



# mind-body-spirit

Carl A. Hammerschlag is a master storyteller and internationally recognized author, physician, and speaker. A Yale-trained psychiatrist; he has spent more than twenty years working with Native Americans. Now one of the world's leading proponents of psychoneuroimmunology (mind-body-spirit medicine), he is a faculty member at the University

of Arizona Medical School. He is an expert on how to survive in rapidly changing cultures.

Dr. Hammerschlag's life work has been chronicled in three critically acclaimed books: *The Dancing Healers*, *The Theft of the Spirit*, *Healing Ceremonies*, and two children's books. In his presentations, Dr. Carl Hammerschlag brings his gift of storytelling, and unique insights which bridge the worlds of science, spirit, and culture. With poignancy and humor, he leads his audiences on a joyful journey that will stimulate and renew their creative and healing potential. The following are responses to an interview about his work and his book *The Dancing Healers*.

## What is psychoneuroimmunology?

Psychoneuroimmunology is the science of medicine that deals with the interaction of the mind, body and spirit. It is the connection between the nervous system, the endocrine system and the immune system. But it is the science of mind, body, and spirit medicine.

## Is this considered a new science?

Well, it is clearly an old science; we have simply given it a new name. We always knew that mind, body and spirit were interconnected — but now we have ways of measuring it, and studying it in the laboratory, which now gives scientific credence to all of the anecdotal tales that our grandparents once told us and that traditional healers have known since the beginning of time. And that is that what you feel in your heart, what you believe in your spirit, is at least as important as what it is you know in your mind.

## Why do you believe that rituals are an important part of the spirit?

Rituals and ceremonies provide us with a structure by which we can get in touch with our feelings. And what it is we feel is crucially important in dealing with what it is we are facing. Rituals and ceremonies help us get in touch with the intangible aspects of ourselves. They connect us with our feelings which is where the spirit lives. The spiritual part of ourselves has nothing to do with coming from a place of certainty, which is really what the mind is about. The mind is about certainty and knowledge that can be proven. The spirit resides in the heart and soul, that part of ourselves where hope and dreams live and have a profound

influence in the healing process. Rituals and ceremonies help us get in touch with a part of ourselves, the intangible, unprovable but still profoundly and impactful part to help us deal with whatever we face.

## Define Spirit.

Spirit, well it is not so easy to define. I think spirit is the light within that propels us forward during the hard times. Spirit is a quality inside that allows us to face the ups and downs of our lives. The human spirit is that part, the light, the fire inside that reminds us we are not alone and we can get through. And then there is the spirit outside of self, which is another matter. But in this particular instance you're speaking more of the spirit within us.

Yes, the ineffable quality within, the thing that can't be defined but somehow we know when it is not there, like depression for example. Depression is when we cover the light inside with all kinds of lampshades of fear and doubt until we are no longer sure the light even burns. And the task of psychotherapy as well as antidepressants is to remove those lampshades so you can catch a flicker of the light which reminds you that you can get through it.

*You had indicated in one portion of your book: If we are comfortable only with answers that can be proven, we'll never really get comfortable. — Have we been taught this or have we just learned it?*

Yes, we have been taught it. Part of the unfortunate side effect of the scientific and industrial revolution of the last 200 hundred years is we have been taught to pay more attention to what it is we know rather than what it is we feel. According to the process of science, the really important answers are those that can be proven. Answers lend themselves to some test retest reliability, some scientific equation which somehow provides all of the answers for us. And we have tended to reduce those things that we know because we intuit it, because we feel it, as having a less important status. As a result, we have reduced most of the human experience to a single sensory dimension — knowledge of certainty. And, we have tended to subordinate those things we know because we feel them, we intuit them as having less credence and that is one of the unfortunate side effects of our growing technology. I am suggesting the things we know from the heart, from the unconscious are important. Those things we know because we intuit them not because they can be proven or because they have easy answers. And, certainly when it comes to the important existential questions (what is the meaning and purpose of our lives) it is my belief that there could be many explanations so no one way of answering those questions is better than any other way. For example, why, while you are at an airport and somebody comes in and fires a gun and all the people around you are hit but you are not wounded? If you can't answer these questions as to why; why it happened to you or why you were saved then there are many ways to explain it and one is not any better than another. And I think we live in a culture nowadays, in which we tend not to pay attention to the feeling parts that have answers for us. Like if we can't explain it then somehow it's not real. I believe we have reduced science to what I call scientism because we don't believe anything unless it has a scientific explanation. As a result, we reduce the richness of the human experience.

Hammerschlag adds, If you anticipate that you are going to have pain, the likelihood is actually that you will increase your pain. There is recent research in psychoneuroimmunology; there are areas of the brain that are called "dread zones". If you believe you are going to get pain it actually increases the likelihood that when you get the pain that it's going to be severe. If you don't anticipate, you actually experience less pain, even if you should have it.

*In the book, you also specify that "If you only see what seems to make you comfortable, then you are always destined to relive the old experiences and remain closed to discovering new levels of your own being." How do you get to the uncomfortable part?*

You have to take risks! Most of us only want to look at what we already know so we keep doing what we have always done. This is not the journey of hero's. Sooner or later all of us are going to face something that we don't know anything about. We're all going to get older and we're all going to die. It is part of the nature of our biology. So you want to prepare yourself the best way you know how to seek out experiences that prepare you for the unknown. The secret in living an effective life is not only paying attention to what you know and what you have already seen. Illumine those areas of your mind that have not yet seen the light. The most important things for us to look at are those areas that have not yet been illuminated. Those areas that make us afraid, those areas that give us doubt. Generally it's those things that we don't want to look at that are probably the most important for us to examine.

*How do you deal directly with the transition of death and mourning, so you can get back to the business of living?*

Now death is the ultimate unknowable. None of us are experts in that. All we know is that we leave this level of corporeal existence and that in the biological sense our life here stops, but we don't know what else happens. We have to deal with the process of mourning for those of us who are left. How are you going to give up the attachment to what was the actual embodiment? I think rituals and ceremonies are ways that help us and every culture has its own defined death rituals and these are ways that help us get through. But then you got to get up and out, because the tribute to death is living a good life, freer, you remember that person everyday, and then you get on with it. If you stay stuck and you hold on to it then you haven't done the work of mourning. A lot of people don't want to do the work, they want to hang on only to the loss and misery because they are afraid to continue to living, but that's not what it is that liberates us. You want to honor the people who have gone by honoring the spirit of their lives. You love somebody deeply you want to use their love to love again. Instead of suggesting, you know I loved somebody I am never going to love somebody again. That is not a gift you give to the person who died. The gift you give to the person who died, whom you loved tremendously is to choose to experience that kind of love again and again. That is the gift of love.

*In your book, you state that "We are here for such a short period of time. The important thing is to play the hand you've been dealt." What about the burdened, sick, poor etc?*

Clearly there are some who are born into cultures in which they are impoverished and enslaved. They haven't chosen that, they have been dealt that. But the important thing is you have to learn how to play the hand you are dealt. If you don't like your cards you can't call for a misdeal and do it over. Meaning that if you have cancer, you have to find some way to come to it instead of wishing somehow it wasn't you. If you have an amputation you can't keep wishing that it isn't true, because that just makes it impossible for you to be where you are. You have to find some way to be where you are; you can't always want to

be someplace other because it makes it impossible to deal with what you got. And you have some power about how you come to that, how you play the hand. You can give up and give up the spirit of your life or you can find some way to deal with it. You can be poor and still enjoy your family and commit yourself to your kids. If you are always wishing that you were someplace else, and miserable about your fate you can't win.

*Why do most of us minimize our choices by accepting somebody else's definition of what's possible or probable?*

Because we are afraid to dream, to make leaps of faith, then somebody else's sense of what's likely to happen becomes your reality. So let's say you have a cancer of the lung and they tell you, you have a 1 in 10 chance of staying alive for five years. I am suggesting you come to it with the expectation that you might be one of that 10 percent, and choose to find ways to strengthen yourself for the struggle.

*In your book you say that responding with "I know it" means that we no longer want to struggle with other ways of seeing it. But the way we once saw it may not be the way it is now. Why do you think we are limited and not be open to re-examination?*

Because as a species we tend to hang on to the way we know and do things. We spend so much time learning to see it one way that we figure even if it's not the best way we have become comfortable with it. And, we don't want to have to learn it another way because then we're afraid that the way we once knew it may not be the only way it is. So most of us tend to hang around with other people who know it the same way we do, which convinces us that the way we know it is the only way it is.

I think that unlearning always has a positive affect. I think most people don't want to unlearn it because it makes them vulnerable. And they think vulnerability is bad. I think vulnerability is good. It simply is an opportunity for new growth. You can't grow if you're not going to be vulnerable. That's the truth all over the animal kingdom — deer shed their antlers, snakes loose their skin, birds molt their feathers, etc. This is always a great vulnerability, but it is the only way the animal grows. The same is true for us as a species. The only way we grow is to give up some stuff — yet growth has nothing to do with adding things on — it has to do with letting things go. You got to make room for new material. If you only want to know what you have already learned you will only do what you have always done. So you only become what you once were, that's not a paradigm for growth.

*Dr. Hammerschlag's final comment:* I think that we can become what it is we dare to imagine. We can actually become the hero's of our own journey. Stuff is going to happen to us all. I want people not to give up. I want them to know that they are not in it alone. I want them to connect to their truth within, and also to connect to something outside themselves. I don't care what that is, this is not a plea for ecclasticism. It doesn't matter what you connect with, (whales, dolphins, spotted owls, or old growth forests, they may all be names for the great spirit), but it has to be something that you believe in other than yourself. That's what sustains us in the hard times. I want people to marinate their minds in what's possible rather than to marinate their minds in daily newspaper reminders that escalate only in fear, cynicism and despair. I want us to make the changes in our lives and our own families that we would like to see people make in the world and by doing it ourselves demonstrates what is possible in the world. ▼

*For information regarding Dr. Hammerschlag's presentations, workshops and products, please visit his Web site at [www.healingdoc.com](http://www.healingdoc.com).*