

The Growing Interest In Spirituality And Health

The relationship between science and religion has been longstanding, however, as we embark on the 21st century, it appears that the relationship between these two perspectives may be finding a bridge in the arena of health research. The last decades have seen a resurgence of interest in the relationship between spirituality and health, moreover, the interest is being expressed as much by the scientific community as the religious.

Surprisingly, this current trend owes much of its initial momentum to America's moon mission, specifically Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell. When Mitchell was hurtling back to earth after walking on the moon in 1971, he had a profound sense that all things are interconnected. After his safe return "home," Mitchell sought out others who likewise felt the need for an expanded, more inclusive view of reality. They resolved to explore the inner world of human experience with the same rigor and critical thinking that made it possible for Apollo 14 to journey to the moon and back.

What started out as an investigation of the more esoteric aspects of consciousness and spirituality significantly influenced another prominent figure, Larry Dossey, MD, who was interested in the occasions where, as a physician, he observed what appeared to be answers to prayer. The author of nine books and numerous articles, Dr. Dossey is the Executive Editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, the most widely subscribed-to journal in its field. The primary quality of Dr. Dossey's work is evidence-based scientific legitimacy, with an insistent focus on "what the data show."

While Dossey was investigating prayer and medicine, Herbert Benson, MD began approaching the problem from a different perspective. In response to the invitation from a religious group that engaged in meditation practices, Benson initiated an investigation of the physiological phenomena associated with meditation. At the time, Benson was regarded as a skeptic, making his subsequent research ultimately more interesting to the scientific community. As described in his best-selling book, the relaxation response lowers Cortisol levels, blood pressure, heart rate and breathing rate.

Working at Harvard Medical School, Benson further defined the relaxation response and determined its clinical usefulness. In conjunction with nutrition, exercise, and stress management, the relaxation response proved to be an effective therapy in a number of diseases, including cardiac disease, many forms of chronic pain, infertility, insomnia, premenstrual syndrome, the symptoms of cancer and HIV/AIDS, anxiety, and mild and moderate depression. In fact, to the extent that any disease is caused or made worse by stress, to that extent mind/body medicine is an effective therapy. Dr. Benson's early discovery of the relaxation response eventually paved the way for the plethora of studies such as the Adventist Health Study that found associations between health, longevity and religious practice. *Next issue, "The Adventist Health Study"*