

CHAPTER VIII: CLAIM #3 – FAITH HEALS

But I want to move from here now to the third claim that makes up the arena of the spirituality health link and this is what it is. It says that faith heals. Faith heals and when this claim is made that “faith heals” what is meant here is not that faith in Jesus heals, for example, or that faith in Allah heals, for example. The argument or the claim is that spiritual faith in general as a psychological state is healing. The psychological state of faith can heal you for reasons science and medicine don’t yet fully understand, but what one believes in, what one has faith in doesn’t matter. And this is how Benson puts the matter. He says, “I describe God with a capital “G” in this book, but I do hope that all my readers are going to understand, you can believe in anything you want.” You can believe in--you can be a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Hindu. You can believe in gods or goddesses. It doesn’t matter he says because whatever name you give the object you worship, the results of believing in God or whatever it is are the same, he says. So they’re very, very emphatic about this point, and that makes it perhaps all the more important and interesting historically for you to realize that historically this claim that faith heals was a Christian claim, has its origins specifically in a set of Protestant traditions in the second half of the 19th century in the United States with strong ties to the broader Evangelical traditions that argued in a range of ways that the best was, the most powerful way to experience God’s presence in your life is through realizing the Biblical promise of healing through faith. The Bible promised, these groups said, it promises us that if you believe, you will be healed. So, then it went on to say if this is true, why not consciously cultivate faith as a kind of a spiritual exercise in the service of better health.

Now, the movements that made these kinds of arguments went by a range of names, some of them called themselves--they were mind cure movements, practical Christianity, new thought, Christian Science, all of them took root at a time--and this is significant--when mainstream medicine was widely seen as ineffective or even worse, when people in all sorts of ways were eager to find alternatives. This was a time when homeopathy was also on tap, dietary therapies, water therapies. But the mind-cure therapies routed in this Christian framework, seemed to many to be particularly effective forms of therapies.

William James talked about them in his *Varieties of Religious Experiences* in 1902. He called these groups--he collectively called these groups--the religion of healthy mindedness. And this is what he said about what they were doing. And I hadn't quite been able to discern what kind of tone he was taking when he wrote, "The blind have been made to see, the halt to walk; lifelong invalids have had their health restored... One hears of the 'Gospel of Relaxation', of the 'Don't Worry Movement', of people who repeat to themselves, 'Youth, health, vigor!'"--looking in the mirror, by the way, to really drive home the point.

Well, you might be thinking, well, that was the late 19th century, but that's not--nothing to do with us today. These movements have all pretty much died out, haven't they? Well, of course Christian Science hasn't--it has survived and it was actually the most radical of these mind-cure movements. But probably a more relevant legacy of these mind cure movements is something all of you have heard of: the power of positive thinking. And particularly the idea of the power of positive thinking as extolled by the guy who kind of coined the term Norman Vincent Peale in the 1940s and '50s, and who spoke to the power of positive thinking not just before his congregation because he was a reverend, he was a minister, but through radio shows, through his magazine called *Guideposts*, through endlessly reprinted paperback books. It was Peale who made the power of positive thinking into a broad-based, popular idea and it was ironically enough also Peale who began first to explicitly detach the idea of the power of positive thinking from its Christian roots, encouraging people instead to just think of the power of positive thinking as this fantastic resource they had in their own minds that you can make yourself sick by thinking the wrong thoughts, he said, but you can also make yourself well. It's all about you.

The Christian community listened to this and some of them came down quite hard on Peale. He got quite an earful. But even as they sputtered, the popular acclaim, the popular response to this idea that we have healing powers on tap within us and it's all up to us seemed unstoppable. By the 1960s Americans believed in the power of positive thinking but did medicine? Peale spoke to the masses but the medical community didn't

really seem to be paying any attention to this. What changed? Well, what changed or what had to happen was the 1970s came along. And the 1970s was another time of increasing discontent with mainstream medicine, with its apparent limitations, with its apparent overly mechanized approach to care, with a new interest in alternatives that might re-empower patients, and in this time of rising discontent--and medicine was unaware of this. These were times when books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* were being published back in the basement feminist presses, when the terms like “holistic medicine” were finding wide currency. In this time one man, a guy named Norman Cousins, functions as an agent of change. He’s the guy that all of us remember as a person who laughed himself back to health. But in fact, he did more than that. What he actually did is he systematically applied a mix of laughter, he watched Marx Brothers films, he watched old reruns of *Candid Camera*, but he also systematically schools himself in positive thinking. He refused to believe in the dire predictions of his doctor. He’d been diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease, his doctors thought a probably--a very likely fatal disease--and he refused to believe them. And against all the odds, he, in fact, got well. And against all the odds in addition, he found himself telling his story not to a group of, you know, sort of mind-cure people in some hallway someplace, but he found himself telling his story to doctors in the pages of *The New England Journal of Medicine*. And remember this is happening in the early 1970s. Remember the backdrop and then you’ll better understand why the response of the medical profession was nothing short of remarkable, why Cousins could later say that he received or later tell how he received no fewer than 3,000 letters from physicians responding to his *New England Journal of Medicine* article praising his courage for pursuing an unorthodox form of treatment. He would be invited to join the staff of UCLA Medical School. He had no medical credentials but they wanted him on their staff. And the fact--the Research Center in Psychoneuroimmunology at UCLA today is called the Norman Cousins Research Center for PNI, or something like that--but bears his name. So, why was the medical community so quick to embrace a man who you might think they would find very threatening, who had turned his back on their treatments and their understandings? Because Cousins offered them a way out. They knew the public was restless. They knew that alternative treatments were increasingly popular. They knew that the positive thinking ideology was

a firm cornerstone of American popular thinking--popular culture thinking. Cousins told them that they could be part of all of this. They could be part of all of this, but they could do it without abandoning their own standards, their own methods, their own professional commitments. In fact, they could not only be part of this, they could own all of this. They could own all of this because they could study it. And they could make sense of it in their own terms. And look at the way he's talking about what is going on here. Look at the language he uses to describe in his *New England Journal of Medicine* article, what he thinks happened, is happening to him. It's not about the divine or even about some sort of abstract, spiritual mental force. It's about chemistry. And if it's about chemistry, then it's okay to be a doctor and be interested in this because chemistry we all know, chemistry is safe. Chemistry is a professionally safe way to think about these things. So having helped the medical community recast the power of positive thinking vision into terms that it could be comfortable with, one way in which the history goes from here is into a set of discussions about the way in which positive thinking, maybe, actually is just another way of talking about the placebo effect. And the placebo effect during these years is now no longer just some sort of fake medicine, it's now seen as an effect that produces real changes in the brain with real consequences for health. I won't talk about this, but I'm using these slides more to illustrate. I'm not going to talk you through all of them. But you can see the brain lights up when you take placebo morphine, when you take fake morphine, something real is happening. And it might have health consequences. So, the placebo effect becomes one way of domesticating the concept that faith heals, that the power of positive thinking might have real effects.