

## TAKING CARE OF IT

When I was in treatment, one of the sayings of the colorful Mormon leader, J. Golden Kimball, kept coming to mind. It took on a new level of meaning, as things have a way of doing sometimes. “All you have to do to live a long and fruitful life is just get yourself an incurable disease, and then take care of it.” I want to tell you what that statement now means to me.

The crucial first step in dealing with any disease is diagnosis. Do I have a disease? What is it? What is its nature? What will it do to me? The world is full of sad tales about disease that was never diagnosed or that was misdiagnosed. Things go from bad to worse and nothing is done, or the wrong things are done. People suffer needlessly, and often die, from diseases that could have been taken care of.

My own incurable disease, alcoholism, is a natural illustration. One in twenty-eight alcoholics today makes the correct diagnosis and learns to take care of their disease. Ten years ago, it was one in thirty-five. The number-one killer – stress, usually diagnosed as heart trouble – is another obvious illustration. People who do not admit the stress and learn to take care of it also die early, of heart attacks.

I am particularly fascinated at the moment with the phenomenon of denial. Nobody likes to admit that there is anything wrong with them. It is not enough, for instance, that a doctor diagnose a disease correctly. The patient must recognize, admit and accept the diagnosis. If not, he or she will refuse to take care of it. The proper medicine and treatment may be prescribed, but the person will not take it; or they will take only part of what has been prescribed; or they will take it for a little while until they start feeling better, then stop until they feel worse, then take it again until they feel better, and so on. All of us could tell numerous stories of people who could never completely accept the diagnosis of their disease. If you asked them point-blank, they would say, “Yes, I have diabetes” (or whatever). Nevertheless, from time to time they stop taking care of it, as if something inside cannot finally accept the reality: “I have a disease – a sickness – that must be taken care of continuously.”

Just so, every person who gets married discovers that resentment is a progressive and fatal disease that comes with marriage. If the diagnosis is not made and accepted by both partners and taken care of continuously, it will kill their love. There are known ways to take care of resentment. Many people have discovered these ways and use them into long lives of being happily married. Others refuse the diagnosis, or cannot accept the rigors of taking care of it, or assume somehow that the disease can be allowed to run its course without having its inevitable outcome. Perhaps their experiences can contribute to the rest of us by proving one more time that it always does run its course – unless it is taken care of.

I have found my incurable disease. If you have not found yours, it does not mean you do not have one. It just means you have not found, admitted or accepted it yet. It is a wonderful thing to finally discover the diagnosis. Then you can start taking care of it.

In earlier times, the church talked about sin – alienation from God. That was the overall sickness from which the more specific diseases came. Separation from God is the big disease that covers all of us yet today. We are suffering and heading toward spiritual death from this disease – unless we take care of it. It is incurable. We never get free from the weakness. It activates or reactivates at any moment we pretend we do not have it and stop taking care of it. The sickness takes different forms, of course. We each have to make our own specific diagnosis under the general category. Some of us drink; some get high blood pressure; some cheat; some get angry or lonely or lazy or fearful.

Nobody becomes really serious about taking care of their disease until they are unalterably convinced that they have it. Nobody becomes really religious until they know for sure they have a sickness which is killing them. To be religious is to follow a specific spiritual path. You follow the path because you know you are sick and your soul will die if you do not. Never mind anything about God punishing you; some people always put it that way. But if you do not follow the path, something inside the real you will weaken, will get bitter, shriveled and lonely, and will eventually die.

Every authentic spiritual path requires so much of us – makes so many changes in our way of living – that there is no way we will follow it for very long or with any consistency unless we are finally and fully convinced that we have an incurable disease. We have the sin – the alienation from God – and it will run its course unchecked within

us until we realize we have it and decide we would rather do anything to take care of it than go on suffering with the increasing symptoms.

Then the great surprise comes. Having denied the disease and having been forced finally to change our ways in order to take care of it, we discover that the new way is a far better, happier, more satisfying way to live. It's a wonderful, joyful release and discovery to finally diagnose our disease and start taking care of it. In Christian language, it's called "conversion."

The Book of Acts records that when the people first started to recover from their alienation, they became so elated and so close to each other and so enthusiastic that they started pooling all their resources. Who *cared* who owned what – they loved each other! They felt such a bond of hope and caring and new possibilities that anyone was welcome to anything they had between them.

Then along came Ananias and Sapphira. They wanted the warmth and unity of the group, but they had not really admitted they had the disease in the first place. Naturally, they could not see giving up all their old ways of separation and fear when they could not admit they were sick. It was too rigorous and risky for them. So they tried to play it down the middle. Join the group, fake the spiritual path, but keep enough in reserve to be safe. Peter says to them, "Look, nobody *asked* you to do anything. So why did you try to pretend something you really did not want to do and were not ready to do yet?" Ananias and Sapphira could not face the full reality – they could not handle the diagnosis – so their sickness ran its full course, and rather quickly, according to the story.

Interestingly enough, Ananias and Sapphira were right, on a technicality. The early commune style of the church was impractical and soon abandoned. Though it was a beautiful idea, it was more efficient for each individual or family unit to take care of its own basic resources and share when there was special reason or a common project. The church still operates on that principle, usually on a very watered-down basis. Ananias and Sapphira were not right for any right reason; they just could not get with the program. They never really felt what the others were feeling, so they never discovered what it was like to take care of their disease. They stayed outside the Faith and its Path. "Half-measures availed them nothing."

It has always confused the life of the church, has it not? There are always those who see the spiritual disciplines as something unfair, something to be avoided or pretended. Dangerous business. Better to honestly abstain from the Path than to pretend at it. If you see no sickness in your life, go on the way you are going until the diagnosis is clear, inescapable and accepted. Jesus came for the sick. Until we know we are sick, we do not need Him and will not like His Path.

You know, trying to recover from a disease always means making some changes. We do not usually have to change everything, of course, but it is the changes that make the difference. One thing we were all doing in the treatment program was working on a sobriety plan for when we came out of treatment. What were we going to actually *do* to make a difference so we could stay sober? The spirituality plan of the New Testament is also a sobriety plan, only written to cover all of us.

I have been noticing a few changes in myself this past week or so, but not all of the changes are very pleasing. I have noticed, for instance, that I do not seem to be as well-organized about details. I guess for years now I have been careful not to lose things or forget things for fear somebody would think I had been drinking. Now that I know I am not drinking and do not have to prove it, it's getting harder to stay organized.

The other day, I walked into the store, bought some tobacco and was clear across the store and half out the door before I realized I had forgotten my change. That never would have happened in the old days. I went back to the counter, and the clerk was waiting patiently with a smile on his face and my change in his hand. I thanked him and took my change and started out again. Behind me I heard him say, "Hey Buddy, you came back for your change. You might as well take what you bought." Sure enough, I had come in, plunked down my money and walked out without either the change or the tobacco. Some things just do not seem as important as they used to.

I started thinking about that phrase: "You forgot your change." Taking care of a disease means remembering to change. God, through all the circumstances of life, keeps trying to change us all the time. I had been forgetting my change in a lot of ways. What good is it to pray or read the Bible if we go off without our change? If we have a conversation with someone and go off without our change, we might as well never have spoken. It's fun to be alive when we realize that everything we encounter brings with it an opportunity to learn and grow and change.

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“All you have to do to live a long and fruitful life is just get yourself an incurable disease, and then take care of it.” (J. Golden Kimball) Admit you have it, and take care of it. Do not come to church and go off without your change. If you do, you were never really here. “They reject the road and not the goal. But lo, he who rejects the road has rejected the goal already.”