

HEALING WORDS

gift of pain

By Mark McClure, MD, Medical Editor

“Warning: life without pain could really hurt you,” says Dr. Paul Brand, author of the book *Pain, The Gift Nobody Wants*.

Leprosy is a case in point. Based upon his 50-year career as a healer, Brand, a world-renowned hand surgeon and leprosy specialist, has concluded that most of the ravages of leprosy trace back to the simple loss of pain sensation; without the protection of pain, leprosy patients hurt themselves without even knowing it.

Other more common health conditions where patients live in constant peril due to pain’s absence include diabetes, alcoholism, multiple sclerosis, nerve disorders, and spinal cord injury. Yet Brand, who spent his lifetime among people who destroy themselves for lack of pain, found it difficult to communicate an appreciation for pain to people who have no such defect. In the modern view pain is an enemy, a sinister invader that must be expelled. On the contrary, he explains, pain is not the enemy, but the loyal scout announcing the enemy.

Indeed, virtually every bodily activity that we view with irritation or disgust—blister, callus, fever, sneeze, cough, vomiting, and, of course, pain—is an emblem of the body’s self-protection according to Dr. Brand. For patients who are unable to feel pain, danger lurks everywhere.

For example, pneumonia may be the end result of an inability to feel a tickle in the throat since a cough reflex won’t be triggered to clear the lungs. Likewise, inability to sense foreign objects and germs in the nasal passages will prevent sneezing thereby risking subsequent infection. Even the most unpleasant aspects of the body are signs of its struggle toward health.

Unfortunately, however, the medical profession looks upon pain as the illness rather than the symptom. Abolishing pain without first understanding its message, Brand warns, has a serious drawback. Once regarded an enemy, not a warning sign, pain loses its power to instruct. It is like disconnecting a ringing fire alarm to silence the annoying racket without first checking to see if there is a fire. The very unpleasantness of pain, the part we hate, is what makes it so effective at protecting us. The pain system makes you feel miserable enough to stop whatever you are doing and pay attention right now.

Instead of suppressing pain, Brand recommends “befriending” it: taking what is ordinarily seen as an enemy and disarming it and then welcoming it. He advises thinking of pain as a speech your body is delivering about a subject of vital importance to you. Instead of silencing pain, we should be straining our ears to hear it.

Statistics show, however, that most Americans would rather pop a pain pill than listen to the message pain is sending their body. As a result, the pain relief industry in the US is now a multi-billion-dollar-a-year business. In fact, Americans, who represent a mere 5 percent of the world’s population, consume 50 percent of its manufactured drugs (including 30,000 tons of aspirin a year—averaging out to 250 pills a person). The three top-selling drugs in the US are a hypertension drug, a medication for ulcers, and a tranquilizer. It requires less effort to treat indigestion resulting from poor eating habits by taking a drug to treat heartburn or to treat stress resulting from overworking by taking a tranquilizer than it does to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

On the other hand there are times when pain medicine should be used to full advantage. Dr. Brand acknowledges that while pain protects us from destroying ourselves, chronic pain itself can destroy. Unchecked pain saps mental and physical energy and can come to dominate a person's life. Pain medicine can be a God-send for those afflicted with chronic pain. Besides pain medicine, other measures can help assuage the grip of chronic pain. For instance, Dr. Brand recommends replacing negative emotions with positive ones. He has found that negative emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, loneliness, and helplessness intensify pain. Replacing these with positive emotions like hope, faith, joy, will to live, creativity, and playfulness make pain more bearable. Other novel approaches to chronic pain management are available.

Based on a lifetime of experience managing pain and the consequences of its absence, Brand has concluded that the path to health must begin by taking pain into account. So whether it's chronic pain or simply a minor discomfort, it is important to listen to the message pain is sending us.

Just as failure to pay attention to the message pain is sending us can destroy our body, from a philosophical standpoint, the same is true for a society. Brand has observed an ironic law of reversal at work: as a society gains the ability to limit suffering, it loses the ability to cope with what suffering remains. Furthermore, as a society pursues pleasure it runs the risk of raising expectations ever higher, so that contentment lies tantalizingly out of reach. Based on his experience in third world countries, Brand has found people living in the industrialized West have a difficult time experiencing pleasure. This is a deep irony since no society in history has succeeded so well in eliminating pain and exploiting leisure. He has found that those who live closer to nature tend to acquire a more balanced view of life that encompasses both pain and pleasure. He notes that nearly all of his memories of acute happiness involved some element of pain or struggle.

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