover the real inner condition of man when he becomes exposed to the world of bacilli — to find how the system came to be thrown out of balance.

During the war it was often noticeable to what extent it depends on the individual whether he falls a prey to germs or not. A man of my acquaintance maintained his mental fortitude magnificently during the war years despite all the terrors he lived through. But when peace came and he saw the dwindling morale of the people, he lost his inner fighting spirit and suffered from moods of depression, seeing no meaning in life. When this depression was at its height he caught one of the severe epidemic diseases — although in previous years he had been much more exposed to the disease and had resisted it.

Sometimes during a war the general health of a nation can improve. This is not merely because normally people eat too much and get a more healthful diet during ration time. It is due to the fact that people develop increased inner resistance as a result of strenuous and difficult times and there is a powerful incentive to keep active and fit.

WE MUST CONSIDER LIFE AS A WHOLE

In the descriptions of the three phases of childhood up to the age of 21, we tried to touch on the different causes of diseases which may be contracted according to the age or the mental state.

We can now consider how as adults we may look at ailments which appear later in life. When grown up we should learn to use the body only as an instrument of soul and Spirit. If we are not strong enough to obey the call of the mind, then the soul may damage the body.

Take the case of a man who wanted to become an artist and whose external circumstances forced him into a business life. His longing for art and the splendour of colours remained in him. But he had to become a house agent. This occupation caused inward dissatisfaction and every morning before he went to his office it was as if he would have to swallow a bitter pill. Week after week and year after year life passed by with the same discontentment. (Are there not many people who have similar experiences?) Such a struggle had its effect on the body of this man, whose very appearance made one think immediately of an artist.

The symptoms showing that the bodily organs became affected were seen in his feeling of oppression in the company of other people, when he felt the urge to open all the windows. The rhythm of his breathing and blood circulation was disturbed so that his anxiety increased. He suffered from bad dreams from which he woke full of fears. Finally, there were pains in the chest, caused by cramps of the arteries of the heart. These vessels became hardened and he contracted **Angina Pectoris**.

The ordinary doctor, asked about the cause of such an illness, will suggest perhaps smoking, drinking, or the strenuous nature of our modern way of living. But if we look more deeply into the case we find that this man was destined by his faculties to become a painter but lacked the courage to follow his vocation. He was once afraid to do what he longed to do because he wanted to earn enough money to live a comfortable life and to please his wife, who wanted luxury. This he would have been unlikely to achieve had he become an artist. So he chose a profession which brought in more money, though less satisfaction, and this caused his illness.

We can see from this example that what we do in one epoch of life has its definite consequences in a later one. Everything comes back to us, but in a transformed way. Such a case helps us to think of life as a unity and it brings forward an important factor which can be called destiny. By this is meant that events in life do not usually happen just by chance but through a deeper reason and this reason often lies in the individual himself.

ACCIDENTS AND DISABLEMENT DO NOT HAPPEN BY CHANCE

Only recently it was discovered that even accidents cannot be considered to happen merely through chance but are brought about by the person himself. An American writer, Flanders Dunbar, points out in "Psychosomatic Diagnosis" that "from 88 to 90 per cent of all industrial accidents are personal, that is, seem to be related to something in the personality of the individual." Among the significant case histories quoted is the story of a Roman Catholic woman who did not want to go to confession and who fell downstairs on her way to the church and broke her leg.

In accidents the working of destiny is often well concealed. Take a man who was quite intelligent, but somehow rather vain and through his good figure admired by many women. He could easily read all kinds of difficult books but he was superficial and achieved nothing for his future life. When he became a soldier during the war he saw a great deal of suffering. Still he was quite egotistic until one day he was wounded in the arm and after terrible suffering he lost his right arm.

That was a real turning point in his life. He could suddenly understand the pains of others. Soon after he was released from the services he started a new life. The first thing was to learn to use his left hand, and amazingly enough he found that he became more skilful with one hand than he was previously with both.

After two years he thought he could teach other disabled people and was highly successful. Later he thought how much better it would be to teach children, for one could develop their faculties even more, and so he became a teacher, and was loved by all around him. Clearly, but for his loss he would never have developed into the unselfish and lovable personality that he became.

Thus we can look at such an event as the loss of a limb either in the usual way and think merely about its unfortunate aspect or we can ask ourselves: What does this destiny really mean? Does it enable me to do something which I could not do before?

It may seem difficult for the modern man to see wisdom in the loss of a limb, and even more difficult to see meaning in the life which a chronic and incurable sufferer is forced to lead. Yet if one is fortunate enough to watch an incurable patient over a period, many interesting discoveries can be made.

There is the case of an old lady who has been paralysed for many years. She cannot leave her bed and lies there quietly day and night. She appreciates everything that is done for her. When the daughter of the house brings flowers she is grateful, and when she receives a book she is delighted. She is keenly interested in everything. She never complains, and hardly ever speaks about the terrible nerve disease which made it impossible to move her limbs. But she was not always so mild and controlled. She was once extremely harsh in her attitude to others. She was very interested in money and was most egotistical and inconsiderate to servants. Through her long illness she became a different being.

THE LENGTH OF LIFE AND EUTHANASIA

Another case throws light on the problem of the incurable person and the question of euthanasia or "mercy killing".

This woman suffered from a bad heart and endured one attack after another. She had no fear of death and longed to liberate her soul from the frail body to which she was tied. From the point of view of her bodily condition it was difficult to see why she continued to live. Many months passed and she herself seemed astonished that she could carry on. But one morning she died without pain or suffering, just like breathing out. The calendar showed that it was Christmas Day.

Many people might not take this seriously, but observation of this personality during her illness left no doubt that the patient was waiting for the special moment when her time had come and her time was Christmas Day. No external proof can be given for such a viewpoint but no one who has had such an experience will doubt that we have our special moment when it is right for us to die.

It is indeed true that we do not only seek to be born at a special moment — as was mentioned in the case of Goethe's birth — but that we want also to die under a special constellation. We are usually unconscious of this, just as we are unconscious of our **will** to be born at a special moment. If this were realised it would place euthanasia in an entirely different light. Fear that a law in favour of it would lead to misuse represents only a superficial point of view. The important thing is that the human spirit should be given the freedom to abandon the physical body when the time has come according to its destiny.

OLD AGE

Old age and early childhood can be compared.

The spiritual being of the little child still only surrounds and does not yet penetrate the physical body, and because of this we feel it is near to the spiritual world from whence it recently descended. This explains the charm which the child has for the adult.

In elderly people the spiritual forces are withdrawing from the physical body and also surround it, so that old people, too, are near to the spiritual world to which they will soon ascend. In both children and old people we can see a certain helplessness and clumsiness because they have not yet, or have no longer, the power in their limbs possessed by the fully incarnated adult.

Since life should be considered as a whole it is important to have the right approach to old age. In modern times a real understanding for the final phase of life is less and less apparent and little more has been achieved in this direction than the idea that old people should have a home.

Today, when old age is dreaded so much there is no greater compliment for a person than to be told that he looks twenty years younger than he is. Mother and daughter, it seems, must look "just like sisters".

So often men and women believe they can remain untouched by age and that they can allow themselves to behave as light-heartedly and irresponsibly as they did when they were adolescents. The strange thing is that just these types, who live up to their fifties and even sixties like boys and girls suddenly become old men and women and find themselves immersed in difficulties.

What are these difficulties? Concerned only with themselves, they forget the necessities of others, and if they have some minor ailment they speak to all and sundry about it. As the memory becomes weaker they repeat and repeat the sad story of their ailment whenever they get the chance. They complain that

no one cares for them and feel continually touchy and hurt. All these negative qualities in old people — and many more could be added — lead so often to unhappiness in the home and ruin the life of many a family.

This is all unnecessary if a human being learns to grow old in the right way. This is possible if the elderly person can detach himself mentally from the burden which old age naturally brings to the decaying physical body. As a matter of fact, the human spirit becomes actually freer from earthly heaviness in old age, and this can only be a blessing if the ageing man or woman goes through this experience with consciousness.

In a future world which will educate people in a more spiritual way, the moaning and groaning of old people about their age will change greatly, and it will be known that the last years should be used to understand the past life and to prepare for the time after death.

DESTINY AND ILLNESS

If we consider life as a unity and see the working of destiny — as in the ease of the artist who missed his vocation by becoming a business man — it becomes obvious that destiny cannot be fulfilled with only one earthly life. This is a conception to be found in nearly all religions and among great philosophers.

Rudolf Steiner has shown that our earthly existence has meaning only if we know that life ends not with physical death but that the spirit of man returns to earth after some time into a body which the child has to transmute according to the individual's destiny. The idea will be familiar to many readers as Reincarnation.

Man has the possibility to compensate in a new life for his failures in a previous one and he can continue a task which he may have left unfinished before. Dr. Steiner has made it clear in many books that the whole question of illness and health is deeply connected with the fact of repeated earthly lives. [see [note 6](#)]

This knowledge shows that the backward child, for example, is born into a body that cannot be the right vessel for the spirit and that the child is backward for reasons to be found in a preceding life. Mistakes in one life may prevent the possibility of building up a body which can be the bearer of a sound mind. An entirely new understanding for backward children arises from such a conception.

The great care and love which is so essential in a truly curative education can bring to a child so much strength for the future that it may well be able in a following life to overcome the difficulties caused by his or her own faults. This knowledge has given the impulse to the foundation of many curative institutions for backward children by the pupils of Dr. Steiner in England, America, Germany, Holland, and in other countries.

It is very remarkable to observe that often the destiny of such children guides them just to parents or others who are specially fond of them. In some homes it can be seen that the youngest in a family of normal children is a Mongol child and that parents, brothers and sisters may love this child. It is as if the helpless creature who has to undergo such a difficult incarnation would bring his remedy — the great love which he needs — into the family. This can be seen in a general way in the institutions for backward children founded on Rudolf Steiner's teaching, where there is a living understanding for the past and the future of the backward child.

Steiner's teaching on the subject of Reincarnation is really essential in our time. Already in 1910 he pointed to the connection which exists between an illness and a preceding life and his book "[The Manifestations of Karma](#)" shows clearly how destiny works through repeated earthly lives. An example given in this book will be quoted because it enabled the author to gain a deeper insight into the destiny of a patient.

Describing a case of Measles contracted late in life Dr. Steiner shows that the illness was caused by the person's previous life; that in the former incarnation this personality took little interest in the external world and was much occupied with his own inner life. He wanted always to know only by a kind of inner pondering what to do in special circumstances.

“The weakness of the soul resulting from this led to the formation of forces during existence between

death and rebirth which exposed the organism comparatively late in life to an attack of measles” writes Rudolf Steiner.

Let us recall what was said earlier on the subject of measles. Through this disease the child can get rid of the forces of heredity. But a person who from a previous life has the weakness which Steiner mentions cannot easily shake off these forces during childhood. (The weakness of this personality was to avoid facing the external world in its reality and to be taken up with his own soul life.) A person who is not able to shake off in time the forces of heredity remains in a certain way “backward.” Through that condition he is inclined to catch measles even as an adult. Thus it is not through mere chance that the person had measles so late; the cause lay in a former life.

To the modern person it may be disturbing to think that such an event as an illness late in life is inevitable, but this need not be so, for as indicated in “The Manifestations of Karma”:

“Let us now assume that this personality before developing measles had succeeded in gaining such soul forces that he was no longer exposed to all kinds of self-deception, having completely corrected this failing. In this case the acquired soul force would render the attack of measles quite unnecessary, since the tendencies brought forth in this organism during its formation had been effaced through the stronger soul forces acquired by self-education.”

In medical practice such an indication can be of the greatest value. The author recalls a case of measles in a middle-aged patient (well over forty). A hard working farmer, he had always a great longing towards higher ideals, but with it he had a soul weakness: he made no effort whatsoever to fulfill his wishes.

Hiding his inner laziness from himself, he gained consolation from the thought that his children might achieve, through a good education, what he himself could not accomplish. So he sent his children to a first-class school and lived in the self-deception that his own slackness might be redeemed in his children.

What happened? One day, when one of his children had measles he caught it at the age of nearly fifty and was seriously ill. The thought of a connection between the “late” measles and a special attitude in a preceding life was most illuminating and helpful to the author in understanding this patient, though it would not have been right to tell it to a personality who was not prepared to accept the idea of reincarnation.

It is hoped that enough has been said to show that we can gradually find that other illnesses are connected not only with the present life alone but also with a previous incarnation.

The suffering connected with an illness can help enormously to develop the strength of the soul for a future time.

HOW TO LOOK AT ILLNESS

We have now come to the end of this little book, although not the end of the subject. From what has been said it will be clear that in order to understand illness we have to consider the whole of man's life. We must look more deeply into the subject of illness than is possible if we consider only chance, heredity, or the germ theory; or take the superficial view associated with euthanasia.

The diseases which attack us in our childhood — those occurring as a result of the crises of puberty are particularly significant — may be regarded not as a misfortune but as a blessing, since they provide opportunities for our development.

The deeper reasons for our illnesses at various ages, reviewed in the light of the threefold being of man, show that the forces of Thinking, Feeling and Willing must work harmoniously if we are to enjoy better health.

An understanding of our destiny will be of the greatest help, for as Rudolf Steiner points out, “The conception of karma does not paralyse our activities in regard to healing. On the contrary, it will bring us into harmony with regard to the hardest fate, with regard to the incurability of a certain disease ...

“The understanding of karma alone makes it possible for us to comprehend the course of an illness in the right way, and to understand that in our present life we see the karmic effects of our previous life.”

Of the greatest importance is our attitude to the suffering which arises from illness, and our understanding of what steps we have to take when disease comes, when we may be disabled through some accident or when we face old age. If we can be rid of the strange idea that death ends everything and can understand and live with the idea of reincarnation, which gives such a broader view of life, we shall be inwardly fortified to meet blows of fate which may befall us.

To all these problems only a short contribution has been possible in a book of this length. If, however, some reader may be interested enough to read the more comprehensive books on Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy the aim of this book will have been achieved.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The invitation to write "How to Look at Illness" has caused me to feel great pleasure and a greater hesitation. It was a pleasure to write the book because this new approach to health and illness may well help many people in these difficult times. The hesitation was due to the fact that in a book of this size it is difficult to deal as fully as I would wish with deep subjects such as the problems of birth and death, the illnesses of children and adults, and the meaning of life. The reader is therefore asked to be patient with the author who is obliged sometimes only to touch on important matters without giving fuller explanations. These may be found, however, in the books by Dr. Rudolf Steiner and others referred to in the text.

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Footnotes

Note 1:

"Inferior stocks are increasing far too rapidly, and are a menace to the future" said Dr. Barnes, Bishop of Birmingham, according to the *Daily Telegraph* (Sept. 4th, 1950).

Note 2:

"On the 28th August 1749, at mid-day, as the clock struck twelve, I came into the world, at Frankfort-on-the-Main. My horoscope was propitious; the sun stood in the sign of the Virgin and had culminated for the day. Jupiter and Venus looked on him with a friendly eye, and Mercury not adversely, while Saturn and Mars kept themselves indifferent. The moon alone, just full, exerted the power of her reflection all the more, as she had then reached her planetary hour. She opposed herself, Therefore, to my birth, which could not be accomplished until this hour was passed." — Goethe's *Truth and Poetry*.

Note 3:

"It is rather a terrifying thought that the whole of the protein in the human body is replaced in roughly 160 days." writes Professor E. C. Dodds in the *British Medical Journal* (Dec. 2nd, 1950, p.1237).

Note 4:

The author shows how these diseases arise in his book *Adolescence And Diseases of Puberty*.

Note 5:

Details of the threefold nature of man are given in Rudolf Steiner's books, particularly in those dealing with medicine, psychology and education, and Dr. E. Kolisko's booklets also contain much helpful information. See *Lectures to Teachers; The Threefold Commonwealth*; etc., by Rudolf Steiner, and *The Bodily Foundation of Thinking; The Bodily Foundation of Feeling; The Bodily Foundation of Human Will* by Dr. E. Kolisko.

Note 6:

See Steiner's *The Manifestations of Karma*.

Other Works by Dr. Glas:

- [How to Look at Illness](#)

