

Gladys McGarey, MD: the Mother of Holistic Medicine

BY DEBRA NELSON-HOGAN



Gladys Taylor McGarey, MD, MD (H), is internationally recognized as the Mother of Holistic Medicine. Born in India in 1920 to medical missionaries, her story would make most historic novels pale in comparison. Dr. McGarey grew up among lepers, elephants, and Indian royalty. She travelled through India on medical missions with her parents and, by chance, was stopped by a group of people chanting for no less than Mahatma Gandhi. I read her biography, *Born to Heal*, written by Analea McGarey, her oldest daughter, and it is full of richness, grace, grit, and humor as the book describes the journey in a medical environment dominated by men who were wed to allopathic ideals. She began practicing medicine in 1946, and years of practice, spiritual belief, studies from the Edgar Cayce works, and what she learned living in India taught Dr. McGarey far more than what she learned in medical school.

Dr. McGarey co-founded the American Holistic Medical Association in 1977, and served as its first president. Her book, *The Physician Within You*, published in 2002, invites people to search for the healing power within themselves, and tells the stories of those who have done so. Her work through the Gladys Taylor McGarey Medical Foundation has helped to expand the knowledge and application of holistic principles through scientific research and education. Dr. McGarey is past president of the Arizona Board of Homeopathic Medical Examiners; was a member of the Board of Directors and a Founding Diplomat of the American Board of Holistic Medicine; and is on the Advisory Board of Arizona State University East. After being a family physician for over 55 years, she retired in 2004 from Scottsdale Holistic Medical Center and now is doing consulting in Living Medicine. I talked with Dr. McGarey about her views on holistic medicine.

Q: How did your family background influence your medical practice?

DR. MCGAREY. I was born in India—my parents were medical missionaries in the Presbyterian Church. I was raised among Hindus and Muslims. My concept of healing and of the physician within started in India. I knew from the time that I was two years old that I was destined to be a physician. It was an inner knowledge, an awareness I was born with—what the Hindus called dharma, a cosmic principle that defines the different natures of all beings.

My parents would see 200 patients a day, and were doing everything from pulling teeth and treating abscesses to dispensing medicine for malaria. I helped my parents in their practice doing small tasks, and I noted that the one constant in all healings was the tender loving care that my parents gave each patient. I knew, even then, that those of us who aspired to be doctors had special work to do

and special tools with which to do that work. It was a matter of searching within ourselves to find and to work with those tools. Doctors do not have to love every patient, but they should love what they do with the patient. The patient knows when a doctor cares. I learned from watching my parents, who, as missionaries, were sent out to heal not only the bodies and minds, but the human spirit. They are all intertwined.

Q: Isn't this the same philosophy of Edgar Cayce, who had a tremendous influence on you?

DR. MCGAREY. Yes, Edgar Cayce saw the big picture—he saw the mind, body, and spirit as one, and each person as an entity and energy force distinct from everybody else. Cayce's suggested treatments varied from person to person even if he were treating the same disease. For me, the psychic readings dealing with prayer, dream therapy, and the body-mind connection were not difficult because I had watched my parents deal in these areas of consciousness all my life and I knew that medicine and healing had to be a total approach. I agreed with Cayce that the patient was more than the disease.

Although it took some time to really get into all of the Cayce material, we realized that behind the health readings were broad psychological and physical concepts that made sense. He was dealing with pragmatic concepts which had to do with how the body functions and how different internal systems had to coordinate to ensure the well-being of the whole. He spoke about the coordination of the liver and the spleen, which was new to us, as well as the coordination of the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems, which we did know. He discussed lymphatic drainage, the body's way of keeping individual cells clean and healthy. He indicated that each cell in the body had an innate intelligence of its own that sent a message when it needed help.

Cayce had remarkable remedies, most notably was the cold-processed castor oil, known as the Palma Christi, which released intestinal obstructions and kidney stones when used as external packs. This treatment makes particular sense when you understand his ideas on the relationship of the organs.

Q: Did this reinforce for you that medicine is more an art than a science?

DR. MCGAREY. In medical school, we are taught that medicine is a science. Yet I truly believe that it is an art, and science is a magnificent tool used in that art. An art

is hard to teach and hard to control because each artist brings his or her own creative spirit and personality to it.

Science needs to be controlled and needs to have parameters. Because we think medicine is a science, we are constantly trying to control it, to make physicians and patients fit into a particular category or a particular model. We have made a god out of science, and its temples are hospitals, medical schools, scientific laboratories, and even the government. This is out of proportion. The science of medicine deals with the study of disease, which is a deadly process. The art of medicine deals with the study of life, which is a healthy process and is filled with joy. Physicians need to look at the patient as a partner and patients need to have something to say about their own healing. In the art of medicine, the human body is the temple.

Q: This philosophy doesn't have a home in today's managed care environment. What would you like to see change?

DR. MCGAREY. We need to create a whole new model of healthcare where holistic and conventional practices are brought together for the good of both the patients and the physicians. The medicine of the future, as I envision it, will integrate the spiritual dimension of healing and acknowledge the spiritual nature of humankind. Then true inner healing can happen. Without this, the physical body can be cured but a true, lasting healing cannot be fully realized.

I see patient care of the future revolving around a center where people of all races and conditions come for healing in a setting where like-minded practitioners (i.e., allopaths, homeopaths, chiropractors, psychologists, physical and biofeedback therapists), together with shamans and healing of all cultures, respect one another's abilities and work individually and together to help people help themselves.

Q: Where have we come?

DR. MCGAREY. Interestingly enough, this last weekend I called together A Gathering of Eagles—those people who were involved in holistic medicine from the beginning. Let me tell you how it came about. Originally I had told Rose Winter, Chairman of the Board of my little foundation, that in the fall I wanted to bring everyone together. I went to bed thinking about it and at two o'clock in the morning I sat straight up with the words and "gathering of eagles" in my mind I didn't go back

to sleep after that. In the morning, when I shared what was going through my mind with my youngest daughter, Helene, she said ‘Mom that’s too late. You have to do it now.’ And then that day she got a letter from the American Academy of Family Physicians. President Obama was calling for physicians to look at the broken healthcare system and make recommendations. I got in



touch with the people that I had started working with on holistic medicine, and we looked at not only where we had come from, but where we feel medicine needs to go. We have a paper we are finishing and will give to the government to incorporate into their process on where medicine is.

Let’s put this into a different perspective. In my mind conventional and holistic medicine can be embodied by two nursery rhymes. Conventional medicine could be “The old woman who lived in a shoe,” and holistic could be, “Mary had a little lamb.” Let’s look at them. “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do. She gave them

some broth, Without any bread, She whipped them all soundly, and sent them to bed.”

I look at it this way: conventional medicine is stuck in one shoe and you can’t go any place with just one shoe. It’s old, tired and has so many diseases and patients to deal with it doesn’t know what to do. It gives them broth without bread, which isn’t the deep sustenance that we need, and whips them soundly; it puts the symptoms quietly out and that is supposed to be a cure, but it is not.

Another rhyme speaks about what holistic medicine is about. “Mary had a little lamb, his fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go. It followed her to school one day, which was against the rules, it made the children laugh and play, to see a lamb at school.”

First of all, we identify the person, Mary, by name. You are dealing with people as people. Fleece is white as snow—the physician within us, it is white as snow, which is pure. It represents a clear understanding of who we as individuals are—that inner aspect of our being. And the lamb would be the physician within, who goes everywhere that Mary goes. It follows her to school, which means it goes out into the school of life and the world doesn’t want it, against the rule. But once it gets past the rule and into the school, it makes the children laugh and play, a real representation of joy. Bring life back into the process and that is joy and healing. Sometimes these thought forms can carry the message as well or better than profound words.

Q: We talk about the need to fix a system of managed care and how this affects physicians, but what about patients? Do you think they understand the difference between healing and cure?

DR. MCGAREY. No, I think again it is “whip them all soundly and put them to bed.” There is a lot of education that needs to take place that lets them become their own physician. Basically, I don’t think we understand about life itself. I had a patient who had lung cancer—she was a smoker. She had had the chemotherapy and was facing having a blood transfusion. She called me and said, ‘I don’t want the transfusion.’ She was afraid of getting AIDs and hepatitis—she’s dying of cancer, but this doesn’t really make a difference. Again, when fear steps in, nothing can happen. Rational thought moves out the window. I tried to explain to her that the chances of getting AIDs and hepatitis were very slim.

photos of Dr. McGarey by Lennie Duensing

Nothing made a difference until finally I said to her, ‘Maybe you could look at it this way: there is somebody in this world who loved you enough to give you their life blood. That’s what a blood transfusion is.’ When she was able to look at it from that perspective she was able to accept it. When she stopped looking at the transfusion as something that was horrible and scary, when she was able to shift from fear to love, she was able to go ahead and have the transfusion. It is not that the modalities are wrong or that science is wrong, it is about understanding the rationale, the gift behind why we are doing it.

Q: Where do you think healthcare broke down?

DR. MCGAREY. It broke when we as physicians abdicated our responsibility in the healing profession and turned it over to pharmaceutical and insurance companies, and any other organization that we thought would take the power. Lawyers and the fear of litigation played a role in this, too. Fear came in, love went out. The basic concept of holistic care is to turn that around: once love comes in, fear can step out.

After World War II, when technology became so amazing, science took over. Instead of medicine being an art and science the tool, it got twisted around. Science is a wonderful tool to be used in the art of medicine, and if we don’t look at it that way we practice “paint by number” medicine.

Physicians are not taught the art of medicine; in fact, it has been ridiculed. This is one of the things I’ve become very aware of—my new book is entitled *Living Medicine* because, the purpose of the holistic movement was to bridge the gap between holistic and conventional medicine. In 2000, I was in the grocery store and I heard the hardware store down the street announcing itself as a holistic hardware store. I laughed and said to myself, ‘We’ve done it.’ Although the store probably doesn’t know what it means, at least holistic isn’t an evil thing anymore, it’s become a household word.

However, we need a broader, different approach. The problem with medicine is that it has become a killing machine. Everything we do has become destructive. We kill bacteria, eliminate AIDs, and eradicate diabetes; medicine is a war machine and is “anti” life itself. We prescribe antibiotics, anticonvulsants, and antidepressants. And the one that really gets me is the anti-aging thing. What in the world are we supposed to do? I was going on and on with this, and I said what

we really need instead of killing medicine is living medicine. If we are alive we are going to have pain. We are going to be born, we are going to die. But our focus is going to be on life, not on getting rid of something. You can’t teach a kid not to hit by hitting, you can’t stop war by creating war, and that’s what we have done in medicine.

Ever since World War II, we think in war terms and patients and physicians are warriors. Women are taught to fight osteoporosis like we are supposed to fight our own bones. And we fight pain. Even pregnancy and delivery has become a disease. Physicians interfere with the disease process. If we want good outcomes, we have to be the ones in control instead of letting life itself be the controlling aspect. So the shift that really needs to happen is the shift from war and destruction to life and living. Until we get that paradigm shift, we can do a lot of corrections of things on the surface, but it’s not really going to heal the broken system. We need to get back to what we as physicians went into medicine for, and that is to heal. We are afraid of our own creativity. We don’t trust our creative impulses. There is a huge need for education here—a paradigm shift.

Q: One of the most significant paradigm shifts in your career, I believe, was your role in creating the American Holistic Medical Association. Can you tell us about that?

DR. MCGAREY. In 1978 at a meeting of 300 physicians in Denver, we formed the American Holistic Medical Association and elected Norman Shealy, MD, a prominent neurosurgeon president. I was elected vice-president and succeeded him. Although many of the practices were looked down upon by some, the idea took hold among other open-minded physicians. This was followed by a swelling interest in holistic and alternative medicine, and even led to the establishment of a Department of Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health in Washington, DC. I was one of 100 physicians and researchers appointed to that department in 1992.

One of the decisions that the group made was to spell holistic without the “w” even though they were dealing with the whole person, the group decided to spell holistic without the “w,” to emphasize the fact that they were working with the spirit of people, and holistic was derived from the word holy or spiritual. This, to me, is the basis of healing. ■