

Illness and the Human Psyche

by Dr Alex Tang

Mr Wong was driving when he felt a lump on his neck. Three days later, he sat in shock as his doctor delivered the dreaded "C" word. "You have cancer of the lungs," his doctor said. "You need surgery!"

Mr Wong's immediate reaction was that the doctor had made a mistake or received the wrong X-rays. Two days later, he received the same verdict from another well-known doctor. The next few days were a blur for Mr Wong as arrangements were made for his surgery. He felt a strange sense of loss, as if something was now missing in his life. All he could remember was how he, a poor kampong boy, was now one of the richest men in Malaysia. A director and majority shareholder of a few public-listed companies, his face appeared regularly in the newspapers and covers of financial magazines. "What can all my money do for me now?" he mused.

A piece of meat

He rapidly discovered that he was no longer that Mr Wong when he was admitted to the hospital. He had become a diagnosis and a statistic—the lung cancer patient in bed 234. His family and friends who visited looked at him with pitying eyes. The surgeons and nurses were courteous, efficient and caring. Yet he could feel the distance behind their smiles and felt like a piece of meat for them to

carve up. "What am I?" he asked himself in the dark.

Pain

The surgery was surprisingly painless because he was under anaesthesia, but upon waking the pain was unbearable. The painkillers given by the doctors helped a bit but not much. Following the surgery, he had to undergo chemotherapy, which made him very sick and resulted in baldness. After three months of treatment, he did not look like Mr Wong anymore. He lived in dread of the next course of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. "Why me?" was a long sigh from the dark despair he had sunk into. "Make it go away. I can't bear it anymore."

Delusion

Mr Wong, like most of us, lived under the wonderful delusion that he was going to live forever. None of us wish to be reminded of our own mortality, to be reminded that our days are numbered and that the countdown started when we were delivered from our mothers' wombs. That is why we surround ourselves with images of virile young men and women with body shapes that few can ever hope to attain. These reinforce our delusions of eternal health and wealth.

Decay

Yet deep in our psyche (soul, mind, spirit), we know the truth. We live in a fallen world where death and decay reign supreme. In spite of



all our medical and technological advances, we barely extend our death rate over the biblical three score and ten. Those who do so often live with severe limitations and a poor quality of life. Dylan Thomas expresses our fight against our mortality in his writing:

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Emotions

When someone is told that they have a serious illness, he or she will often go through a whole myriad of emotions.

First, a keen sense of loss. This loss may be tangible, as in the loss of a foot after a below-knee amputation in a diabetic patient. Or the loss may be intangible, perhaps a feeling of betrayal—betrayal by one's own body for not functioning as it should, or betrayal that one's right to health has been taken away. It may be a deeper loss as one considers what might have been or inappropriate choices that

were made.

Second, a sense of loss of identity.

This is especially acute in those who base their identity on their strength, physical beauty or achievements. When all these are suddenly taken away, this loss of identity manifests as feelings of incompleteness and disintegration of one's self-image. This loss is exacerbated by feelings of helplessness while under the care of health professionals.

Third, a sense of uncertainty.

Patients soon realise that medicine is as much an art as it is a science. There is no guarantee that a particular treatment modality will work. Add to that the increasing healthcare costs, loss of earning capacity and the weakening of one's body, and the human psyche is often stressed into depression.

Finally, a sense of suffering.

Being sick is not anyone's idea of a holiday, and there is real suffering and

pain. The knowledge that loved ones suffer with you does not make it any better.

How then should a Christian, who has a redeemed human psyche, in the process of being restored to the image of God, approach illnesses? I believe they, too, will experience the sense of loss, loss of identity, uncertainty, and suffering.

Perspective

However, their perspective can greatly affect the way they manage these emotions. Firstly, the Christian recognises that their bodies, like their health, are gifts from God. Secondly, a Christian's self-identity is based on who God is, rather than what he or she can achieve. Thus, that identity cannot be easily shaken as God is unchanging. Thirdly, a sense of uncertainty can be countered by surrendering our lives to the Lord.

As Jesus in the garden of

Gethsemane committed his life into the Father's hands, Christians, too, can learn to surrender. Life has always been uncertain, but Christians have One who stands behind the scene to protect them.

Finally, Christians may suffer as much as non-Christians during illnesses. The difference is that Christians, in knowing that their Lord had suffered with them on the cross, can have the certainty that their suffering, however senseless it may seem to them, does have meaning in God's great, sovereign plan.

That, in the final analysis, is what really counts.



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