

BOOK REVIEW: The Fourfold Path to Healing

Reviewed by Kate Walter, Garden Teacher, Toronto Waldorf School March 2006

Accompanying the work with children in the education at Waldorf schools come enriching opportunities for adult study, and it is not easy to leave a bookstore or library of literature from Anthroposophic writers without a book or two in hand.

One day I purchased Thomas Cowan's book, The Fourfold Path to Healing, a beautiful guide to a conscious approach to living, and the book has proved a sound investment in my household. Cowan's work is in family practice medicine, and he enriched his practice, studying nutrition, herbal remedies, homeopathy and anthroposophic medicine as well as conventional western medicine. He has synthesized those studies, and in his book he describes his approach: ""Right diet for healing the physical body; beneficial medicines or therapies for the Life-Force body; healing movement and exercise for the Emotional Body; and effective thinking activity for the Mental Body, activity that moves the human spirit forward in its evolution toward meaning, service and health."

To open his book Cowan describes Rudolf Steiner's* picture of human development and presents it as a foundation of his medical thinking. This picture is also the foundation of the Waldorf school movement, and Cowan's presentation, simple and clear, gives us a lively explanation of this multidimensional view of life.

With important sections by Sally Fallon and Jaimen McMillan, The Fourfold Path to Healing suggests choices to make with the food and physical exercise and thought to support health, steps we can take to bring our movement and our thinking and feeling lives into a place of harmony. The four elements of the fourfold path on the way to healthy living are nutrition, therapeutics through non-toxic remedies, movement and meditation.

Cowan's section titled "The Art of Medicine" includes discussion of 14 major areas of disease in humans, with suggestions for foods and remedies and life style alterations that can lead to beneficial changes in health. In this writing, Dr.Cowan presents such a knowledgeable and reverent understanding of the functioning of the human body and it's relation to the universe that I find myself feeling warmly reassured that life, full of miracle and correspondence and mystery, really can be lived in a balanced and harmonious fashion.

I find his anecdotal paragraphs particularly interesting. The stories he relates bring life to his message, and the message is always delivered with the humble reminder that for all that we know, we still really don't know. And yet, in the unknowing, we can move with confidence along the path. "The purpose of this book," he writes, "is to provide, for each of the four realms of the human being, rules and guidelines that work; and to stimulate the Mental Body, dwelling place of the human spirit, to become its own wise physician through the exercise of that activity that makes the human being uniquely human -- focused meditation, which is deliberate and objective thought.

Sally Fallon, citing Weston Price* as a major influence, finds wisdom in traditional diets of peoples of the world. Her work in nutrition opens the Fourfold Path to Healing, and her opening words are strong.

“The degradation of (our) ...food supply.” she writes, “-- from factory farming to industrial processing -- is so pervasive that it requires some effort to find good quality foods, and the same effort must be applied to avoiding foods that are overly harmful. This list of harmful foods begins with refined sugars and white flour, which provide plenty of calories but which have been shorn of the nutrients that naturally occur in sweet foods and in grains. To digest and assimilate sugar and white flour, the body must draw on its own reserves of vitamins and minerals, leading to depletion and deficiencies. In addition, sugar and white flour cause glucose to enter the bloodstream very quickly. When the body tries to compensate for this rapid rise in blood sugar, diabetes, hypoglycemia and adrenal insufficiency can result. These conditions open a veritable Pandora’s Box of unpleasant conditions -- from allergies to depression. “

In her nutritional analysis, Fallon describes the physical nature of food and its relation to the physical human body, and she offers very interesting information about the physical effects of what we eat. She holds a bigger picture, as well, her analysis including recognition of the need of all parts of our being to be nourished.

“The challenge to modern men and women involves melding a certain amount of time for food preparation and meals into a busy life-style along with recognition that the way we cook and eat has a profound effect on the quality of our life, our state of health and the nourishment of the mind and soul.”

It was Jaimen McMillan, the third author of The Fourfold Path to Healing, whose name first caught my eye. I knew when I saw it that I wanted this book in my library.

Jaimen McMillan, founder of the discipline known as Spacial Dynamics, has worked with thousands of people all over the world, helping them feel better through the way they move. Taking inspiration from sport and from a multicultural study of movement traditions, McMillan continually works to develop and teach movement activities that encourage balance and health, and I have been fortunate to participate in some of his classes through the years. I enjoy practicing the exercises and games he teaches, and I’ve wished for written material to support my practice. Hard as it is to write about movement exercises, McMillan has done it, and hard as it is to study a movement exercise in a book, I am grateful for the written reminders of ways and reasons to keep moving toward an upright and flexible stance. The Fourfold Path to Healing presents explanations, with accompanying drawings, of an amazing number of movement exercises and visualizations designed to encourage vitality in the human being.

“Many books on psychology and health,” McMillan writes, “urge readers to visualize the results they desire. This important step includes the whole human being in a given activity. When it comes to changing our movement, however, visualization is not enough. We need to do more than visualize -- which is based on the sense of sight and is intellect-

centered. We must both visualize and create the space around ourselves that we need in order to accomplish a particularly gesture or goal. “

The Fourfold Path to Healing has become a reference book at our house, and every time I peruse it, I learn something.

In his section of the art of medicine, Cowan includes what he calls a postscript titled “How to be a patient.”

“Many years of practice,” Cowan writes, “have taught me that I have no cures for any disease, and neither does any form of medicine. What I strive for is the ability to listen and unlock the wisdom and magic of each person’s inner healer. This means listening without interference, without judgement and without preconceptions. In other words, listening with love. I invite all to join me in this quest to remold the practice of medicine into an image of compassion, an image of true healing.”

And I invite all people who are interested in feeding this vision of compassion and true healing on earth to take a look at this beautiful book on the fourfold path.

The Fourfold Path to Healing by Dr. Thomas Cowan with Sally Fallon and Jaimen McMillan, published in 2004 by New Trends Publishing.

*Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) esotericist, scientist, philosopher, scholar

*Weston A. Price (1870-1925) doctor of dentistry, pioneer in the study of nutrition