

# Art of Healing, Medicine and Humanity: A Conceptual Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

*Medicine is the art of relieving others of their suffering. It requires technology and methodologies that science has helped us develop. However the understanding of pain and its impact in peoples' lives and on the society as a whole is often missed out in the skewed focus on the search for happiness ("Definition of happiness - state (British & World English)," n.d.). Pain is an important symptom that serves as a warning as well as a pointer for an illness. Here the authors re-examine the reasons that connect pain and suffering to artists and healers as well as the connection between an artist and a healer. It also dwells on the age old science versus arts argument and its validity.*

*Keywords: Archimedes, Art, Empathy, Galileo, Humanity, Medicine, Melancholia, Pain, Passion, Science, Suffering*

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Medicine was born from pain and suffering! It came to life to steer those in pain towards a life without suffering. Pain - and all its synonyms like discomfort, distress, suffering etc. - therefore is the key symptom that guides a healer towards the diagnosis of almost every illness. History taking cannot lead us to a disease unless there is a distress that points towards either physical or emotional pain. It is this point of pain from where a doctor begins his/her work - first to apply the knowledge of medicine to understand the problem and then to work towards the best possible way of alleviating that pain. Thus it becomes imperative for a doctor to understand pain. For the person who is suffering, it is just the pain that matters and not the physiology, anatomy or pathology of it.

By its very nature, pain makes us pull away from the stimulus that causes it and / or seek ways to ease it. Even a toddler instinctively raises an alarm when experiencing a painful stimulus. Hence 'pain' serves as one of the key survival-mode-triggering-mechanisms in the body - a danger-warning mechanism to help us survive.

Physical pain is easy to understand and empathize with. Everyone has suffered an injury, a fall, a cut or something else that causes pain. It is therefore easy for most of us (but surely not all - and I will come to that a little later) to express it in most situations. Emotional pain on the other hand remains a huge grey area of confusion. Those suffering it as well as those who wish to care for the sufferers, struggle to

DOI: 10.4018/ijudh.2013100108

understand it. Often the person suffering from emotional pain, is not sure of what he or she is going through. A look at the medical history of someone suffering from depression or anxiety is enough to deduce that. The amount of time it takes a person to articulate and seek help, since the first symptoms of emotional distress appear, points to the confusion (at least in our society).

The appreciation of this pain is more difficult for a number of reasons. An important one being that it colors one's perception and outlook towards life itself with a negative tone. While this is not the happiest of the situations, this very emotion has been the reason for many creative works of art and literature across cultures and land. Poetry, prose, paintings, sculptures, films and many other forms of art have come out of the pain that either the creator went through or others with whom the creator was able to empathize. Countless creative souls went through the pangs of broken heart, dejection, pathos and a struggle-filled life that added further to their stresses and strife for survival, pushing them further into the depths of emotional pain and often, even breaking them down completely. In arts, the word melancholia (arising from melancholy) ("Definition of melancholy - sadness (British & World English)," n.d.) is commonly used to describe this negative mood, that many artists tend to turn into a time for introspection, often preceding a creation.

Mirza Ghalib, the well known Urdu poet summarized the struggles of love - for a partner (or life) - as:

*Ye ishq nahin aasaan bas itna samajh lijey,  
Ek aag ka dariya hai aur doob ke jaana hai  
(Love isn't easy, get that my friend, It's a river  
of fire, and to cross it, you must drown and  
accept it's ire).*

Vincent Van Gogh, the Dutch painter, on the other hand wandered through a more defined insanity and languished at mental asylums while still painting his apparently crazy ideas furiously. The critics and the gentry of his time, rejected his work as useless. But, the force of his painful creativity kept him on that path of

doing what he wanted - suffering the demons of social acceptance while expressing his turmoil through the harsh strokes and striking colors on canvasses, perhaps the only things that accepted him silently.

Many may believe so, but science ("Science," 2012) can not be devoid of art. Whenever art is taken out of science, it becomes mere technology. Consider for example the story of the so called Eureka moment of Archimedes ("The story behind Archimedes' legendary 'Eureka!' moment #ItsNotMagicItsScience.com," n.d.) when he realized that water gets displaced from his bath tub when he enters it. Whether he shouted 'Eureka' and ran naked through the streets in his excitement to inform the king, could well be fiction. The fact that his discovery happened neither in a laboratory nor while he was performing an experiment, points towards the ability of the mind to constantly wonder, question, analyze, deduce and express... exactly the process an artist undergoes.

August Kekule ("Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," n.d.), in 1865, published a paper describing the structure of the Benzene molecule. He had fallen asleep while pondering over the structure and dreamt of a snake holding its tail in its mouth, forming a ring like structure. He woke up and interpreted that ring as six Carbon atoms with alternating double and single bonds. Newton watched an apple fall and contemplated about gravity. Galileo Galilei's ("The Galileo Project," n.d.) passion turned him almost blind towards the end of his life because of his gazing at the sky and the sun for years through his telescope, to confirm, re-confirm and re-affirm that the earth is not as holy and powerful as religion suggested and that it revolved around the sun. Having uttered the blasphemous words and post his inquest by the church, he was made to retract his statement and confined to his house for the rest of his life, perhaps to prevent the world from getting polluted by his thoughts. Yet, his thoughts prevailed and changed the way we think today. As per the play Galileo, written by Bertolt Brecht, the well known German playwright, Galileo encouraged his students

(before he was barred by the church to experiment and teach about the celestial bodies in the sky) to question and challenge one's own ideas in every possible way and to re-examine them from every possible angle to see if they really work. In other words, not only did he just look at the planets and the stars but he also tried to interpret and deduce by letting his mind free to imagine, think and create concepts beyond what he saw. That is the way of science to develop logic – question, examine, understand, conceptualize, explain and express.

The word 'science' itself came from Latin 'scientia' which means 'knowledge'. It refers to a way of 'pursuing knowledge', not just knowledge itself, and that is the way of constant questioning. Art on the other hand, engages people by questioning, thinking, exploring and expressing what the artist has figured out after an exploration of whatever he is engaged with. Galileo was an artist in terms of perfecting his ideas and explanations through observations of the planetary motions and questioning of the existing concept of the crystal sphere that held the universe together. It was his passion that led him to peep through his telescope and deduce that the earth revolves around the sun which he then expressed in words. Another interesting fact, and perhaps the bigger reason why the church got after him, was that he chose to publish his thoughts about the earth and the sun in vernacular Italian, rather than Latin (the language used for the elite and professional scientific discourse at that time). This was a deviation from the norm, like an artist trying to take art beyond the confines of the elite art galleries and hallowed spaces, to the common people, in a bid to experiment with the reach of newer ideas. That little act of his made the common people connect with a larger idea of questioning things in life, rather than remaining subservient to the authorities.

The telescope, on the other hand, is a mere technology. Galileo used it to further his quest by using a scientific method of exploration and deduction, while many others were using it then (and even today) for mere voyeuristic peeps into the lives of other people. Technology itself therefore can not open our minds or

the doors ahead, but passion, questioning, and the urge to explore, does. The same applies to arts. While Salvador Dali created the magic of surrealism on his canvas, challenging and pushing the boundaries of artistic exploration and expressions, many others with similar prowess used the same brushes, knives and paints (read: the tools) to merely replicate existing thoughts... not able to question beyond what was taught to them.

So, the commonplace argument of Science versus Arts, which one often gets dragged into, is actually irrelevant. If at all, the debate should be about the use of passion and a creative thought process versus a mere clinical (or technical) approach, in whatever one does in life.

Life (read: humanity) has been in a continuous search for happiness, through various ideologies, religions, philosophies and even medical science (when it came to illnesses). 'Happiness' is defined as, "The state of being happy" and 'Happy' as, "Feeling or showing pleasure or contentment" according to Oxford Dictionary. This elusive chase of 'happiness' has existed through the ages and somehow got alluded (perhaps inappropriately though) to status, power, security of future etc. etc. Unhappiness, on the other hand, is best avoided and kept suppressed in a bid to capture more happiness or to maintain one's status. But, science shows us that to understand light, we must know darkness - the lack of light. It would therefore seem reasonable that to understand happiness, one would need to know a lack of it - the feeling of sadness, pain and suffering. Mere observation of life or experiences from one's own life suggest that neither of the two last perpetually anyway. Yet, somewhere in our strangely skewed focus on happiness, and the way we have developed as a society, the importance of pain got lost on us. We pretend being happy and contended even when we are not, be it in social interactions or professional spheres. The acknowledgement of pain, hurt and sadness has become almost inversely proportional to our status and the so called 'development' of the society.

Pain has somehow got linked to 'weakness'. That has given rise to numerous concepts of strength - judged by a lack of expression of

pain. Macho men, for example, are assumed to be strong and hence wouldn't express pain. Other connotations of strength are connected with power, status, gender etc. Hence people of status and power would express less of pain than a commoner (the apparent weakling). In terms of gender, men are 'supposed' to be less expressive about pain and suffering than women, because they are 'considered' stronger. The fact that women bear children and hence go through the labor pain (rated among the severest of pains on the pain scale), bears no consequence in our obviously skewed perceptions of macho-ism and gender discrimination.

The idea of suppressing or controlling the expression and acknowledgement of pain seems to have distorted a lot of social perceptions. For a doctor for example, it is assumed that he / she need not feel the pain of the patient and go about his work clinically. It is one of those things in the air that we seem to understand and follow, merely by walking through the corridors of a medical school. A surgeon may not want to empathize too much with his / her patient for the fear that his emotions may make his hand shake when making an incision. A Psychiatrist prefers his distance from his patients lest he gets sucked into the depths of another person's psychic turmoil (Counter Transference) ("Transference - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," n.d.) and lose precision of his clinical judgment.

Yet, what differentiates one doctor from another is the level of empathy ("Definition of empathy - ability and psychology (British & World English)," n.d.) he / she can build with a patient. And this particular empathy rests on one's ability to connect with and understand the pain of the person seeking help. Our ability to diagnose (read: label something) and speak big words in Latin, like 'Cholecystitis' for example, may strike awe in a patient, but it does nothing to alleviate the pain she / he has come to us for. To understand that pain and empathize, we must be able to feel it ourselves first.

Empathy requires a certain level of emotional intellect and a connect with oneself as well as the rest of the humanity. The moment

that sinks in, we will find the passion of an artist, no matter what we deal with then. The hands that hold the scalpel will then move not only with clinical precision, which anyway a doctor learns as a skill, but also with the devotion of an artist immersed in the creation of a painting or a sculpture. It is then that the blade will move for the person who is suffering from pain and not merely to earn one's bread through clinical skills. If medicine is really born off the pain of humanity, then a doctor has to be an artist who can understand other beings in their totality – people filled with emotions, doubts, pain, happiness and countless other feelings running through their heads - and not as mere body parts, even if we are trained to treat just that.

It is the totality of a person that provides a proper context, given the milieu she / he comes from, to be able to connect with and understand his / her pain. This will take us out of the safe and in-our-control-confines of the hospitals and clinics, landing us bang in the middle of that painful world where 'most' patients come from (unless we work in a five-star-resort-like-hospital). It will take us into the poverty and the lifestyles we cannot easily imagine in our contended upper-ish class existence. Until the context is understood, how does one connect to the suffering of another? It is not merely the disease that people are scared of. There is a life waiting for them, with mouth wide open to devour them everyday. Perhaps that is where another Urdu poet, Asrar-Ul-Haq Majaz, found at least one of his poems coming from:

*Zindagi muntazir hai moo phadey, Zindagi khak-o-khoon mey lithdi hai, Aankh mey shola, hai-tund liye. Kuch tabiyat to hum rawaan kar len. (Life awaits with jaws wide open, covered with muck and blood, With eyes hot and fiery. Let me, for that, prepare my mood)*

Even when science and technology has progressed immensely over the last few decades and we have countless new tools and methods to treat and manage a lot more diseases than we ever had, we still remain limited and confined by what we are yet to discover. People continue

to suffer from pain. And death of course remains inevitable. A doctor therefore will always remain confined if operating with mere clinical knowledge. What however is boundless and freely available to us is that touch of empathy that can connect us with the patients at a less clinical but more humane level. It is that connect, that assures a person of being in the hands of someone who understands the pain, that brings on a priceless smile even on the face of a terminally ill person. No amount of technology and sophisticated jargon can ever trigger that feeling in any patient. That requires the art of being a healer with a passion to heal, the art of being a human in whom another being can find solace and understanding. No hallowed text books or lectures in classrooms can ever teach that. We have to learn it from those who come to us thinking we understand their suffering; and those who feel safe and content, even in their last moments, for we are by their side. Such passion and empathy is likely to leave behind a turbulence of emotions within us, for each person we treat will feel like our own. But, that is where the art of dealing with pain comes from, if we agree that medicine is about that.

Humanity, as well as Humanities, can exist without medicine. But, medicine becomes meaningless without either. A healer therefore has no choice but to be an artist, unless the motivation is something other than relieving the pain of others.

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