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The Heart Speaks: A Cardiologist Reveals the Secret Language of Healing

by Mimi Guarneri, MD, FACC

Review by Harold Braswell; Howard I Kushner, PhD

Are doctors human? Not really, says Mimi Guarneri, founder and director of the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine. In *The Heart Speaks: A Cardiologist Reveals the Secret Language of Healing*, Guarneri argues that the American medical system produces physicians who are more in touch with their MRI scanners than the emotional life of their patients. This dehumanization imperils the health of patient and clinicians alike.

Guarneri, an interventional cardiologist at Scripps Clinic, studies the human heart as both a biological and emotional organ. She illustrates how stress, anger, and grief increase risk of heart disease, while optimism, gratitude, and forgiveness decrease it. Ignoring the emotional context in which cardiac abnormalities occur, physicians frequently miss the underlying etiology of a patient's disease.

Guarneri aims at the lay public who will find this text accessible and persuasive and clinicians who, like readers of this journal, may be more skeptical. She represents a tradition of what might be called "humanistic" medicine, found lately in the writings of physicians such as Jerome Groopman, MD, and Arthur Kleinman, MD. Groopman and Kleinman agree with Guarneri on the problems with contemporary biomedicine, but their solutions are different. For Groopman, the key is teaching physicians to be more sensitive listeners. For Kleinman, recognition of the role of political, economic, and cultural forces is fundamental to improving medical care. Guarneri's solution is the inclusion of spirituality in medical practice.

A manifesto for "alternative" or "integrative" medicine, this book draws on exemplars from Guarneri's practice: the healing power of prayer, cellular memory, angelic visions, and energy healing. These represent what Guarneri calls "the ancient healing virtues of the past."^{1p199} Guarneri does not explain how "spiritual" elements link to physical and emotional health and, although her examples are persuasive, they often have little in common except their exclusion from conventional biomedicine.

Alternative treatments may be valuable when clinically proven to have beneficial results. But Guarneri's examples are difficult to translate among patients, not to mention populations. She is an excellent advocate, but even she admits her evidence consists of "interesting anecdotes."^{1p183}

Guarneri cites Krucoff's MANTRA study as evidence that

praying for patients can contribute to their recovery,^{1p119} neglecting his follow-up study, which found that prayer had no significant effect.² Similarly, she describes herself as a practitioner of energy healing, without reference to experimental findings on its effectiveness; she neglects the findings of Schwartz and Simon³ and Harriet Hall's critique.⁴ She does not mention Rosa's canonical debunking of the "therapeutic touch."⁵ Finally, Guarneri argues in favor of cellular memory—the idea that living tissues have the capacity to memorize their owner's characteristics—by claiming that "[t]welve to 15 percent of heart-transplant recipients report added characteristics following transplant of their new hearts."^{1p183} With a personal communication as her only source to support this claim, she acknowledges that medication and surgery may be in part responsible, leaving the reader uncertain about the phenomenon's underlying mechanisms.

The Heart Speaks is not designed to withstand evidence-based scrutiny; it is a spiritual memoir that has as much in common with Augustine as with Groopman. Although at times it seems that for Guarneri spirituality is just another tool, she recognizes that belief operates under a different set of rules from randomized clinical trials and does not always give you what you want.

Ultimately, Guarneri references serious problems with medical care: physician lack of time, patient lack of money, American lifestyles and work environments. These issues are as much political and economic as spiritual. ❖

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She reveals the heart as a multilayered, complex organ and explores the new science that indicates the heart acts as a powerhouse of its own, possessing intelligence, memory, and decision-making abilities that are separate from the mind. When Dr. Guarneri was only eight, her vivacious forty-year-old mother died of a heart attack. To overcome the powerlessness she felt that night in Brooklyn when her mother was taken from her, she became a cardiologist -- healing her own heart by healing the hearts of her patients. Dr. Guarneri spent her early years as an overworked, sleep-deprived medical stud