

Diversity in the Law of Similars

Mainstream and Alternative Homeopaths in Massachusetts

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This paper, “Diversity in the Law of Similars,” presents key findings from my research on homeopathic practitioners’ understandings of the relationship between homeopathy and spirituality. I interviewed sixteen practitioners in Massachusetts from a range of medical and nonmedical backgrounds. Each interview lasted at least ninety minutes and resulted in a transcript of approximately seventy-five hundred words. While the narrow aperture of this project cannot demonstrate trends, the data that I have collected demonstrates the ways in which these practitioners draw from their diverse religious and spiritual traditions to explain connections between the action of the homeopathic remedy on the “vital force” and the remedy’s potential to facilitate spiritual growth. I will explore these findings in light of the homeopathic philosophy laid out by Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathic medicine, in the mid-nineteenth century.

Let me first begin with a brief introduction to homeopathy. Outside of allopathic medicine, we think of complementary and alternative medicine, or CAM therapies, which is an umbrella term for a number of different practices. Naturopathic medicine, for example, requires training across a spectrum of healing modalities, and a naturopathic doctor often receives training in any one or several of the following modalities: acupuncture, chiropractic, reiki, massage, homeopathy, meditation, and yoga. Many CAM practitioners do not attend naturopathic school and instead attend schools for their particular field or fields. One should note that homeopathy is as unique a medical science as, for example, acupuncture or chiropractic and is not a catch-all term that includes the practice of a host of different modalities, as does naturopathy.

Homeopathic medicine derives from the ideas and experiments of Samuel Hahnemann, a German medical doctor who practiced in the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. It was he who first coined the term homeopathy – from the Greek *homoios*, meaning “similar,” and *pathos*, meaning

“suffering” – to refer to the law of similars that is the basis of this medical system. Homeopathic medicine traces its origins to 1789 when Hahnemann was translating a book by W. Cullen, an eminent physician of that era. Hahnemann noted that Cullen attributed the bitter and astringent qualities of Peruvian bark to its efficacy as a treatment for malaria. Dissatisfied with Cullen’s explanation, Hahnemann began to experiment on himself by taking repeated doses of Peruvian bark extract until he started to manifest fever, chills, and other symptoms associated with malaria. Over the next twenty years, Hahnemann put to use his knowledge of botany, chemistry, and toxicology and eventually, after repeated tests and trials (known in homeopathy as “provings”), set forth his claim that substances which cause symptoms similar to those of the disease – like Peruvian bark – when given in highly diluted doses, will act to treat, and even cure, the disease. This is what is now known as the law of similars, or “like cures like.”

Today, the National Center for Homeopathy claims just over fifty-five hundred members, some of whom may be practicing professionally and others of whom may be practicing informally on themselves, family, and friends. Fifty-eight percent or so reside on either the West or East coasts, with roughly 42 percent living in the middle of the country. Of the just over six hundred members in New England, 279 live in Massachusetts. Of those, 83 percent are female and of the Massachusetts residents, over 50 percent live within the Route 495 beltway. About 38 percent of Massachusetts members have some form of higher education in, for example, chiropractic, homeopathy, allopathy, nursing, and acupuncture.

Five months ago when I initiated this inquiry of practitioners’ understandings of the relationship between the mechanism of action of the homeopathic remedy, its relation to the vital force, and practitioners’ understandings of spirituality, I did so *not* to prove or disprove the medical efficacy or legitimacy of homeopathic medicine, but rather to

explore two primary questions: first, given the often tense relationship between allopathy and homeopathy – both historically and in the present day – I wondered who would choose to practice this medical science and when and where they discovered it.

Second, I was intrigued by Hahnemann's understanding of disease as the result of a "pathologically untuned vital force."¹ In my research, I investigated what relationship, if any, practitioners perceived between the remedy, the vital force, and disease by inquiring about their definitions of homeopathy and spirituality.

Since, according to Hahnemann, a human being is both a physical organism and a *dynamis*—meaning "the life-giving, regulating, instinctively feeling vital force" which animates the physical organism—disease, he contends, results when there is an "untunement" of this vital force.² Accordingly, to rectify an energetic untunement, a physician must assist the "spirit-like vital force with medicines having equally spirit-like, dynamic effects."³ In other words, to treat spirit-like untunements with what Hahnemann calls "crude medicinal substances" – a.k.a. biomedicine – instead of dynamized, or energetic, medicine is contradictory.

Homeopathy's ontological definition of disease as an energetic untunement of the human being, rather than a biochemical or biophysical alteration of an individual's physiology, challenges current biomedical practices. Such alterations, according to Hahnemann, are the symptoms of the disease, but *not* the disease itself. If a disease is energetic, then, in order to treat like with like, the medicine must also be energetically based.

There is significant diversity of background in those practicing homeopathy in Massachusetts and in the New England area in general. Of the over one hundred practitioners in Massachusetts with higher education, I was able to interview sixteen – seven women and nine men. Of those, 50 percent had received training in biomedicine while the other 50 percent had training in acupuncture, naturopathy, chiropractic, nutrition, psychology, literature, and even a former MIT professor with a Ph.D. in algebraic topology. In other words, many were quite highly trained with backgrounds in various professional fields.

While very few learned about homeopathy during their medical training – in fact, only two – nearly as many learned about homeopathy prior to medical training as discovered it once they were working in the medical profession. Two individuals, an M.D. and a family nurse practitioner, went to medical and nursing school knowing that they would practice

homeopathy after receiving their degrees. The most common reason individuals found their way to homeopathy was as a result of their own, or a family member's, sickness. In all cases, the homeopathic remedy worked efficiently and effectively and, as a result, inspired the practitioner to explore further its mechanism of action and clinical applications.

All practitioners referred to the law of similars, Hahnemann's foundational tenet, when defining homeopathy and employed a variety of other terms to flesh out their definitions. Each practitioner contended that it was a complete medical system unto itself – and in many cases, practitioners had left their initial field of health care for homeopathy because they felt that as a system of healing, it was the most comprehensive compared to, for example, acupuncture, biomedicine, or chiropractic.

The terms "energy," "God," "balance," "open," "vital force," "miasm," and "energetic pattern" were the most frequently used when practitioners articulated the relationship between the homeopathic remedy, the vital force, disease, health, and spirituality. Spirituality was most commonly defined as "an awareness of God," "a personal relationship with God," "a sense of wholeness and interconnectedness with our environment," "the substance and ultimate nature of the universe," and "an intangible force." The most common word used to describe both spirituality and homeopathy, however, was the term, "energy." Not one person failed to use this term during the interviews and, while further research on this topic needs to be conducted, my hypothesis is that the term "energy" is an important connector between homeopathic practice, the vital force, and spirituality.

Comparing the words from the 2003 interviews with Hahnemann's *Organon*, we see that his use of the term "vital force" is as prominent compared to the other terms as the practitioners' use of the term "energy." For both Hahnemann and these practitioners, energy (i.e., the vital force) is a key component when articulating a definition of disease, the remedy, and health. Of the remedy, Hahnemann writes, "this very subtle dose, which contains almost nothing but the spirit-like medicinal force released and freed, can bring about, solely by its *dynamic* power, results impossible to obtain with crude medicinal substances, even in massive doses."⁴

Further evidence reveals that practitioners unanimously consider homeopathy to be an energetic medical science and, as such, to possess the potential to facilitate spiritual growth if a practitioner or patient is so inclined. However, several practitioners were adamant that homeopathy is not a spiritual

practice and that one need not be spiritually oriented either to practice or to derive medical benefit from a remedy. The six practitioners who did not feel homeopathy had a strong potential to facilitate spiritual growth noted that they did not have compelling enough evidence to know whether or not the remedy facilitated spiritual growth.

There appeared to be a connection between a practitioner's own familiarity and comfort with the term "spirituality" and his or her claim that homeopathy had the potential to aid in an individual's spiritual development. Those who were less certain about their definition of spirituality were also less inclined to emphasize the ability of a homeopathic remedy to support spiritual growth. None of the practitioners suggested that homeopathy could *not* facilitate this kind of growth.

When asked to describe how the practitioner understood the way in which homeopathy could support an individual's spiritual development, many referred to the remedy's ability "to release an individual from old habits and patterns of behavior." Others suggested that the remedy itself serves as "a spirit-like force" and a kind of energetic "inner guide" which "stimulates the body's innate healing capacities." Others mentioned that the intake process and the continuing care increase the client's own emotional, physical, and spiritual awareness.

Practitioner responses to my questions about homeopathy and spiritual development never strayed far from the terms "energy" and "vital force." However, the very ambiguity of the remedy's mechanism of action combined with the nuministic qualities of terms like "God" and "Spirit" rendered the interviews highly theoretical, and answers about homeopathy were often infused with spiritual terminology from the practitioners' particular theological and cosmological understandings. For example, in describing the way in which a homeopathic remedy acts on the patient, one nurse stated:

. . . in my own experience, homeopathic remedies carry divine healing power in a very direct way . . . the healing energy is refracted through a particular substance that carries a particular informational pattern that teaches the person's healing energy how to rearrange itself around a particular theme. . . . I believe that God chooses the homeopathic remedy as the messenger. It's as though the remedy has two faces like Janus the two-faced god: the energetic, vibrational aspect of the remedy looks to the infinite vastness of God's healing energy and the other aspect, which is the physical aspect – the fact that it's contained in these tiny sugar pellets – speaks to the finite concrete embodiment of God, which is the patient.

Here we see that such an articulation forces this nurse to draw on metaphor, as well as on theological, mythological, and metaphysical language particular to her own beliefs. This is something Hahnemann tried to avoid. "Far be it from me," he writes, "to attempt a metaphysical explanation of the inner nature of disease in general or of any particular case of disease. I am merely pointing out that diseases obviously *are not* and *cannot* be mechanical or chemical changes in the material substance of the body, that they do not depend on a material disease substance, but are an exclusively dynamic, spirit-like untunement of life."⁵

The tension between, on the one hand, attempts to explain this relationship and, on the other, Hahnemann's insistence that such an explanation is superfluous raises important questions about the role spirituality plays in assisting current-day practitioners to understand why and how their method of healing works. It also points to one possible direction for future research. This nurse's contention that the remedy carries divine healing power and is both a messenger and a teacher from God begs several questions: Given this claim, what kind of agency does the practitioner have in mediating the choice of the patient's remedy? Does the practitioner then become an agent of God? Is this something about which she is aware? Is the practitioner explicit about her role in this relationship when meeting with clients? Should she be? And how would Hahnemann respond?

Many practitioners have found it possible, and even preferable, to construct theological and cosmological meaning from their practice of homeopathy. All contend, however, that it is *not* this broader framework which enables the remedy's efficacy. Rather, it appears that it is, in fact, the efficacy of this tiny, low-dose, energetic remedy which compels the practitioners to construct a framework to explain the results. These explanations are usually informed and complicated by their particular religious or spiritual practice.

If the homeopathic remedy does, in fact, work without the need for a broader framework of any kind, further research might undertake a study of the role such a framework plays in the health of both the practitioner and the patient. It is evident from this research that many practitioners have spiritual practices and have chosen a homeopathic medical practice because it supports, deepens, and even challenges their theological and cosmological frameworks in ways that other healing modalities do not.

What role this confluence of medicine and spirituality plays in contributing to an individual's healing and the mental and emotional health of the practitioner is ripe for further study.

Notes

1. Samuel Hahnemann, *Organon of Medicine*, trans Alain Naudé (Blaine: Cooper Publishing, 1982), 19.
2. Ibid., 20.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Ibid., 31.