

CULTIVATING VITALITY

BY DR. BEN REEBS

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THE LAW OF VITALITY

“The art of healing comes from nature, not from the physician. Therefore, the physician must come from nature, with an open mind.” — **Paracelsus**

“Nature is the physician of diseases.” — **Hippocrates**

“The human body possesses an inherent ability to heal itself through the mechanisms of homeostasis—restoring balance in structure and function and adapting to environmental change.” — **Benedict Lust, MD, ND**

The body has an innate ability, which is ordered and intelligent, to heal itself. When we realize that we can facilitate and augment this healing ability, we can align with the laws of nature.

The first law of healing is the Law of Vitality. This law is based on the fact that we have the

inherent and innate ability to heal ourselves. Our health is governed by the vital force (or *vis*), which is always working to restore normal structure and function to our body.

The vital force, naturally enfolded within our nature, has been known by several names through time: the *vis*, *archeus*, *élan vital*, *chi* or *qi*, and so on. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, is credited with calling this force the *vis medicatrix naturae* (Latin translation from Greek), meaning “the healing power of nature.”

Could it be that our birthright is health, not disease? When you realize that the vital force restores health, then you discover that your biological status quo is balanced, homeostatic health and wellness. The more you experience health, the deeper you realize that it’s a spectrum of potential.

If you happened upon a baby bird struggling to break free from its eggshell, would you help it out? The struggle to break out of its shell (a process called “pipping”) is a necessary part

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of a bird’s biology. The bird will strengthen its legs by pushing against the shell, and transition from relying on egg blood vessels that transfer oxygen through the calcium carbonate to taking its first breath of air. In fact, hatching is the culmination for the bird from fertilization through incubation.

“The shell must break before the bird can fly,” said the poet Tennyson. What he failed to mention was that the bird must break the shell itself. You cannot break the shell for the bird unless, of course, you are the bird. And the same goes for the process of healing. No one can engage in it for you by proxy. No one can heal you; there is only self-healing, enfolded within the laws of nature. Only you can heal yourself, with the help of your body’s vital processes. You can rely on the Law of Vitality residing within you. The vital force has got your back!

Take an adult stem cell, technically called a *mesenchymal stem cell* (MSC), in the body. It is multipotent, meaning that it has the poten-

tial to become various kinds of tissue—such as skin, gut, bone, or blood—depending on the environment it differentiates in. When stem cells are traveling in the blood, they literally home in on areas of inflammation or tissue damage, fostering a regenerative healing response by releasing a cascade of medicinal signals. We have yet to understand exactly how this homing happens, but the process is rapid.

In fact, Arnold Caplan, considered the father of the MSC, later said its moniker was inappropriate and it should be called a *medicinal signaling cell*. Caplan’s proposed new name reflects the homing ability and the fact that MSCs also secrete medicinal bioactive factors in areas where they are needed. The vital force is much like an MSC in the body. It moves to where it is needed: marshaling resources, engendering homeostasis, and healing by way of expressing itself in the language of symptoms.

But if the vital force is always working to

heal you, then it is possible to work against it as well. If you work against the forces in your body, you’ll most likely only prolong whatever imbalance you may already be experiencing, or you could even drive the problems deeper into your body.

Generally, each of us enters this world a newborn with a full vitality. At first, for the most part, we recover quickly from illness and injury. In our youth, our immune system can more easily stave off the ills of the world, the ever-present onslaught of viruses and bacteria to which we are continuously exposed. One crucial activity our immune system engages in is clearing away senescent cells that have lost their function and have been shown to engender disease-promoting inflammation, an immune surveillance which is impaired with aging.

As we grow older, a familiar story unfolds: our health takes a turn for the worse. We may begin to get sick more frequently or feel like something is off or just not right. When we do

get sick, we stay sick longer and our episodes are more intense. Perhaps we simply no longer feel well; our energy seems to diminish with each passing year, however subtly, until one day we wake up to a vital force that feels lackluster. To rephrase anthropologist Carlos Castaneda, our vitality is now but akin to faint sparkles near our shoes. These sparkles are all that’s left of a luminosity which once ignited our whole being as children. With age, immune cells required for a robust immune system, such as B and T cells, diminish in their production, and our bone marrow and thymus gland function become compromised.

As our vital force seems to lose its luster with each passing moment, our immune systems can weaken to the point where we don’t seem to get acutely ill anymore. For many, a significantly diminished vital force may coincide with the progression, or even the presentation and subsequent diagnosis by a physician, of a chronic disease, such as type 2 diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis.

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In other words, this common process of devitalization, due to various internal and external forces present in our environment since birth (i.e., environmental toxicity, poor diet and lifestyle, stress, age, etc.), can set us up for worsening health. Our existence becomes hampered by the gradual yet steady onset of a chronic disease which perpetuates itself. We may experience a series of acute health crises as we tread upon our path, and then suddenly find ourselves riddled with a constellation of chronic diseases—managed by an ever-growing team of specialists who do not communicate with each other—and medicated by an ever-plentiful cornucopia of polypharmacy.

Although we are living more than twice as long as in 1900, conventional medicine, which is supposed to help us get well, may turn out to be a failure at keeping our health condition from worsening. Our drug-managed disease may now set us up for the development of new symptoms and possibly

even drug-induced disease (DID). A plethora of side effects and complications, induced in part by conventional medicine, may lead to increased morbidity and mortality. In fact, properly prescribed medications are the third leading cause of death in the U.S.

But the Law of Vitality reminds us that there is another, unconventional paradigm: a paradigm of health, not disease. This new paradigm is wellness-oriented and constitutes “the evolution of medicine,” as integrative medicine advocate James Maskell calls it. We can begin to see that our signs and symptoms are a language that communicates our body’s attempts to restore normalcy. We can learn to understand and to speak in the language of the vital force. Only by supporting and enhancing the efficacy of the vital force can we truly realign with the laws of nature and prevent (as well as reverse) chronic disease.

We may have to tread on the dark pathless ground in the wood where only we can tread to follow the calling of our healing journey.



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To quote mythologist Joseph Campbell, who inspired George Lucas to create *Star Wars*, “You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there is a way or path, it is someone else’s path.” This may be a long, arduous path, with many twists and turns; we may not ever return home from whence we originated. But we can rest assured that the Law of Vitality is there for us to apply in our own lives, a perennial philosophy of health and wellness.

However, the Law of Vitality is much more than a philosophy or myth to live by. It is an ever-present reality living in us; our bodies are always trying to heal themselves, and we can learn how to allow and enhance this naturally occurring process. We can learn from those who know, such as people who have struggled with and resolved chronic disease. Is it any wonder that many of the best health and wellness books were written by people who healed themselves of a chronic disease,

such as Terry Wahls, MD, and her healing journey with multiple sclerosis (MS)? “May the vital force be with you, grasshopper.”

We can seek out someone who can help us along the way, such as a naturopathic or integrative medicine practitioner. We can take the first step in a journey which may unfold into a new life free of chronic disease. We can align with our body’s keen attempts to heal itself, rather than engage in conventional practices which, especially when carried out over long periods of time, may only engender further suppression of our symptoms and may even drive our diseases deeper into the recesses of our bodies.

Globally, hundreds of millions—over 157 million, estimated by 2020, in the United States alone—are struggling with a chronic disease, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Nearly 70 percent of Americans are on at least one prescription drug, more than 50 percent take

more than two, and one in five are on five or more prescription medications.

In 2006, the World Health Organization (WHO) assessed “almost 50% of all medicines are prescribed, dispensed or sold inappropriately, and 50% of patients fail to take them correctly.” Some common types of irrational use include the inappropriate use of antibiotics, polypharmacy, and the overuse of injections. In the United States alone, hundreds of thousands die each year due to adverse drug reactions (ADR). In fact, *iatrogenesis* (that is, healthcare intervention-induced harm) is the fifth leading cause of death in the world, and it is estimated that 5 to 8 percent of all hospitalizations are due to ADRs.

The journey of chronic disease remission may be long and toiling, or it may be short and sweet. There are many ways to get to a renewed vitality; we only need to choose a path that fits our self-expression. We can choose a porridge just right for us, as Goldilocks would

have it. We can experience the Law of Vitality, unlocking “spontaneous healing,” as Andrew Weil, MD, called it, by supporting rather than suppressing our innate healing capacity.

HOW CAN WE APPLY THE LAW OF VITALITY TO BENEFIT OUR HEALTH?

If you desire to enjoy the benefits of a strong vital force, then you have to regularly access experiences and environments which support and enhance vitality. This includes breathing clean air and drinking filtered water; consuming a diverse, nutrient-dense diet; engaging in stress reduction and regular exercise; enjoying a natural environment with exposure to the elements whenever possible; and engaging in regular immersion in a supportive and loving community, whether it be family, friends, a spiritual group such as a church, or those united by shared interest or cause. It would be wonderful if these things



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were readily available to everyone, but not all of them are, for various reasons, such as socioeconomic status. However, some alternatives and options are accessible to most, such as the ability to take walks in the local park, engage in home workouts, or surround ourselves with nontoxic friends who build us up rather than put us down.

It is important to note that applying the Law of Vitality has just as much to do with not doing certain things. On a basic level, this means not doing the things that make us feel bad, such as spending time with people who put us down or eating foods that make us feel like crap. On a more superficial level, this also means not regularly going for the quick fix (such as the pink boxes of Prilosec at Costco for heartburn).

When we suppress the things which irritate or pain us, such as acid reflux or a tension headache, by literally turning them off with drugs, we engage in the practice of regularly untuning ourselves from and becoming numb to the signs and symptoms—the language of our vital force—that our bodies are using

to communicate with us. Also, because the body is extremely intelligent, there is usually a reason behind the often painful and unsettling goings-on. If we interfere too often with natural processes, we risk disturbing a fragile ecosystem whose innate programming is to restore normal structure and function.

This is the problem with the approach known as the Doctrine of Suppression, upon which most of conventional medicine is established. Basically, this doctrine is founded upon the notion that we can suppress a symptom, such as a headache, with a medication, thereby turning off our experience of the pain. This is much like snipping the wire to the dashboard engine warning light in our car, rather than hiring a mechanic to look under the hood. Naturopathic doctors will look under the hood for you; they won't just snip the wire.

Human beings are infinitely more complex than motor vehicles, yet every mechanic knows that automobile functions are intimately entwined: there is a reason a warning light comes on, much the same way that there

is a reason a tension headache occurs.

If we merely suppress the symptom without addressing its root cause, then the body will have to compensate in some other (perhaps unseen) way, in order to restore homeostasis. This will likely produce side effects which often get dubbed as a new disease or condition.

For example, when we get cold, the temperature center in our brain triggers responses that help to warm us up, such as shivering which causes heat to be generated by our muscles, or goose bumps which trap an air layer near the skin to retain heat. These are compensatory evolutionary mechanisms to keep us from freezing to death, and if we took anti-shivering or anti-goose bumps medications to turn these symptoms off, then our bodies would have to find other ways to thermo-regulate, such as by increasing hormone release to raise heat production.

In general, every occurrence in the body has a reason behind it, and everything we do in response has a consequence. When we choose not to suppress our symptoms but

rather to work with the wisdom of the body to help the body get what it needs, to stimulate and enhance the vital force, then we apply the Law of Vitality in our lives.

APPLYING THE LAW OF VITALITY:

Explore the Law of Vitality by engaging in the following activities:

- 1. List the five things which make you feel the most vital in your life.** Do more of these things.
- 2. List the five things which make you feel the least vital in your life.** Do less of these things.
- 3. Engage in some form of hydrotherapy, which enhances the vital force,** as well as benefits different systems, such as the digestive, circulatory, immune, and nervous systems. This can include steam rooms and saunas, hot springs, sensory deprivation float tanks rich in magnesium salts, showers and baths, saline pools, foot soaks, and any other therapy

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using water. Generally, it is best to always end with some form of cold, even if it's thirty to sixty seconds in a cold shower. Here are two versions of home constitutional hydrotherapy treatments, the original therapy of which was pioneered by O.G. Carroll, ND:

Version 1: While lying supine, cover the anterior torso with two hot large hand towels folded in half (four thicknesses or layers of terry cloth) soaked in hot water tolerant to touch, leaving in place for five minutes.

Then, replace hot towels with one cold large hand towel folded in half (two thicknesses or layers of terry cloth), leaving in place ten minutes or longer, until towel is warmed. Cover body with blanket, preferably wool or Vellux, to retain body heat during length of treatment. Then repeat entire procedure on posterior torso while lying prone. This version will usually require having someone assist in placing the towels. The total time will be approximately one half hour.

Alternative Version: Immerse entire body in hot bath or shower for five minutes. Then dry off quickly with towel, soak a towel in cold water, wring out completely, and wrap around both sides of torso, or from armpit to groin. Cover body with wool or Vellux blanket, leaving the cold towel wrapped for twenty minutes, or longer, until towel is warmed.

4. Spend time in nature regularly, such as by taking walks in the park or by camping, when possible. Spend time in the sun. Walk barefoot in the grass. Breathe fresh forest air, or try the Japanese art of “Forest Bathing,” which consists of simply spending time in the forest in order to rejuvenate and promote health.

5. Swim in rivers, lakes, and streams. Visit the ocean and breathe in the fresh salty air while running your bare feet through the surf and ocean water.



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6. Obtain quality sleep by focusing on setting in place suitable supportive habits. Limit exposure to junk light a couple hours before bed, such as from cell phones and fluorescent light bulbs. Limit screen time before bed, choosing instead to read a physical book or meditate. Study your own sleeping patterns and figure out what bed-times are optimal for you, such as what matches your lifestyle or your chronotype. Drink herbal teas, such as chamomile, if need be. Use blackout curtains and remove your phone, as well as any other active electronic devices, from the bedroom, or minimally, put them in airplane mode so as to limit the electromagnetic frequencies (EMF) they may harmfully emit.

7. Seek out a naturopathic doctor or integrative medicine practitioner who can help guide you along your healing or health and wellness journey. Seek out therapies that enhance or stimulate the vital force, such as acupuncture, reiki, homeopathy, craniosacral therapy, or other alternative vitality-enhancing

modalities.

8. Please fill in the blank: I'm grateful for my health because _____.

This piece is excerpted with permission from [The Serpent & The Butterfly: The Seven Laws of Healing](#) by Dr. Ben Reeb.

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