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Beyond the Disease Model to Healing

The Birth of a Disease

Doctors describe a disease as “a disordered pattern of bodily structure, function, and mentation” which has occurred in several people, “with such frequency as to suggest a common cause.”¹ As an NLP Practitioner, two presuppositions in this description really interest me. Firstly, that disease is disordered. Secondly, that the disease has one specific cause (and in medical minds that cause is usually a germ or a gene).

The disease model, although an historic advance, is only one reframe of what happens when someone is unhappy. It is, in fact, very close to the opposite of the model used by the developers of NLP. Over the last two centuries, the disease model has become a dominant way of understanding the human condition. We accept it so totally that we no longer remember that it is only a reframe (*the map is not the territory*). The disease model developed in its modern form in the eighteenth century, based on the philosophy of life epitomized by the Frenchman René Descartes. Descartes imagined the material universe as a giant clockwork mechanism which the spirit/minds of humanity lived in as “ghosts in a machine”. Illness was a breakdown of the machine. In the nineteenth century, researchers such as Lister, Pasteur and Koch found the cause of the breakdown—germs. This mechanical explanation of physical illness replaced traditional notions of illness as “divine punishment”.

In Biblical times, germs and genes were unknown. Their place was filled by the sins of an individual or that person’s ancestors. In John 9.1, the disciples find a man blind from birth and ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This old reframe led to the cruel persecution of such “sinners” as lepers. Today, fundamentalist Christians eagerly apply it to AIDS sufferers (“God’s punishment on gays”). Mostly, though, as a society we have let go of the “sin” reframe, and adopted “disease”. Today the disciples