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Faith in Health and Health in Life

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It is all too common that people must learn to cope with the knowledge that a loved one is fighting a potentially deadly disease. The advancements of modern medicine, while helping to heal the body, oftentimes neglect the emotional and psychological effects an affliction has on the patient as well as his family and friends. Faith and religion of any sort can be an incredibly effective tool in dealing with such a distressing situation; not as a salve for the physical pain, but in addressing the emotional wounds that may result for both the patient and his loved ones. For example, it is simple to explain the cause of a disease: the mutation of cells or the failure of the immune system. It is infinitely more difficult to explain, and impossible in medical terms, why a certain person was afflicted to begin with. What, in particular, did that person do to "deserve" such misfortune? This is where faith and religion may offer answers, and more importantly comfort, that cannot be found in any physician's reference book."

Faith in Health and Health in Life

by

Sarah M. Piston

It is all too common that people must learn to cope with the knowledge that a loved one is fighting a potentially deadly disease. The advancements of modern medicine, while helping to heal the body, oftentimes neglect the emotional and psychological effects an affliction has on the patient as well as his family and friends. Faith and religion of any sort can be an incredibly effective tool in dealing with such a distressing situation; not as a salve for the physical pain, but in addressing the emotional wounds that may result for both the patient and his loved ones. For example, it is simple to explain the cause of a disease: the mutation of cells or the failure of the immune system. It is infinitely more difficult to explain, and impossible in medical terms, why a certain person was inflicted to begin with. What, in particular, did that person do to “deserve” such misfortune? This is where faith and religion may offer answers, and more importantly comfort, that cannot be found in any physician’s reference book.

In order to address how one can use faith and religion to calm them in times of need, it is necessary to look at different interpretations of faith and how they apply to humanity. This does not mean examining the different types of religion. Rather, this is how a person interprets faith and, subsequently, how they apply it to their outlook on life, regardless of whether or not this outlook has any basis in religious doctrine or practice. One faith-based belief is that of fatalism. Fatalists believe that life has been planned for them and everything that ever has or will happen to them is out of their hands. A fatalist may tend to look at the onset of a disease with the philosophy that “everything happens for a reason.” In sharp contrast, there is an atheistic approach to life; that there is no god or higher power than themselves.

Both fatalism and atheism are extremes, and as such, can prove to be dangerous ideologies if used in an attempt to assuage the fears of both patients and loved ones. An unquestioning belief in fate can cause inactivity and complacency. This might occur in the feeling that fighting to live by actively fighting the disease on all fronts – physically and emotionally - is unnecessary. “Why be proactive? It was fate that the disease appeared in the first place, and it will ultimately be fate that decides if the disease will claim a life, or disappear.” Fatalism is also dangerous because it belittles the definitive characteristics which make us human: reason and, equally as important, the ability to act on reason. As beings with reason, we can choose our destinies. Of course, there are always events, some big, some small, that change our plans. But it is the incredible power of human nature to accept unplanned events, such as cancer, and to continue to fight and push on.

Atheism can also inhibit a person in dealing with a deadly disease of their own, or of a loved one. Since atheism assumes that there is no higher power, it also assumes that humanity, with all of its downfalls, is the height of existence. Unlike fatalism, it gives ultimate power of choice and action to people, but at the cost of one of the most powerful weapons that we, as humans, possess: faith.

But the majority of people do not live in these extremes. The majority of us live in a sort of middle way, believing in a higher power to guide our life, not command it. Of course, this middle path is followed in varying degrees by different people and always varies in degrees in an individual’s lifetime. There are always events which test our faith; oneself or a loved one becoming seriously ill. In such an instance, we are presented with a choice: to abandon faith and face the illness without the hope of divine assistance, or to

draw upon faith, not necessarily to cure, but to make life whole. It was once said that “the only two guarantees in life are death and taxes.” In truth, this somewhat pessimistic statement is not far off. The only two guarantees are birth, which has happened, and death, which inevitably will. It is one’s responsibility, therefore, to make the most of the interim, living life to the fullest extent possible, even in trying circumstances. It is with faith that this “fullest extent” can occur. Faith, while completely intangible, is a force that cannot be denied. As such, it is also difficult to define. But the belief in a benevolent power higher than humanity has existed for thousands of years and remains an incredible force that one may draw upon to face any challenge.

Faith and religion may cause miraculous cures; there have been many recoveries in history that cannot be explained medically. More commonly though, faith and religion play a role, not in prolonging life, for even 100 years is a short time on earth, but in making life worthwhile; in giving us the strength to work towards our goals and dreams, whether that be as the head of a company or as a parent. Everyone has the power and the potential to make life better for themselves and for others, and it is with faith that this potential can be achieved. It is therefore incredibly important for people dealing with the illness of a loved one to incorporate faith into their lives. It can be the source of much comfort, giving us the will to live as well as the will to live well.