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Review Article

Western esoteric healing II: A taxonomy of sources of therapeutic knowledge

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This article, the second in a two-part series, continues an exploration of Western esoteric healing, with special reference to its sources of therapeutic knowledge. First, the taxonomy introduced in the first paper is applied to a selection of representative esoteric healing systems, traditions, or organizations. These include respective groups whose therapeutic knowledge originates in and is transmitted via channeling, initiation, or empirical observation or validation, as well as groups whose knowledge comes through a combination of sources. Discussion is provided of Western esoteric traditions with substantial therapeutic and/or diagnostic teachings exemplifying these sources of knowledge. This entails a detailed unpacking of a wide range of medical and health-related information originating in historical and primary-source material on more than a dozen healing traditions. Recommendations are offered for follow-up investigation, including historical and social-historical, ethnographic, and medical and health-related research.

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In the first paper in this series,¹ a taxonomy was introduced for sources of therapeutic knowledge in Western esoteric healing. This taxonomy differentiates among systems whose knowledge about diagnosis and/or therapeutics originates from and was or is transmitted via *channeling*, *initiation*, or *empirical observation or validation*. Detailed explanation is found in the previous paper. These categories provide a helpful framework to describe and to compare and contrast concepts propounded by respective esoteric systems, traditions, and organizations.

For each respective example of esoteric healing, information is provided on its (a) history, (b) constituent beliefs and practices, and (c) source of therapeutic knowledge.

A channeled source of therapeutic knowledge

Spiritism

Communication with discarnate beings, whether departed humans or celestial entities who never incarnated, has a long history within esoteric and exoteric traditions. Consider the biblical story of Saul and the medium of Endor whose powers of divination summoned Samuel from the dead; also the Prophet Muhammad, who received the Holy Qur'an from the archangel Gabriel. In occult and New-Age circles, necromancy, or speaking with the dead, is an enduring mode of divination. National population data from 1988 found that nearly 40% of the adult population in the U.S. had engaged in this practice, over 15% "several times" or "often," influenced by their religious background and sociodemographic characteristics.² The most familiar manifestation of communication with

the deceased in North America is the spiritualist movement of the Fox sisters in upstate New York in the late 19th Century. There are still spiritualist churches today, in direct lineage from this earlier movement.^{3(pp747-51)}

In Brazil, Spiritism is a contemporary movement with more adherents than any religion besides Catholicism and the combined membership of evangelical and Pentecostal churches.⁴ Founded by Allan Kardec in France in the 19th Century, Spiritism is grounded in beliefs and principles regarding God, the nature of the universe, creation of matter and living beings, the spirit world, reincarnation, and divine and natural laws on morality.⁵ A defining feature of the religious life of Spiritists is mediumship, and Kardec wrote at length regarding its theory and practice, especially the complex issues that arise in navigating the spirit world.⁶ Adherents number between two and three million, according to survey data from 1994⁴ and more recently,⁷ and are highly educated and mostly urban-dwelling and value upward social mobility.⁴ Spiritist beliefs and practices have spread elsewhere, notably within Latin America and the Caribbean.^{8,9}

Healing is central to Spiritism, whose contacts with discarnate spirits are an ongoing source of therapeutic knowledge. This includes information from deceased physicians used to diagnose and treat illness. The diagnostic nosology includes categories familiar to Western physicians, and Spiritism has been especially active in psychiatry, where spiritual etiology is advanced without rejecting organic and psychosocial causes of mental illness.¹⁰ Etiological categories and diagnoses unique to Spiritism include malefic actions of discarnate spirits, such as obsession, parasitism, karmic stigmas, vampirism, symbiosis, and pathological mediumicity.¹¹ Therapy is eclectic, including spiritual and natural treatments: e.g., prayer, laying on of hands, fluidotherapy (magnetized water), charity and volunteering, moral education, and disobsession (spirit release therapy).¹²

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Clinical trials¹³ and health services research¹⁴ have studied Spiritism, and there is a healthcare chaplaincy¹⁵ and a network of over 1600 healing centers in Brazil.¹⁶ The International Spiritist Medical Association is a professional society for practitioners; they have a U.S. affiliate, publish research on healing, and host academic conferences throughout the world. Spiritists are not the only spiritualist healers in Brazil, the most (in)famous being João de Deus (John of God), controversial trance medium and psychic surgeon.¹⁷

Discarnate entities

Besides organized movements like Spiritism, considerable information has been received on healing from various independent discarnate entities.¹ As trance-channeling gained in popularity in North America and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, well known entities with distinct personalities gained popular followings.¹⁹ These included Ramtha, Seth, Lazaris, Orin, Ra, Cosmic Awareness, and more, as well as other miscellaneous examples: the plant *devás* who communicated with Dorothy Maclean at Findhorn, the ascended masters who spoke through Elizabeth Clare Prophet of the Summit Lighthouse, the Hierarchical Board channeled by Pauline Sharpe of Mark-Age, the Guides who spoke to former White House reporter Ruth Montgomery, and “Jesus Christ” who transmitted *A Course in Miracles* to Columbia University professor Helen Schucman. Messages covered a range of topics, including politics, metaphysics, the fate of the world, past lives of celebrities, and subjects related to human psychology and self-actualization.^{20–22} Some messages are directed to all of humanity, others to individual clients and their respective needs in response to specific questions. Material is available in the form of books and self-published manuscripts and on myriad websites.

A substantial proportion of popularized channeled material since the 1970s has focused on healing physical illness and emotional wounds. Information is included among published transcripts of channeling sessions with the most famous entities, as well as from other less widely known entities (e.g., Gildas, Agartha, White Eagle, Silver Birch), summarized in several places.²³ Typically, such material is brought through by a trance medium whose words are recorded and transcribed by a third party. Oftentimes this includes free flowing soliloquys with medical guidance regarding particular conditions.²⁰ Alternatively, respective channels—who may operate in the conscious state and refer to themselves as clairvoyants or medical intuitives—work face-to-face with individual clients in question-and-answer sessions regarding particular diseases or cases.^{24,25} This material is less likely to take written form, but rather is a product of sessions with individual mediums or psychics (not necessarily healers) purporting to transmit information with diagnostic or therapeutic content gleaned from discarnates or from the “inner planes” or via psychic assessment of a client’s energy field or Higher Self.

Despite a variety of sources, motives for contact, and modes of transmission, common themes can be identified throughout this corpus of therapeutic knowledge: the importance of love and forgiveness for true healing; physical effects of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs; the efficacy of prayer; the innate capability to be a healer; the reality of past lives and possession; death as a transition and not an end; health effects of *karma*; and more.²³ Medical outcomes research has not yet probed the efficacy of this information for healing or curing. The sum of channeled material here is so vast that knowing where to start is daunting. But its enduring popularity as a source of therapeutic knowledge suggests that clients are receiving something of value, even if remission of symptoms or disease cannot be confirmed. The veracity or utility of such information is a separate issue

that requires validation, and further investigation of a connection between trance-channeling and pathological dissociative states is also recommended.²⁶

Alien contactees

A subset of discarnates are entities purportedly from other planets or dimensions channeled by alien contactees. They include what are referred to in ufology as extraterrestrial biological entities (EBEs), a phrase first used in reference to the famous story of a purported UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947.²⁷ A substantial literature emerged in the 1950s, with the experiences of George Adamski, Howard Menger, and other early contactees.²⁸ Such reports have continued in the decades since, but seem to have declined since the 1990s. Distinctive modes of contact are described throughout reports of these experiences,^{29–31} including communication in the dream state, interaction through out-of-body or other paranormal experiences, person-to-alien “close encounters,” even physical transportation by alien crafts.³²

Some reports have focused on health-related experiences. These include lurid tales of medical experimentation conducted on abductees,³³ stories receiving publicity in mass market books and conspiracy magazines. These include reports of intrusive body-cavity probes, induced pregnancies, and other imagery that has entered popular culture and colored public perceptions of “normative” alien contact. Studies seeking to identify higher rates of psychopathology among experiencers compared to controls have been inconclusive,³⁴ without addressing whether such contacts are real or imagined. More under the radar have been reports and published accounts of anomalous healing or of abductees who “returned” with seemingly miraculous healing powers.^{35,36} These appear in accounts of medically-related encounters for contactees, but popular awareness is low, lost in the din of stories of anal probes and fetal implantation.

Among those reporting more pleasant encounters, the collective therapeutic knowledge from such contacts is vast. Healings include cures of flesh wounds, injuries, and minor illnesses; treatment of eye, skin, and hair conditions; and seemingly miraculous cures of cancer and other chronic diseases of the liver, kidney, and lungs.³⁵ Case reports also contain information about the cause and cure of disease, including content on past lives, parasites, spirit beings, self-healing, implanted chips, and other unusual subjects.³⁶ Despite diverse contactee experiences across geographical locations, even the “race” of entities channeled or communicated with (e.g., Reticulans or “Greys”; Pleadians or “Nordics”; Draconians or “Reptilians”), common themes in diagnostic and therapeutic information emerge. For obvious reasons, especially the enduring controversy and marginality of this topic,³⁷ neither population-based prevalence studies nor systematic outcomes research have been conducted.³⁸

Akashic records

Another source of channeled health-related information occurs via readings of the Akashic records. These are described in occult lore as a permanent record of every thought, feeling, and action in the history of the universe,^{39,40} stored in “a kind of cosmic memory bank”^{41(p6)} outside of physical reality. This concept is derived from the Sanskrit word *ākāśa*, or “the ether,” and rebranded by contemporary scholars as an “Akashic field” accessible psychically and through disciplined spiritual practice.⁴² While said to be a feature of the cosmology of esoteric Buddhism,⁴³ the Akashic records were popularized in the West by Theosophy and its offshoots and through teachings of various esoteric lodges and initiatory orders. It is also a part of the lingua franca of contemporary New-Age spirituality.

Ākāśa, as depicted in contemporary accounts, exhibits nonlocal characteristics similar to descriptions of consciousness by Dossey.⁴⁴ According to *The Secret Doctrine*, it “pervades all things”^{45(pl.334)}—it is “an all-encompassing medium that underlies all things and becomes all things,”^{42(p76)} a kind of unified field of everything. Accordingly,

¹ For purposes of this paper, this does not include the wealth of ethnographic information received from medicine men, *curanderas*, shamans, and other native folk healers from traditional cultures throughout the world. Such material has been cataloged and explored by medical anthropologists for decades.¹⁸

due to its subtle nature, it contains “information that comes from the external world without having been conveyed by the body’s exteroceptive senses.”^{46(p243)} This includes material on health and healing, of individual people or cases and related to diseases and medical therapies. Therapeutic knowledge is accessed and transmitted through a psychic channel or trance medium in a practitioner-client encounter or via self-readings for self-healing.⁴⁷ Akashic readings are typically one-on-one sessions like other psychic readings, and the channeler or medium may enter into a trance state or operate from waking consciousness. Some practitioners believe that reading the Akashic substrate can be taught for self-application, like other psi capabilities. Indeed, one could contend that psychic readings are readings of *ākāśa*, implicitly—that they are one and the same thing.

Consistencies in medical or health information are not easily identifiable. For one, these are primarily readings given for individual cases. Secondly, this phenomenon has not been subject to systematic study within the medical literature. Nonetheless, underlying principles in the advice or information given in Akashic, psychic, or “life” readings typically touch on familiar esoteric medical themes such as congestion of energies, imbalances, harmful relationships to malefic cosmic forces, and so on.⁴⁸ The therapeutic knowledge derived from Akashic readings is consonant with the themes of garden-variety spiritual healers, alternative doctors, and folk healing practitioners. The diagnostic information elicited and approaches used also underlie the work of contemporary medical intuitives and clairvoyants, whether they refer to their source as *ākāśa* or something different, such as “emotional energy”²⁴ or the “White Brotherhood.”⁴⁹ Empirical research on Akashic health readings may be hindered by existing scientific and biomedical models—“conventional views [that] cannot account for the Akashic phenomenon, and other ways in which consciousness is manifest in the world.”^{50(p240)}

An initiatory source of therapeutic knowledge

Golden Dawn

Among the most influential esoteric organizations of the 19th Century was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an initiatory society providing graded instruction in ritual and practical magick.⁵¹ Founded in 1888 by a group of European Freemasons and Rosicrucians, including MacGregor Mathers, Golden Dawn was a key radix for the Western mystery tradition in the 20th Century.⁵² Members included occultists Aleister Crowley, A.E. Waite, and Evelyn Underhill, and the Order spawned successor or offshoot organizations, some still in existence.^{3(pp826-40)} Among successors was Stella Matutina, whose most famous members were Dion Fortune and Israel Regardie, Crowley’s former secretary, who took control of the group’s archives upon its folding in the 1930s.⁵³ Regardie, who became a chiropractor, is noted for publishing the full ritual of the Golden Dawn.⁵⁴ The Order and its successors promulgated a system of beliefs and practices leading initiates on a graded path to spiritual self-actualization. Among its influences, this system was based in Enochian magick⁵⁵ and Kabbalah, the topic of influential books by both Mathers⁵⁶ and Regardie.⁵⁷ The latter’s subsequent writing detailed beliefs and practices of Golden Dawn, including esoteric teachings on healing.⁵⁸

As with other Western esoteric orders in the Hermetic tradition, Golden Dawn and its successors, according to Regardie, taught a healing system based on a simple truth: “Within every man and woman is a force that directs and controls the entire course of life. Properly used, it can heal every affliction and ailment that we have.”^{59(p13)} Accordingly, “The central question, then, is how are we to become aware of this force? What is its nature? What is the mechanism whereby we can use it?”^{59(p14)} As with Hermeticism in general, “Self-discipline and asceticism are required of the initiate,”^{41(p156)} this informs Golden Dawn’s approach to healing. Its therapeutic knowledge addresses both pathophysiology and treatment, including

meditative and visualization techniques that enable awakening and conscious engagement of spiritual energy centers or *chakras*.⁵⁹ These ideas are not much different from teachings of other esoteric orders, grounded in concepts that originate in Eastern spiritual and therapeutic traditions.⁴⁸

In the Hermetic tradition, “Ritual is expression of magic, as is knowledge, special wisdom, and understanding of cosmic law, truth, and justice.”^{60(p6)} Healing rituals involve the practice of magick, such as recitation of secret formulae, affirming “the close proximity of medicine to magic in all ancient societies.”^{60(p7)} Hermes himself (said to be identical to the Egyptian Thoth), as Thoth “healed Horus and restored his vision.”^{60(p7)} Indeed, “Magical medicine was probably born in Egypt. . . as a science both theoretical and experimental . . . to maintain the human body in harmony with the cosmos, so that it will serve as a receptacle for the vital forces which created the universe.”^{61(p117)} For Regardie, healing rituals were consistent with his “psychologization of esoteric discourse”⁶²—acknowledging that the esoteric may function, in part, through the human psyche and consciousness. Through initiatory experiences that facilitate “tuning ourselves to the ultimate,”^{59(p59)} a healer may effect a transpersonal healing transaction between the healer’s and patient’s spiritual centers by means of sympathetic magic, leading to banishment of symptoms of chronic diseases and mental or emotional problems.^{59(pp45-58)}

Alchemy

Defining alchemy is “formidable, sufficient, certainly, to challenge not only modern scholars but the early alchemists themselves.”^{63(p6)} The *Dictionary of Mysticism* describes it as a “science of decomposing and recomposing things, as well as of changing their essential nature and raising it higher—transmuting them into each other.”^{40(p8)} In his foreword to *The Alchemist’s Handbook*, Regardie describes alchemists as “concerned with the purification of metals and the elimination of sickness and disease from the human race . . .”^{64(pp6-7)} He notes that this work is conducted with an “emphasis on piety, secrecy, and allegory.”^{64(p7)} Scholars believe that alchemy “originated in Egypt during the first few centuries B.C. and was later transmitted to Europe through Greek and Arabic sources,”^{65(p71)} which entailed exposure to the Hermetic tradition.⁶⁶ The most historically significant figure was 16th Century Swiss polymath Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus. The eponymous Paracelsus Clinic, a Swiss naturopathic clinic, considers him “the father of alternative medicine.”⁶⁷ He has been described as the “first modern medical scientist” and “the Hippocrates of the Renaissance,”^{68(p78)} the “Luther of medicine,”^{69(p31)} and as a seminal figure for modern esotericism.⁷⁰ The most important figure following Paracelsus was 17th Century Flemish physician and scientist J.B. van Helmont, considered a bridge between alchemy and modern biomedicine—“the last alchemist—the first biochemist.”^{71(p1775)}

For medieval alchemists and modern-day practitioners such as members of the now defunct Paracelsus Research Society, therapeutic knowledge was conveyed through instruction from master teachers. This involved structured learning in laboratory procedures (practical or operational alchemy) and “inner” work (theoretical or spiritual alchemy) not dissimilar from the mystical teachings of other esoteric orders. Learning was experienced through and protected by initiatory experiences and oaths. According to *The Alchemist’s Handbook*, “Those who have demonstrated some of the teachings and formulas of Paracelsus know it, but keep profound silence about their findings, as they are of immense scope.”^{72(p102)} Initiates were (and are) then equipped to practice self-healing, as well as enabled to conduct proximal and distant healings of others and authorized to train and initiate others in methods of healing,⁷³ grounded in natural, if arcane, laws. According to alchemists, “Healing is by nature an alchemical process.”^{73(pxiii)}

The popular conception of the medieval alchemist is a proto-chemist squirreled away in a secret laboratory, using the mythical Philosopher's Stone to transmute base metals into gold.⁷⁴ Among most alchemists, this Great Work was allegorical: it “symbolized the transformation of natural, material man into spiritual man.”^{41(p7)} For Paracelsus, curing disease through creating elixirs and other remedies was central to his art and science. He believed that “sickness and health are controlled by astral influences, and that sickness can be eliminated and health restored by *arcana* or remedies containing virtues. The function of the remedy is to restore a celestial harmony between the inner, astral body of man and a heavenly *astrum*.”^{65(p78)} He maintained that “the human body and the cosmos should be regarded as a unity, mutually reflecting each other.”^{75(p69)} In contrast to modern biomedicine, the “*corpus Paraselsicum*” is founded in “a broad table of categories of medical thought and action” which acknowledge the health and healing impact of environmental, cosmological, and astrological influences; toxins and poisons; the natural constitution of the human body or bodymind; spiritual aspects of life; and the work of God.^{76(pp157-60)} For Paracelsus, “alchemy represents more a therapeutic process of healing that could best be described as physiological-pathological chemistry on a vitalistic basis.”^{76(p162)} On the occasion of his quincentenary, a commentary in *The Lancet* had this to say about his life's work: “But whatever one makes of his medical ideas . . . one cannot mistake the compassion and commitment to the patient which lies at the centre of Paracelsus' work”^{77(p1397)}

An empirical source of therapeutic knowledge

Theosophy

The Theosophical Society is a membership organization founded by Helena Blavatsky and colleagues in 1875 in New York. The Society is a repository for teachings channeled from a group of discarnate beings or “Mahatmas” known as the Spiritual Hierarchy, Ascended Masters, or Great White Brotherhood.⁷⁸ Blavatsky's best known works, *Isis Unveiled*⁷⁹ and *The Secret Doctrine*,⁴⁵ were influenced by esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism, by New Thought, and by other philosophies circulating at the time, to such an extent that accusations of plagiarism have been made.⁸⁰ Theosophy, in turn, has strongly influenced the normative beliefs of Western metaphysical organizations, its teachings and concepts becoming part of the vocabulary of 20th-Century esotericism, occult mysticism, and New-Age beliefs and practices. These include reincarnation, subtle bodies, *chakras*, spirit guides, channeling, séances, thought forms, meditation, and the coming of a *maitreya* or world teacher. The Theosophical worldview is wide-ranging, laying out a vision of the creation and purpose of the universe (cosmogogenesis) and of human life (anthropogenesis) largely adopted by contemporary metaphysical groups and even “diffused fairly widely” into the larger American culture.^{81(pp37-9)} A recent biography called Blavatsky “the mother of modern spirituality,”⁸² a moniker probably not too wide of the mark.

A significant portion of Theosophical writing is devoted to the human body-mind complex, its physical functioning, and methods of healing.⁸³ Just as Theosophy helped to define the contemporary metaphysical worldview, so too has it contributed to its tacit understanding of human esoteric anatomy (*chakras*, *nāḍīs*), esoteric physiology (*prāna*, *qi*) and pathophysiology (“cosmic” forces), etiology (toxins and immune system challenges unvalidated by conventional medicine), and therapy (including bodywork and energy healing).⁴⁸ Much of what constitutes therapeutic knowledge for New-Age healing and integrative medicine in the West is derived from Theosophical concepts. Moreover, a big piece of what is taken for granted by Western spiritual healers and alternative medical practitioners originated in Theosophical teachings, especially salutogenic effects of mind-body practices such as meditation.⁸⁴

The Theosophical Publishing House has issued volumes summarizing Theosophy's approach to health and healing.^{85–87} Principles include hypnosis, thought power, vital magnetic healing, psychic diagnosis and radiaesthesia, “spirit” healing, spirit guides and angels, and more.⁸³ This material constitutes Theosophy's therapeutic knowledge, and Theosophists assert its validation by observations consistent with their interpretation of the nature of physical reality. While Blavatsky's original revelations were (purportedly) channeled, medical information put forth by individual Theosophists is not channeled, nor hidden behind initiatory firewalls. Etiological statements are based, in principle, upon observables and recommended practices are primarily naturalistic, or, if unorthodox, rely on naturalistic explanations. Treatment modalities include surgery, physical therapy, pharmaceuticals, and psychotherapy, and where spiritual healing is recommended its effects are attributed to suggestion, patient attitudes, and other “mundane” factors.⁸⁶ Theosophy encourages scientific research to validate its teachings on healing.⁸⁷ Study of the health effects of mind-body practices such as meditation, promoted by Theosophy since the 19th Century, has been a staple of psychophysiological research for decades.⁸⁸ Likewise, research on spiritual healing, another topic that Theosophy helped to introduce in the West, has flourished as a result of significant contributions from Theosophists.⁸⁹

Anthroposophy

Among the earliest and most significant offshoots of Theosophy was the philosophical system or “Spiritual Science” developed by former Theosophist Rudolf Steiner. Known as Anthroposophy, Steiner's perspective was characteristically more Christocentric, Western, and practical and less Asian and mystically oriented than Theosophy,⁹⁰ and has been described as “esoteric Christianity.”⁹¹ Steiner was among the most prolific public speakers and published authors in history, writing and lecturing on diverse topics including anthropology, cosmology, consciousness, religion, social science, education, the arts, and natural science.⁹¹ Unlike Theosophy, whose teachings contain health-related content, noted above, Steiner and colleague Ita Wegman established a full-blown school of medical thought and practice, first described in *Fundamentals of Therapy*.⁹² Anthroposophical medicine is characterized as a “practice that treats the non-physical (or spiritual) elements of the patient as well as the physical,”^{93(p15)} while being “firmly based on the knowledge and experience of conventional medicine.”^{93(p15)} Anthroposophical medicine exists in its own world of medical texts,⁹⁴ research studies in peer-reviewed medical journals,^{95,96} and professional organizations and conferences, medical clinics, and physicians who practice in accord with Anthroposophical teachings.⁹³

As with Theosophy, the origins of Anthroposophy's therapeutic knowledge was at least partly in channeled or psychically obtained material, transmitted through Steiner, who read the Akashic records.⁹⁷ But also as in Theosophy, trance-channeling or psychic readings are not a defining feature of the diagnostic or healing process. The armamentarium of Anthroposophy is predominantly naturalistic: it draws on the therapeutic use or application of substances, phenomena, and concepts originating in nature and not in a hypothetical supernatural realm, although “nature” as defined here may be stranger than as understood by contemporary Western biomedicine and science as it is decidedly spiritualized.⁹⁸ Still, etiologic factors comprise tangible things or observables in the natural world: e. g., alcohol, nicotine, diet, breathing, effects of the sun, culture, heavy metals, and more.⁹⁹ Likewise, treatment modalities are also eclectic, drawing on therapies from conventional medicine, homeopathy, bodywork, hydrotherapy, counseling, herbal and other natural remedies, movement therapy, art therapy, and more.¹⁰⁰ The imprimatur for these recommendations originates in Steinerian theory, in observation, or in empirical validation,¹⁰¹ rather than on the word of discarnate masters, as in Theosophy.

Thus, despite Anthroposophy's origins in Theosophy, the therapeutic knowledge of Anthroposophical medicine is *sui generis*. Steiner and Wegman synthesized an approach to disease, pathophysiology, health, wellness, prevention, healing, and medicine unlike any other system in the history of medicine. Steiner recognized this, and proclaimed his synthesis of spiritual and scientific information as the foundation for a "True Physiology."^{102(pp107-21)} Many of Steiner's ideas remain popular in the West and have become insinuated into contemporary perspectives on natural healing, including concepts of "geographic medicine,"¹⁰³ such as climatic, environmental, geocultural, and cosmic (e.g., astrological) influences on health.

Medical astrology

For thousands of years, seers and diviners have looked to the stars for insights into human affairs, mundane and spiritual, in order to discern the destiny of individual human lives and gage the deeper meaning and causes of challenges that people face. Insights have been sought through astrology, defined as "the science which defines the actions of celestial bodies upon animate and inanimate objects, and their reaction to such influence."^{104(p19)} Among the most pressing challenges are threats to health, physical and emotional; accordingly, among the most significant branches of this ancient art has been medical astrology.¹⁰⁵ A guiding principle, misunderstood by non-practitioners, is not that the positions of the stars "cause" illness, but rather that they reflect underlying relationships that occur at all levels of manifestation, as in the maxim "as above, so below."¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, an interesting historical essay described how with the advent of the scientific revolution, medical astrology in the West evolved in some quarters into a kind of "medical astronomy," with a more empirical and mechanical rationale no longer explicitly esoteric, enabling it to persist into the 19th Century.¹⁰⁷ In either context, medical astrology has a naturalistic basis, emically speaking, even if features of the worldview are alien to mainstream natural science.

Medical astrology as practiced today is predominantly diagnostic, focused on etiology, rather than an explicitly therapeutic modality, although considerable therapeutic information is found throughout medical-astrological writing. Alternative medical practitioners of various schools use this information diagnostically and in setting a course of treatment. As with other medical specialties and subspecialties, published material is available for diverse audiences and purposes: e.g., a diagnostic instructional manual with case reports,¹⁰⁸ a text by a physician linking astrological data to pathophysiology,¹⁰⁹ an academic handbook,¹¹⁰ a self-help health guide with an alternative-medicine focus,¹¹¹ a medical dictionary,¹¹² a guidebook for lay readers,¹¹³ and an extended take on ancient and classical medical astrology.¹¹⁴ Especially notable are Cornell's *Encyclopedia of Medical Astrology*¹⁰⁵ and thirty or so books on medical astrology written by or for professionals and published by the American Federation of Astrologers.

While the therapeutic knowledge of medical astrology is focused on diagnosing disease, it also supports treatment recommendations—such as ideal times, zodiacally speaking, to receive certain treatments or regimens of care. Astrological correlates have been identified for respective diseases, health conditions, and symptoms and signs. For example, leucorrhea is associated with an unfavorable birth chart aspect of Pluto square with the moon; accidents to the knees involving injuries or wounds are associated with Uranus, Saturn, or Mars afflicted in Capricorn; and myopia and astigmatism are associated with multiple planets in conjunction or opposition in Cancer or Capricorn, especially with these signs on the ascendant or descendant; and so on.¹⁰⁵ Just as there are other systems besides contemporary Western astrology, so, too, is information available on medical astrology as practiced elsewhere, including India,¹¹⁵ Tibet,¹¹⁶ and China.¹¹⁷

Multiple sources of therapeutic knowledge

Besides these three sources of therapeutic knowledge, hybrid forms also exist. That is, esoteric groups or traditions can be identified which exhibit two or more of these three types of knowledge transmission. This may be a more commonly observed phenomenon than the "pure" forms described above, because, as noted, sources of therapeutic knowledge are not discrete categories of esoteric healing traditions. Rather, they are simply a taxonomic classification used here for heuristic purposes. Examples of such hybrid forms are described below.

Edgar Cayce

The famous "sleeping prophet," Edgar Cayce, founded the Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.), one of the largest and most influential metaphysical organizations in the world.^{118–120} Located in Virginia Beach, the A.R.E. contains a repository of over 14,000 of Cayce's trance readings, about 68% of which (over 9000) contain information on etiology, diagnostics, or treatment for individual cases and/or particular medical conditions.¹²¹ The source of therapeutic knowledge in the Cayce tradition is both *channeled*—based on psychic and past-life readings made while in a trance state—and *empirical*—in that a school of medical philosophy and therapeutics has grown up around the readings,^{122,123} with associated clinical case evidence, as well as peer-reviewed research papers seeking to validate the readings.¹²⁴ According to the Cayce perspective, healing is "a process of attuning ourselves, our energies, to our true nature, that of becoming companions, cocreators with the Father-God."^{125(p13)}

In the Cayce therapeutic knowledge base, certain anatomical structures (e.g., lacteal gland) and (patho)physiological mechanisms (e.g., lymphatic transport) are understood in functionally different and more esoteric ways than in Western medicine. These are described in detail, as if they were real, observable things, and, through case reports and modern-day client experiences, validation studies have been conducted.¹²⁶ A characteristic set of etiologic factors is also identifiable, broaching concepts such as poor assimilations and eliminations, dietary factors, improper acid-alkaline balance, spinal subluxations and lesions, imbalance-incoordination of the nervous system, glandular malfunction and imbalance, stress and overexertion, and infection.¹²⁷ These are treated by Cayce-influenced practitioners through mostly natural and/or conventional remedies, such as castor oil packs, diet and nutrition, exercise, bodywork and massage, and meditation.¹²⁸ Cayce is widely regarded as a founding father of holistic medicine,¹²⁹ and his principles are influential among contemporary integrative practitioners. He promoted an eclectic approach to diagnostics and therapeutics that is something of an implicit model for holistic care—a blend of old, new, expert-administered treatment, and self-care.

Rosicrucianism

The Rosicrucian movement originated in the 17th Century with publication of several manuscripts including *Fama Fraternitatis*, the story of one "Frater C.R.C." (later identified as Christian Rosenkreuz) which describes an esoteric order whose doctrine is stitched together from kabbalism, Pythagoreanism, alchemy, esoteric Christianity, and other sources.¹³⁰ Scholarly consensus is that the manuscripts, Rosenkreuz, and existence of the order are fictions,⁷⁵ but various pseudo-Rosicrucian orders and lodges emerged throughout Europe as Masonic auxiliaries.¹³¹ Dozens of orders established in the 20th Century still exist. Modern Rosicrucianism is genealogically connected to other esoteric orders—Freemasonry, Golden Dawn, Ordo Templi Orientis—and represents itself as continuing a tradition extending back to ancient mystery schools.¹³² Among contemporary groups claiming Rosicrucian lineage are the Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis (AMORC), founded by H. Spencer Lewis in 1915, and the Rosicrucian Fellowship, founded by Max Heindel in 1909.³

Rosicrucian teachings are largely *initiatory*, based on graded lessons, and *empirical*, based on observation or scientific validation of metaphysical truths. An emphasis is on self-mastery through knowledge of natural and spiritual laws and cycles underlying human experience.¹³³ This includes therapeutic knowledge, including related to human physiology and healing. AMORC teaches about annual cycles of health, dividing the year into seven equal periods, each associated with a distinctive epidemiology and therapeutic prescriptions. For example, during Period Number Two, individuals may expect to have “temporary trouble with the stomach, bowels, blood stream, and nerves”,^{133(p118)} during Period Number Five, “the great outdoors [should be] utilized for deep breathing, fairly long walks, and good exercise.”^{133(p121)} AMORC monographs for the Sixth Temple Degree contain “a complete system of healing,”^{134(p1)} including instruction on digestion, nutrition, blood circulation, the arterial and nervous systems, and anatomical features of nerve ganglia and the head and neck.^{135(pp83-102)} AMORC-affiliated doctors continue to publish medically-related works.¹³⁶ In *Occult Principles of Health and Healing*, Heindel offers an eclectic theory of “general” and “specific” causes of disease, including insanity, mediumship, obsession, past-life experience, etheric phenomena, diet, heredity, and alcohol and tobacco.¹³⁷ He prescribes diet, fasting, sleep, light and color, and the assistance of “Invisible Helpers” who work under the guidance of “Elder Brothers.”¹³⁷ Another Rosicrucian-related group, Builders of the Adytum, teaches that “healing is accomplished by spiritual means, through the establishment in human consciousness of the perfect pattern of the heavenly man . . .”^{138(p92)} Accordingly, Rosicrucians, across groups, are schooled in techniques of absent healing for treatment of acute and chronic conditions, physical and psychological.¹³⁴

Lucis Trust Arcane School

As noted earlier, while “esoteric healing” is treated here as a conceptual category, it is more familiarly a branded entity associated with occultist Alice Bailey and her organization, the Lucis Trust.¹ Raised in the Church of England, Bailey became a Theosophist and began channeling Djwhal Khul, member of the discarnate Spiritual Hierarchy, alienating her from the Theosophical Society’s leadership.^{132(p11)} Khul (a.k.a. “the Tibetan”) dictated two dozen books over the next 30 years, one of which was *Esoteric Healing*.¹³⁹ With her husband, Bailey founded the Lucis Trust in 1922 as a publishing outlet, and a year later established the Arcane School as a spiritual and educational home for followers. Based on her writings, *channeled* from the Tibetan, the Arcane School teaches the Ageless Wisdom via a course of meditation and graded study, with stepped *initiation* as in other lodges.

Esoteric Healing is essentially a comprehensive textbook of esoteric pathophysiology and therapeutics. It propounds a system of therapeutic knowledge, laying out a theory of disease etiology that encompasses causes originating in the human psyche, in group life, and in “karmic liabilities.” Psychological causes relate to uncontrolled emotions, pathologies of the etheric body (congestion, lack of coordination and integration, and over-stimulation of the *chakras*), harmful mental attitudes as well as fanaticism and “frustrated idealism,” and special afflictions of mystics and spiritual disciples. *Esoteric Healing* includes hundreds of pages of material on “laws” and “rules” of healing, focused on the process of “restitution,” the art of “elimination,” and the processes of “integration,” terms that refer to aspects of the transition (death) of the physical body and the soul’s journey to higher planes. Healing encompasses trans-incarnational experiences not limited to resolution of acute or chronic conditions in one’s current lifetime. This is a complex matter, with many prerequisites; according to Bailey, “the preparatory work is not easy.”^{139(p389)} Recent writing continues to explore these concepts.^{140–142} A professional society exists for esoteric healers in the Bailey tradition, the International Network for Energy Healing, founded in the U.K. in 1982 by a student of the Arcane School.

Subtle-energy medicine

Energy healing is an umbrella term for various therapeutic modalities that heal through accessing and manipulating energies and energy fields across the bioelectromagnetic spectrum, including “subtle” bioenergies.¹⁴³ These refer to that part of the spectrum associated with the subtle bodies (especially the etheric body), the subtle energy centers (or *chakras*), psychic or intuitive modes of diagnosis, and treatment through projection of “unseen forces.”¹⁴⁴ Some contemporary systems of subtle-energy medicine exemplify esoteric healing approaches whose therapeutic knowledge is obtained in all three ways: via *channeling*, *initiation*, and *empirical* validation or observation. Since the focus here is on Western esoteric healing, the many Eastern-based systems of energy healing will not be considered, although some of them (e.g., Reiki) fit this description to a tee.¹⁴⁵ Efforts to taxonomize systems of energy healing have differentiated East Asian, Western professional, bioenergy, and contemporary metaphysical traditions.¹⁴⁶ The last category contains branded systems of energy healing and associated training programs founded by individual healers in the U.S. such as Rosalyn Bruyere, Donna Eden, and Barbara Brennan, whose common defining feature may be their eclecticism.¹⁴⁶

Each of these healers works clairvoyantly, accessing information through psychic and intuitive means, although they vary as to use of the term channeling. Each gives classes and workshops, and Eden and Brennan have created formal systems of instruction leading to certification, similar to other traditions of energy healing, such as Reiki, Healing Touch, and Wirkus Bioenergy.¹⁴⁶ Each either synthesizes information from scientific sources or participates in and encourages scientific study to validate the healing process. In *Wheels of Light*, Bruyere discusses and incorporates sophisticated research on the impact of bioelectromagnetic fields on the human body, and she has contributed to research studies at the Kennedy-Krieger Institute, the Menninger Clinic, UCLA, and elsewhere.¹⁴⁷ Eden’s teachings are also strongly science-based, referencing empirical studies and validated facts in lectures and classes given to medical and other professional audiences, and she has co-authored papers published in the peer-reviewed medical literature.¹⁴⁸ Brennan’s method incorporates findings from various sources, including studies of bioelectromagnetic medicine, and she lectures at and participates in panels at scientific conferences.¹⁴⁹ The present author participated in a panel with Brennan and *Explore’s* executive editor Larry Dossey in a conference on energy medicine in 2001.¹⁵⁰

Still other esoteric healing traditions or approaches would seem to check *none* of these three boxes—that is, their source of therapeutic knowledge is not explicitly channeling, initiation, or empirical observation. Rather, it emerges from general teachings associated with a spiritual system or tradition, based on theory, sacred writings, worldview, or some other mostly naturalistic source, much like for contemporary systems of alternative medicine. Yet the content of this knowledge is categorizable as esoteric, for reasons described in the first paper,¹ and thus is not best identified as “merely” unconventional or alternative healing.

Examples include beliefs and practices associated with neopagan or Wiccan,¹⁵¹ neo-Kabbalistic,¹⁵² and neo-Essene¹⁵³ systems of healing, each derived from a respective older spiritual tradition (a clue being use of the prefix “neo-”). For these healing systems, therapeutic knowledge is not explicitly channeled, although it may result from intuitive skills reinforced by longstanding spiritual practice. It is not accessed via formal initiation, besides the usual quasi-initiatory experiences that are part of the developmental process along the associated spiritual path. Nor is it empirical, in that there are no traditions of research, documentation of efficacy, or efforts to derive beliefs or practices from systematic naturalistic observation. The authority of the respective spiritual tradition acts as an imprimatur for the therapeutic knowledge’s inherent truth.

Conclusion

To summarize, Western esoteric healing modalities can be differentiated on the basis of their source of therapeutic knowledge. These include channeling, initiation, and empirical observation or validation. For some therapies, the knowledge base is informed by a combination of such sources. The analysis of healing philosophies, systems, and modalities surveyed in this paper leads to a couple observations.

First, traditions of esoteric healing originating in the West come by their therapeutic knowledge in a diversity of ways. For the most part, sources and transmission of knowledge are outside of physical reality as defined by modern (biomedical) science. Whether information is received through channeling from a discarnate being, initiation into an arcane mystery tradition, or postulation of a veiled metaphysical truth validated through spiritual or transcendent experience or empirical observation, these are not the normative routes by which new etiologic, diagnostic, or therapeutic innovation occurs in Western medicine or by which new practice standards are advanced. These pathways do not even bear much resemblance to the transmission of information underlying most alternative therapies, including spiritual or energy therapies, which, despite their marginality, still play by the same rules as biomedicine: efficacy determined by clinical trials or other conventional research methods, and mechanisms of action determined by bench science or other biomedical, biophysical, or biobehavioral investigations.

Second, for some Western forms of esoteric healing, therapeutic knowledge is obtained through multiple means—that is, through two or three of the sources described in the taxonomy. As with other marginal healing-related phenomena with hazy conceptual boundaries, while it is tempting to try to fit observations into discrete categories the underlying reality may be more complex and provocative. Access to bodies of medical knowledge channeled from otherworldly sources may also require an initiatory process for practitioners. Philosophical schools may seek empirical confirmation in order to fulfill an “evangelistic” desire to validate the channeled teachings of a revered founder. Initiation into the mysteries of arcane healing knowledge may follow a step-sequential process that has evolved over time from empirical observations that validate the original teaching in the same way or produce effective practitioners. And so on.

A significant limitation of the approach taken here bears noting. Construction of a taxonomy based on subjective insights gained from years of study, observation, and participation rather than on a formal methodology is not an exact science. Another scholar might locate some of these groups elsewhere in the schema; others might argue for a different set of categories altogether. Others still may conclude that there are better examples than the groups referenced in this paper. The present author acknowledges the merit of these judgments. This exercise is meant as a starting point for further exploration—not a final word—so revisions of the taxonomy, a more systematic approach, and additional discussion and follow-up are welcomed.

The present two-paper series has been an effort to broach the subject of Western esoteric healing and organize its content in a way to encourage further study. Fundamental information on the parameters of this phenomenon—historically, ethnographically, and medically—is still lacking. Several next steps for research can be identified.

First, there is a need for more detailed *historical and social-historical research*, especially on the origins and cultural context of esoteric organizations and their founders and leaders who have advocated for theories or philosophies of healing. Of special interest would be discussions of interactions and relations with both normative religion and Western medicine. It has been observed that “just as respective esoteric religious and medical traditions appear correlated . . . so too do respective esoteric cosmological and healing systems go hand in hand.”^{48(p102)} These correlations merit further investigation.

Second, this subject would benefit from more extensive *ethnographic research* among existing groups, as well as participant self-reports among clients or experiencers of esoteric healing modalities. Detailed analyses of the transmission of therapeutic knowledge would be welcome, too, but there are obvious barriers to obtaining this information from groups that guard their membership and teachings behind firewalls, such as graded initiations or secret oaths. Moreover, a rigid “hierarchy of knowledge” in Western medicine reinforces the marginalization of indigenous, folk, and non-normative traditions of healing and sources of therapeutic knowledge.¹⁵⁴ Successes in documenting the origins, beliefs, and practices of new religious movements and obscure New-Age organizations^{132,155} provide a model for deeper exploration.

Third, *medical and health-related research* of various types would better enable scholars to describe the impact of esoteric healing on people and populations. This might include health services, clinical, and epidemiologic studies—e.g., of rates of utilization, of efficacy, and of impact on population-wide morbidity, respectively. As secondary analyses by now have mined existing sources of population data on unorthodox healing modalities,¹⁵⁶ this will require original data collection efforts. The usual barriers, including identifying funding sources, may be amplified here in light of the subject matter. Other means exist, however, for sophisticated exploration of topics involving marginal themes in healing.¹⁵⁷

It is easy—too easy—to dismiss this ontological category of healing modalities and concomitant therapeutic knowledge as fringe, marginal, strange, and thus unworthy of seeking a deeper understanding. Words like marginal and unorthodox may be fitting in a sociological or descriptive sense; none of the content of this paper could reasonably be described as normative medicine. Yet these same philosophies, schools, systems, and modalities of etiology, diagnosis, and treatment comprise a substantial sector of beliefs and practices which, data suggest, have been utilized by millions of adults just in the U.S. As the internet and social media hasten widespread access to obscure knowledge, what was once arcane or esoteric may soon become out in the open—whether the guardians of such knowledge approve of this or not. This has already happened, for example, with obscure Rosicrucian teachings (e.g., on the Hall of Records said to lie under the Sphinx in Giza) and with the geometric symbols used in Reiki attunements and healing sessions (exposed on dozens of websites). There is thus considerable incentive to marshal scholarly resources to bear on esoteric healing phenomena, both for the health and perhaps safety of individual seekers and for our collective knowledge of the healing process.

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