

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Anatomy of the Spirit

Caroline Myss

About the Book

Anatomy of the Spirit is the first book to unify Eastern and Western spiritual healing into a programme for physical healing and personal power. In this breakthrough view of mind, body and spirit, Caroline Myss demonstrates that the seven stages through which everyone must pass in the search for consciousness and spiritual maturity are the same in all traditions and are also the same seven stages for healing.

During her many years of research into the power centres of the body, Myss has uncovered strong evidence that each illness we develop corresponds to a very specific pattern of emotional and psychological stress and that certain beliefs and attitudes influence corresponding areas of the human body. For example, fears regarding financial stress affect the health of the lower back; emotional barriers to experiencing love undermine the health of the heart. A strong need to control others or your environment influences the health of the sexual area of your body. Caroline also discusses in depth why people do not heal and the reasons why we often find ourselves in difficult circumstances that never seem to change.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Foreword by C. Norman Shealy, M.D., Ph.D.

Preface: Becoming Medically Intuitive

Introduction: A Brief Personal History

Turning Points

An Intuitive Apprenticeship

From Hobby to Profession

The Final Turn in the Road

Part I: A New Language of the Spirit

1. Energy Medicine and Intuition

The Human Energy Field

The First Principle: Biography Becomes Biology

The Second Principle: Personal Power Is Necessary for Health

The Third Principle: You Alone Can Help Yourself Heal

Learning Symbolic Sight

2. Made in the Image of God

The Symbolic Power of the Seven Chakras

The Symbolic Power of the Christian Sacraments

The Symbolic Power of the Ten Sefirot

How the Chakras, Sacraments, and Sefirot Work Together

The Seven Sacred Truths

Part II: The Seven Sacred Truths

1. The First Chakra: Tribal Power

Tribal Culture

The Energy Consequences of Belief Patterns

Challenging Toxic Tribal Power

Questions for Self-Examination

2. The Second Chakra: The Power of Relationships

The Power of Choice

Choice and Relationships

The Challenge of Managing Creative Energy

The Challenge of Managing Sexual Energy

The Energy of Money

Ethical Energy

The Personal Power of the Second Chakra

Questions for Self-Examination

3. The Third Chakra: Personal Power

Developing Self-Esteem

Enhancing Inner Power

Self-Esteem and Intuition

The Four Stages of Personal Power

Challenges of the Journey

Questions for Self-Examination

4. The Fourth Chakra: Emotional Power

Learning the Power of Love

Loving Oneself as the Path to the Divine

Awakening the Conscious Self

Moving Beyond the Language of Wounds

- The Path to the Empowered Heart*
Questions for Self-Examination
5. The Fifth Chakra: The Power of Will
The Consequences of Fear
Faith
Between the Head and the Heart
Questions for Self-Examination
6. The Sixth Chakra: The Power of the Mind
Applying Detachment
Consciousness and Its Connection to Healing
Consciousness and Death
Developing the Impersonal Mind and Symbolic Sight
Becoming Conscious
Questions for Self-Examination
7. The Seventh Chakra: Our Spiritual Connector
Spiritual Awakening
Spiritual Crisis and the Need for Devotion
Enduring the "Dark Night"
Questions for Self-Examination
- Afterword: A Guide for the Contemporary Mystic
Guidance for the Contemporary Mystic
A Daily Meditation

Selected Bibliography

Acknowledgments

Index

About the Author

Also by Caroline Myss

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Anatomy of the Spirit



The Seven Stages
of Power and Healing

Caroline Myss, Ph.D.

*This book is dedicated with boundless love and gratitude to
my three personal angels,
without whom I could never have survived
the darkest times of my life:
my mother, who is my constant source of strength;
my brother, Edward,
who is my continual source of humor and optimism;
and my sister-in-law, Amy,
who has become a family treasure.*

Foreword

ON RARE OCCASIONS, you may meet a unique person who dramatically alters your perceptions of the world and of yourself. You are about to meet just such an extraordinary individual. Author and medical intuitive Caroline Myss will intrigue, provoke, and inspire you with her views on spirituality and your personal responsibility for your own health. Some aspects of Caroline's work will seem so commonsensical to you that you will wonder why you hadn't thought of them that way before. Other ideas of hers will push your emotional and psychological buttons and cause you to reevaluate your spiritual path.

I was introduced to Caroline's philosophy a dozen years ago. Her simple, powerful message is that each of us is born with an inherent spiritual task, a sacred contract to learn to use our personal power responsibly, wisely, and lovingly. For thousands of years, the concept that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely has dominated society. Authority and control, money and sex have provided the artificial trappings of power. A recent magazine article featuring John F. Kennedy, Jr., for instance, emphasized that he had had more than adequate money and sexual security but no power. The article then trivialized power by extending the popular illusion that JFK Jr. could somehow buy power by publishing a jet-set magazine. If this is your own idea of power, be prepared to

be shaken deeply by *Anatomy of the Spirit*, for Caroline offers a much deeper vision of true power—the power of the human spirit.

There have been, throughout the ages, talented intuitives and mystics who have sensed the power centers of the human body. Alice Bailey, Charles W. Leadbetter, and Rudolf Steiner have all written in this field, but no one has captured the breadth and depth of our electromagnetic spiritual framework as well as Caroline. Never before has the anatomy of the spirit been so powerfully revealed. Herein lies the foundation for medicine of the twenty-first century.

The single most important question that people have asked throughout history has been “What is my purpose in life?” Caroline answers this question simply and profoundly. One’s purpose is to live in a manner that is consistent with one’s spiritual ideals, to live the Golden Rule every moment of one’s life, and to live every thought as a sacred prayer. It is simple—but far from easy!

Imagine for one moment that you have entered a room filled with people, and that you know instantly how uncomfortable you feel. Imagine further that you can tune in to the chatter inside each person’s subconscious, that you “know” the energy and health of each individual in the room. Even more important, imagine that you know in detail about your own energy and about every factor that is draining your intellectual, physical, and emotional power. The basic wisdom transmitted in this book gives you the tools to begin to see your own and others’ energy.

Quantum physicists have confirmed the reality of the basic vibratory essence of life, which is what intuitives sense. Human DNA vibrates at a rate of 52 to 78 gigahertz (billions of cycles per second). Although scientific instruments cannot yet evaluate any one person’s specific frequency or the blocks to the flow of such energy, two basic facts cannot be denied. First, life energy is not static;

it is kinetic; it moves around. And second, talented intuitives such as Caroline can evaluate it, even though neither the human mind nor the energy system can yet be accurately physically measured. Indeed, in my twenty-five years of work with intuitives throughout the world, none has been as clear or accurate as Caroline.

Caroline tunes in to the subtle energy of our systems and reads the language of our electromagnetic being. Her diagnoses repeatedly document the effects of emotional energy, past and present, on physical health; she senses deep and traumatic experiences, beliefs, and attitudes that alter the frequencies of cells and the integrity of our energy system. She reads our spirits, which are ultimately our true power.

In this book you will find detailed information on the seven power centers of your body. These centers are critical regulators of the flow of life energy. They represent the major biological batteries of your emotional biography. “Your biography becomes your biology”—if you learn nothing else from this work, this fact alone will be useful to you. You will also learn how to avoid being sapped or zapped by your own attachments or by other people’s negative energy; how to secure your sense of self and honor so that your personal power base is not eroded by the false symbols of power—money, sex, and external authority; and how to develop your own intuitive abilities.

The Anatomy of the Spirit presents an exciting new ecumenical way to understand the seven energy centers of the body. It integrates Judaic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist concepts of power into seven universal spiritual truths. As Caroline writes, “The universal jewel within the four major religions is that the Divine is locked into our biological system in seven stages of power that lead us to become more refined and transcendent in our personal power.”

You will be transformed forever by the power of this merging of the metaphysical meaning of the Christian sacraments, the Kabbalah, and the chakras. Knowledge is power, and the knowledge presented in this book is the key to personal power.

This book presents the essence of alternative medicine, with a clarity that will inspire you to live your spiritual ideals and that will awaken you to the miracles of self-healing. I am delighted to have been present during the long gestation of this seminal work. My life has been enriched by this knowledge beyond my dreams. May yours be equally graced by Caroline's wisdom.

C. Norman Shealy, M.D., Ph.D.

Founder, Shealy Institute for Comprehensive
Health Care

Founding President, American Holistic
Medical Association

Research and Clinical Professor of
Psychology,

Forest Institute of Professional Psychology

Author of *Miracles Do Happen*

*God be in my head and in my understanding
God be in my eyes and in my looking
God be in my mouth and in my speaking
God be in my tongue and in my tasting
God be in my lips and in my greeting*

*God be in my nose and in my smelling/inhaling
God be in my ears and in my hearing
God be in my neck and in my humbling
God be in my shoulders and in my bearing
God be in my back and in my standing*

*God be in my arms and in my reaching/receiving
God be in my hands and in my working
God be in my legs and in my walking
God be in my feet and in my grounding
God be in my joints and in my relating*

*God be in my guts and in my feeling
God be in my bowels and in my forgiving
God be in my loins and in my swiving
God be in my lungs and in my breathing
God be in my heart and in my loving*

*God be in my skin and in my touching
God be in my flesh and in my paining/pining
God be in my blood and in my living
God be in my bones and in my dying
God be at my end and at my reviving*

Extended from the traditional prayer by
Reverend Jim Cotter and printed in his book

Prayer at Night, Cairns Publications, Sheffield,
England, 1988.

Preface:

Becoming Medically Intuitive

IN THE AUTUMN of 1982, after ending my career as a newspaper journalist and obtaining a master's degree in theology, I joined forces with two partners to start a book publishing company called Stillpoint. We published books about healing methods that were alternatives to establishment medicine. Despite my business interest in alternative therapies, however, I wasn't the least bit interested in becoming personally involved in them. I had no desire to meet any healers myself. I refused to meditate. I developed an absolute aversion to wind chimes, New Age music, and conversations on the benefits of organic gardening. I smoked while drinking coffee by the gallon, still fashioning myself after an image of a hard-boiled newspaper reporter. I was not at all primed for a mystical experience.

Nonetheless, that same autumn, I gradually recognized that my perceptual abilities had expanded considerably. For instance, a friend would mention that someone he knew was not feeling well, and an insight into the cause of the problem would pop into my head. I was uncannily accurate, and word of it spread through the local community. Soon people were phoning the publishing company to make appointments for an intuitive assessment of their health. By the spring of 1983 I was doing readings for people who

were in health crises and life crises of various kinds, from depression to cancer.

To say I was in a fog would be a gross understatement. I was confused and a little scared. I could not figure out how I was getting these impressions. They were, and still are, like impersonal daydreams that start to flow as soon as I receive a person's permission, name, and age. Their impersonality, the nonfeeling sensation of the impressions, is extremely significant because it is my indicator that I am not manufacturing or projecting these impressions. It's like the difference between looking through a stranger's photograph album, in which you have emotional attachments to no one, and looking through your own family's photo album. The impressions are clear but completely unemotional.

Because I also didn't know how accurate my impressions were, after a couple months of consultations I found myself dreading each appointment intensely, feeling each was a high-risk experience. I got through the first six months only by telling myself that using my medical intuition was a bit of a game. I got excited when I made an accurate "hit" because, if nothing else, an accurate hit meant my sanity was intact. Even so, each time I wondered: "Will 'it' work this time? What if no impressions show up? What if I'm wrong about something? What if someone asks me something I can't answer? What if I tell someone she's healthy, only to learn later that she's had a terminal diagnosis? And above all, what's a journalist-theological-student-turned-publisher doing in this borderline occupation in the first place?"

I felt as if I were suddenly responsible for explaining the will of God to dozens of sad, frightened people, without any training. Ironically, the more these folks wanted insight into what God was doing to them, the more I wanted insight into what God was doing to me. The pressure I felt finally resulted in years of migraine headaches.

I wanted to carry on as if my emerging skill were no different from a talent for baking, but I knew better. Having grown up Catholic and studied theology, I was keenly aware that transpersonal abilities lead one inevitably to the monastery—or to the madhouse. Deep in my soul, I knew that I was connecting with something that was essentially sacred, and that knowledge was splitting me in two. On the one hand, I feared that I would become incapacitated, like mystics of old; on the other, I felt destined for a life in which I would be evaluated and judged by believers and skeptics. No matter how I envisioned my future, however, I felt I was headed for misery.

But I was fascinated by my newfound perceptual ability, nonetheless, and was compelled to keep on evaluating people's health. In these early days the impressions I received were mainly of a person's immediate physical health and the related emotional or psychological stress. But I could also see the energy surrounding that person's body. I saw it filled with information about that person's history. And I saw that energy as an extension of that person's spirit. I began to realize something I had never been taught in school: that our spirit is very much a part of our daily lives; it embodies our thoughts and emotions, and it records every one of them, from the most mundane to the visionary. Although I had been taught, more or less, that our spirit goes either "up" or "down" after death, depending upon how virtuously we have lived, I now saw that our spirit is more than that. It participates in every second of our lives. It is the conscious force that is life itself.

I carried on with my health readings on a sort of automatic pilot, until one day my ambivalence toward my skill was resolved. I was in the middle of a session with a woman who had cancer. The day was hot, and I was tired. The woman and I sat facing each other in my small office at Stillpoint. I had completed her evaluation and was

hesitating for a moment before sharing it with her. I dreaded telling her that the cancer had spread throughout her body. I knew she was going to ask me why this catastrophe had happened to her, and I felt irritated by my responsibility of answering her. Sure enough, as I opened my mouth to speak, she reached over, put her hand on my leg, and asked, “Caroline, I know I have a serious cancer. Can’t you tell me why this is happening to me?”

My indignation rose to meet the hated question, and I almost snapped, “How would I know?”—when suddenly I was flushed with an energy I had never felt before. It moved through my body, as if it were pushing me aside in order to make use of my vocal cords. I could no longer see the woman in front of me. I felt as if I had been shrunk down to the size of a dime and ordered to “stand watch” from inside my head.

A voice spoke through me to this woman. “Let me walk you back through your life and through each of the relationships of your life,” it said. “Let me walk with you through all the fears you’ve had, and let me show you how those fears controlled you for so long that the energy of life could no longer nurture you.”

This “presence” escorted this woman through every detail of her life, and I mean *every detail*. It recalled the smallest of conversations for her; it recounted moments of great loneliness in which she had wept by herself; it remembered every relationship that had held any meaning for her. This “presence” left the impression that every second of our lives—and every mental, emotional, creative, physical, and even resting activity with which we fill those seconds—is somehow known and recorded. Every judgment we make is noted. Every attitude we hold is a source of positive or negative power for which we are accountable.

I was awestruck by this experience. From the sidelines I began to pray, half out of fear and half out of humility in facing the intimate and ultimate design of the universe. I

had always assumed that our prayers are “heard,” but I had never been quite sure how. Nor had I figured with my simple human reasoning how any system, even a Divine one, could keep track of everyone’s needs, giving requests for healing priority over, say, requests for financial assistance. I was unprepared for this sacred spectacle in which every second of life is lovingly held to be of great value.

As I prayed, still only an observer, I asked that this woman remain completely unaware that it was not I who was speaking to her. Since I couldn’t have answered her question “Why do I have cancer?” I also couldn’t have explained how I knew details about her past. As soon as I released that prayer, I was again looking directly into her face. I found that my hand was on her knee, mirroring her reaching out to me, although I had no recollection of having put it there.

My entire body was trembling, and I removed my hand. All she said was, “Thank you so much. I can live with everything now.” She paused, then continued, “Even my death doesn’t scare me. Everything is just fine.”

She left my office, and a moment later so did I, in a profoundly shaken state. I walked into a beautiful open field that surrounded Stillpoint, and I agreed to cooperate with this intuitive ability, no matter the outcome.

Since that autumn day in 1983, I have worked wholeheartedly as a medical intuitive. This means that I use my intuitive ability to help people understand the emotional, psychological, and spiritual energy that lies at the root of their illness, dis-ease, or life crisis. I can sense the type of illness that has developed, often before the individual is even aware of having an illness at all. The people I work with usually are aware, however, that their lives are not in balance and that something is wrong.

No dramatic “first event” ushered my intuitive abilities into my life. They simply woke up inside me, easily, naturally, as if they had always been there, awaiting the appropriate time to emerge. When I was growing up, I had always been alert intuitively, reacting continually to my gut instincts, as most people do. You, too, instinctively and sometimes consciously evaluate other people’s energies, but usually you know that person or have had at least some contact with them before. What’s unusual about my intuition is that I can evaluate people with whom I’ve had no contact whatsoever. In fact, I prefer to have had no previous contact, because looking directly into a frightened face interferes enormously with my ability to “see” clearly.

The more I have used my intuition, the more accurate it has become. Now it feels almost ordinary to me, although its workings will always remain a little mysterious. While I can teach you up to a certain point about how to become intuitive, I’m actually not quite sure how I learned it myself. I suspect that I became extremely intuitive as a consequence of my curiosity about spiritual matters, combined with a deep frustration I felt when my life didn’t unfold according to plan. On the other hand, it’s equally possible that my medical intuition was simply the result of something I ate. Knowing how the gods work, I would not find it surprising in the least.

It was not easy, even after pledging to cooperate with it, to perfect my intuitions. I had no models and no teacher, although eventually I had the support and guidance of medical colleagues. Now, however, after fourteen years of continuous work, the skill feels like a sixth sense to me. This means to me that it’s time for me to teach others about the language of energy and medical intuition.

By working with my intuitions, I have identified the emotional and psychological causes of illness. Unquestionably, a strong link exists between physical and emotional stresses and specific illnesses. This connection

has been well documented, for instance, with regard to heart disease and hypertension and the so-called type A personality. My particular insights, however, have shown me that emotional *and spiritual* stresses or dis-eases are the root causes of *all* physical illnesses. Moreover, certain emotional and spiritual crises correspond quite specifically to problems in certain parts of the body. For instance, people who come to me with heart disease have had life experiences that led them to block out intimacy or love from their lives. People with low back pain have had persistent financial worries; people with cancer often have unresolved connections with the past, unfinished business and emotional issues; people with blood disorders frequently have deep-seated conflicts with their families of origin. The more I studied the human energy system, the more I realized that very little is created “randomly” in our bodies or, for that matter, in our lives. The links between our emotional and spiritual stresses and specific illnesses are best understood in the context of the anatomy of the human energy system—the anatomy of our own spirits—which is the nucleus of the material that I now teach throughout the United States and in many other countries, and the focus of this book.

Being medically intuitive has helped me learn not only about the energy causes of disease but about the challenges we face in healing ourselves. Of great significance to me was the realization that “healing” does not always mean that the physical body recovers from an illness. Healing can also mean that one’s spirit has released long-held fears and negative thoughts toward oneself or others. This kind of spiritual release and healing can occur even though one’s body may be dying physically.

Learning the language of the human energy system is a means to self-understanding, a way through your spiritual challenges. By studying energy anatomy, you will identify the patterns of your life and the deep interworkings of your

mind, body, and spirit. This self-knowledge can bring you pleasure and peace of mind and lead to emotional and physical healing, along the way.

This introduction to medical intuition is the summation of my fourteen years of research into anatomy and intuition, body and mind, spirit and power. In its pages I teach you the language of energy with which I work. By gaining a fluent knowledge of energy anatomy, you will also become aware of your body as the manifestation of your own spirit. You will be able to read your own body like a scripture. Understanding the language of energy enables you to see your own spirit in your body and to understand what generates it and makes it—and you—strong. The language of energy will give you a new view of your personal power. You will also learn what weakens your spirit and personal power so that you can stop further loss of energy. Using the language of energy and understanding the human energy system will help you have clearer intuitive impressions by giving you body-based, concrete referents that take the edge off the sensation that you are looking blindly into empty air for information.

In this book, I draw on the deep, abiding, ancient wisdom of several spiritual traditions—the Hindu chakras, the Christian sacraments, and the Kabbalah’s Tree of Life—to present a new view of how body and spirit work together. Please note that I have deliberately not included the rich teachings of Islam, not because I do not honor its truths, but because I have not lived with the tradition as I have with Judeo-Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist teachings. Therefore, I do not feel that I can write about Islam with any integrity. By learning to see your body and spirit in a way that draws on old truths, you can begin to develop your own intuition and to understand and manage your own spirit.

While I had originally intended to focus this book “simply” on the human energy system, on the philosophy

and practices of energy diagnosis, and on medical intuition, I realized as I began writing that I could not accurately portray these energy concepts without this spiritual framework. I believe we are meant to understand our body-minds as individual spiritual powers expressive of a greater Divine energy. We are meant to discover both our personal power and our shared purpose for being alive within a spiritual context.

We all share a type of physical body that becomes ill or heals for the same reasons. We also share emotional and psychological crises common to the human experience. Everyone fears abandonment, loss, and betrayal; anger is as toxic within a Jewish body as it is within a Christian or Hindu body; and we are all drawn to love. When it comes to the health of our spirits and our bodies, we have no differences.

Thus the mind-body focus of this book is infused with the spiritual language of *symbolic sight*. Symbolic sight is a way of seeing and understanding yourself, other people, and life events in terms of universal archetypal patterns. Developing symbolic sight will enhance your intuitive ability because it will teach you a healthy objectivity that brings out the symbolic meaning of events, people, and challenges, most especially perhaps the painful challenge of illness. Symbolic sight lets you see into your spirit and your limitless potential for healing and wholeness.

The people who attend my lectures and workshops are diverse: they are health professionals, or people seeking assistance with their own health, or people who wish to become medically intuitive. Yet they all share in common a desire to understand the power of their spirits. They want to develop an internal clarity, their own intuitive voice. The physicians who fill my workshops share with me their frustrations that when they get a hunch that an emotional or even spiritual cause underlies a patient's illness, they are not at liberty to make a spiritual diagnosis because

spiritual ideas have no authority within conventional science. Many physicians withhold their intuitive impressions because, as one put it, “hunch and proof are not yet compatible with the requirements of health insurance companies.” Another physician told me, “I don’t need medical intuition. I have enough of that. I want to learn about the family patterns and the deeper spiritual issues of my patients, because I know that’s the information they need to heal. They need more than drugs, which only temporarily mask their symptoms.” The desire for a spiritual context and interpretation of life is universal. I believe that the language of energy and the practice of symbolic sight can help bridge the gap between conventional medical and spiritual views of health and healing.

Nonetheless, when I first began intuiting the presence of illness, as I mentioned earlier, I was frightened and disturbed by my own lack of medical and spiritual context. So for the first two years, I held back much of the information that I sensed. I limited my assistance to helping people interpret the emotional, psychological, and spiritual stresses and factors underlying the development of their illness. I did not discuss specific medical treatments or surgical procedures but instead referred clients to physicians. In 1984, however, I met C. Norman Shealy, M.D., Ph.D. I began intensive training with him in the physical anatomy of the human body. By speaking to and through Norm to patients about their lives and illness, I was able to refine my understanding of the impressions I received. This gave me the comfort zone I needed to permit my skill to mature, although I still do not treat clients and only try to help them interpret the spiritual issues at the root of their emotional or physical crisis.

Through my years of working with Norm, who became my medical colleague and dear friend, I learned that my skill is of most value in the stages before a physical illness

actually develops. Before the body produces a physical illness, energy indicators, such as prolonged lethargy and depression, tell us we are losing our vitality. People in such stages seek the advice of their physicians because they know they aren't feeling well—they are picking up signals that their bodies are losing energy. Frequently, however, medical tests indicate that nothing is wrong because they cannot yet identify anything happening at the physical level. Conventional medical tests have no way of measuring energy loss, and most physicians do not give credence to the idea of energy dysfunction. Yet new, perplexing diseases that do not respond to conventional medical treatments are emerging continually. Some of them, like AIDS, can be diagnosed through conventional medical methodology, while others seem to develop as a result of the high-voltage pace of our lives and our constant exposure to electromagnetic energy from computers, satellite dishes, cellular phones, and the many other devices with which we are overloading our environment. Illnesses such as chronic fatigue syndrome and environmental disorders, at present, are “unofficial” illnesses; according to conventional medical standards, they lack an identifiable microbial cause. Yet they are most certainly official illnesses within the energy definition of a health dysfunction, because their symptoms indicate that the patient is experiencing a loss of power in the energy field.

Medical intuition can help physicians who understand the human body to be both a physical system and an energy system, who have a spiritual context for the human experience, to identify the energy state of a physical illness and treat the underlying cause as well as the symptoms. Treatment in the energy field can include an array of therapies, such as psychological counseling, acupuncture, massage, and homeopathy. The essential ingredient for energy healing remains, however, the active involvement of

the patient. No matter how urgently a medical intuitive warns of the probability of an illness, warnings do not heal. Action does.

Nothing would please me more than to transmit my own intuitive skill to you immediately through my books and workshops. But it is only through years of practice that you will fully develop your own intuitions. The “intuitive residency” I did with Norm, a Harvard-educated neurosurgeon and founder of the American Holistic Medical Association, gave me my ability to work as a professional. Anyone can benefit from following the teachings in this book and improve one’s intuitive clarity, but because a residency program is so essential to developing intuition fully, in the near future Norm and I intend to help medically intuitive students do their residency programs at holistic health centers throughout the country. Norm and I hold a program on the science of intuition at his farm in Springfield, Missouri, which is aimed at teaching people to use intuition as a normal part of their perceptual skills.

The idea of a medical intuitive residency program would have seemed fairly outrageous a decade ago, yet as a society we have since become more and more open to medical treatments that use the ancient knowledge of energy flow in and around the human body, including acupuncture, acupressure, and chi kung, among others. As Larry Dossey, M.D., writes in *Meaning and Medicine*, we need to practice “Era III Medicine”—therapies that combine spiritual and physical, holistic and allopathic approaches to physical and emotional healing. I cannot help feeling that medical intuitives will eventually become essential members of health care teams, both in this country and around the world.

The conventional medical world is on the brink of recognizing the link between energy or spiritual dysfunction and illness. It is inevitable that it will someday

cross the divide between body and spirit, but in the meantime we can help ourselves by building our own bridges to our spirit by learning the language of energy and the skill of symbolic sight. Through this book I hope that you will learn to think of yourself in the language of energy as vividly as you now see your physical body, and that you will begin to care for your spirit as consciously as you now care for your physical body.

Introduction: A Brief Personal History

AS I SAY to people attending my workshops and my lectures: I am taking you into the world that exists “behind my eyes.” But if I first tell you about the series of wake-up calls that led to my own perspective, if I first introduce you to the many different people and events that over the years directed me toward becoming a medical intuitive, you may become more aware of the inner guidance at work in your own life.

Turning Points

EVERYTHING THAT HAS professional, personal, and spiritual value for me, I have learned through my work as a medical intuitive. As a college student, however, I was headed in a very different direction. Overloaded with ambition, I studied journalism, and in my junior year I decided that I would win the Pulitzer prize before I turned thirty. The problem with this plan, I discovered while working at my first newspaper job, was that I lacked the talent required for successful newspaper reporting.

I quit the paper, but I could not accept that my only dream career—being a writer—would not come true. Having no backup dream, I descended into a poisonous, gluey depression, a classic “dark night of the soul.” During

the worst months I would sleep late into the morning, then sit on the floor of my home office staring at half-written magazine articles.

One morning, just as I was coming out of a deep sleep, still in that state between wakefulness and sleep, I was overwhelmed with the sensation that I had died and was only remembering this lifetime. I felt grateful that my life was over. When I finally opened my eyes and realized I was still very much alive, nausea overtook me and I spent the morning vomiting my disappointment. Exhausted, I returned to bed to try to evaluate where I had miscalculated in planning my life. At that point a memory of a homework assignment in a journalism class exploded into my mind.

My journalism professor had spent a fair amount of time emphasizing the importance of objectivity in accurate newspaper reporting. Objectivity, she said, meant keeping yourself emotionally detached from the subject on which you are reporting, and seeking out only the “facts” that describe a situation. She asked us to imagine that a building was on fire, and that four reporters, each standing on a different corner, were covering the story. Each reporter would have a different view of the same event. Each would interview the people on his or her corner. The question the teacher posed to us was: Which reporter had the real facts and the accurate viewpoint? That is, which reporter saw the truth?

Suddenly, that simple assignment from years ago took on immense symbolic meaning for me. Perhaps “truth” and “reality” are actually only matters of perception, I thought. Perhaps I had been looking at life with only one eye, seeing the building from only one corner and sharing it with others who also lacked depth perception. I realized that I had to open my other eye and get out of that corner.

My exhausted, frustrated mind then made another leap backward. The year after I graduated from college, I had

left my hometown, Chicago, to go to work for a summer in Alaska. I traveled cross-country with good friends to Seattle, where we boarded a ferry and headed up the inland passage for a three-day trip to Haines. None of us slept the whole time, so that by the time we arrived in Haines, we were practically seeing double.

We were met at the dock by a man who drove us in a van from the ferry to the local hotel. We went to our room and collapsed on the beds, everyone but me falling into a deep sleep. I was too wound up, so I left the hotel and started wandering around the town. The van driver spotted me, stopped his vehicle, and asked me where I was going. I told him I was out for a walk. He told me to jump in his van, which I did, and he dropped me off in front of an old two-story wooden building. "Go on up to the second floor," he said. "The name of the woman who lives there is Rachel. Go talk to her for a while, and I'll come back for you."

Today, back in Chicago, such behavior would be considered fairly dangerous. But at the time my reasoning ability was eclipsed by my exhaustion and by my fascination with Alaska. So I did just what he suggested—I walked up the stairs and knocked on the door. A Native American woman in her early eighties—Rachel—opened the door and said, "Well, come on in. I'll make you some tea." This was Alaskan etiquette—gracious, trusting, warm hospitality. She did not seem surprised to see me; nor did she act as if I were an imposition. For her, this was just an ordinary experience of someone dropping in for tea and conversation.

As I sat dreamily in Rachel's home, I felt as if I were between two different worlds. Half the apartment was decorated with objects from Russian culture—icons of the Black Madonna, a samovar in which Rachel was making the tea, Russian lace window curtains. The other half was pure Athabascan Indian, including a small totem pole and an Indian blanket that hung on the wall.

Looking up from the samovar, Rachel noticed that I was looking at the totem pole. “Do you know how to read a totem pole?” she asked.

“No,” I replied. “I didn’t realize you could read one.”

“Oh my, yes. Totem poles are spiritual statements about the guardians of the tribe,” Rachel said. “Look at that one. The animal on the top is the bear. That means that the spirit of the bear—strong, clever at stalking his prey but never killing just to kill, only for protection, and needing long periods of sleep to recover his strength—this spirit guides our tribe. We must imitate that spirit.”

Hearing those words, I woke up. I was in the presence of a good teacher, and a good teacher brings me to attention instantly.

Rachel told me that she was half Russian and half Athabascan and had lived in Alaska long before it became a state. As she shared, albeit briefly, her background and Athabascan spiritual traditions with me, she changed my life forever.

“See that blanket on the wall? That blanket is very special. In the Athabascan culture, being a blanket-maker or a songwriter or having any occupation is a matter of great honor. You have to have permission from a songwriter to sing his songs because his songs contain his spirit. And when you are a blanket-maker, you are forbidden to begin weaving a blanket unless you know you will live long enough to finish it. If you find out that you need to die”—mind you, she said “*need* to die”—“you must perform a ceremony with someone who will agree to finish the task for you, because you cannot leave one part of your work unfinished before you die. Otherwise, you leave a part of your spirit behind.

“That blanket was almost finished, when the Great Spirit came in a dream to the woman who was making it and told her to prepare to leave the earth. She asked the Spirit if she could live long enough to finish the blanket, and the