

# HEARTS AND MINDS

*Reclaiming the soul of science and medicine*

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Lindisfarne Books

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## PREAMBLE

Precarious. Anxiety-breeding. Political positions, hardened. Economics, unforgiving and ruthless. Racial/social divides sharp, aggravated. Middle ground and the middle class shrinking fast. Are the laws and courts owned?

Welcome to our times.

We're still the richest country in the world, and we pay the most for health care by far, yet still, we're last or off the lists altogether when it comes to the best health care systems among industrialized nations. Life expectancy is down; infant mortality is up. Doctors and patients are unhappy with six- or seven-minute visits. As medical patients, we feel that we're seen as collections of billable diagnoses, procedures and potential pharmaceutical sales.

### **Have We Arrived Somewhere We Don't Want To Be?**

On what basis can we object, when our science conceives of a universe of particles and forces governed by chance, and of our very selves as nothing more than biological contraptions? As Nobel Laureate Francis Crick put it, "You, your joys and sorrows . . . [and] your sense of personal identity are in fact no more than . . . a pack of neurons." You could say that we've concocted a sense of the world that leaves us altogether out of the picture.

Could how we see ourselves affect our ability to act? Does that, for example, enter into the political impasse and paralysis blocking the portal between high scientific certainty around climate change and paths to effective action? Consider the newly-minted physician, fresh out of learning in medical school that the indiscriminate use of antibiotics invites the creation of multi-resistant superbugs and horrendous epidemics. But what guarantees that a bright-eyed new pediatrician will land in hot water with "management"? Merely raising an eyebrow when the parent of an infant with a sniffle (known to be viral—antibiotics are completely useless) insists on going home with a prescription for an antibiotic? The child, it's sad to say, is, at some clinics and hospitals, literally more likely to be admitted (in order to pad billing) than sent home with a lollipop.

After an interview, I mentioned to the medical director of one of New York City's major hospitals that a young pediatrician had complained to me about flak he'd gotten repeatedly for resisting handing out unwarranted antibiotic prescriptions. The nearly annoyed response startled me: "Oh, I just give it to them! Otherwise they'll get it from someone else." How did medicine's bedrock maxim—*primum non nocere* (first, do no harm)—get the small-print add-on, "unless it helps your balance sheet"?

For small indulgences, the gap between what we know and what we actually do may be survivable. But on a large scale, it gets us to where we are now, roadblocked and beset by addictions and distractions.

We stand at an abyss, and it is hard to look down—especially since, it can be said with some certainty, who we are is what got us here.

### So What Can We Do?

We can go back to fundamentals. *We can examine the thinking and the assumptions that led us to where we are.* Some of them, *Hearts and Minds* shows, are simply wrong or, at best, incomplete.

What kinds of assumptions are we talking about? Deep and basic ones. What we think we know about the mind and matter, about genes, about history, evolution, the arts and about consciousness itself. On the medical side, in *Hearts and Minds*, we look at our firmly-held understandings of the heart and the brain, the connections between them, and how they affect how we heal.

### What is The Impulse Behind *Hearts and Minds* and Where Did It Come From?

Some rare individuals are born with questions burning like torches. Purpose soon defines their every step. Others have an early path-defining event that shocks them into awareness of issues that are both personally and societally consequent. The event organizes their future lives. For others, life's course seems to drift—through error, work and study, love, illness, adventure and even catastrophe. But that seemingly aimless meander finally leads to inquiry. When pursued, it connects the disparate fragments, and previously unsuspected underlying forms emerge and shine. *Hearts and Minds* got its start this way.

As a freelance medical journalist, I have written for many editors. Some years back, one of them, an editor of a news sheet for oncologists, called and asked me to interview the newly appointed director of the just-formed Integrative Medicine Service at New York City's foremost cancer center. My article was supposed to be a "puff piece" of course, casting a nice glow on the person and the program. No hard-hitting investigative piece, for sure. The program included acupuncture, nutritional counseling, herbal medicine, music and art therapy, tai chi, mind-body therapies, biofeedback, massage, yoga, meditation, spirituality in general, and support groups.

All of it sounded good, I thought. But the smooth-going interview faltered when the director made it absolutely clear that no non-conventional cancer therapies could *ever* have any direct impact on the course of the disease. Then the interview tripped again over my next question: How did the ancients come up with their systems of medicine? And then it took a real dive when the director vehemently denigrated anyone who even *entertained the possibility* of validity behind the alternative therapy known as *homeopathy*. Certainly no real scientist would, she said. I had attended, not long before, a meeting of researchers from top institutes (e.g., Harvard, Stanford, The Max Planck Institute) very seriously doing just that.

So this question also arose: What makes a scientist a real scientist? And this phenomenon popped out too: Even among thoughtful, serious people, there is a very sharp divide. More stunning than that, this divide has flame-throwing guardians patrolling the no-man's land between the sides.

What choice did I have? I wrote perhaps the subtlest piece I've ever written—hitting the ears of the unsuspecting as just the pedestrian puff piece I'd been assigned, but between the lines sounding a warning to those for whom such attitudes matter.

I'm an expert in neither medicine, neuroscience or quantum physics, nor in any of the other disciplines and arts touched on in *Hearts and Minds*. Far, far from it. Being an expert in any specialty today calls for a laser-focus, a focus that consumes much of life's substance. Gaining deep expertise often breeds monk-like seclusion and jealously forbids jaunts to other disciplines where treasures of pertinent knowledge might lie.

*But I am an expert at talking to experts* (who often are only good at talking to other experts and are miserable at talking to the non-experts who lack the boorish habit of persistent questioning cultivated by journalists). So I'm aiming, in writing *Hearts and Minds*, at open-minded souls with keen and wide-ranging interests. My wish is that for them (and for you, I trust), well-assembled aspects of the narrative will evoke pictures that seem alien or radical only at the outset. With patience, they will, like long-lost relatives, joyously reconnect with what you already know or suspect. Then seeming serendipity becomes a vessel for the unanticipated grace of discovery. For that reason, I'm including something of my own journey from wild enthusiasm for all things scientific to a conviction that some scientific orthodoxies—around what is *objective* and true and what is *subjective* and spurious—are erroneous. They are causing real harm and need to be revised radically.

### **Is All Lost?**

In the tradition of great cliffhangers, listening closely, we may hear faint bugle blasts and galloping cavalry! It's not a single massed charge, but squadrons rallying from diverse points. They come out of science itself, out of quantum physics, out of open-systems biology and medicine, out of consciousness studies and epistemology, out of the arts and philosophy. They come as separate warriors, each responding to distress cries from the core. They call to us passionately, urging us to dig in, to be fierce, and to forever renounce despair.

This is what *Hearts and Minds* is about: restoring the lost place of ourselves in our own understanding of the world.