

“Shifting Our Focus: From Disease to Health; From Alienation to Home”

*“Finding health should be the physician’s objective. Anyone can find disease.”
~ Andrew Still*

In 1850, Andrew Still introduced a revolutionary paradigm with the science of Osteopathy by declaring that the doctor was not to focus on disease but rather, on *health*. The fact that, over 150 years later, the idea of finding health versus treating pathologies, has yet to find a stronghold within most fields of western health care, belies its inherent merit and power. I believe and have discovered in my own Cranio-Sacral practice that an approach that assumes that my clients are fundamentally healthy has the potential to empower us. By shifting our focus away from the things we label wrong, broken, or undesirable, we release ourselves from the burdensome need to fix and empower our clients to connect with their fundamental state of health. In this article, I invite you to join me as I explore Dr. Still’s directive.

But, before going any further, it will be helpful to understand how I view disease. I believe that all sickness is a sort of homesickness. When we are away from home, we feel ill, ill at ease, dis-eased. We experience a deep longing for the ease and comfort that comes with being back home. Yes, homes can be messy, dirty and in need of attention. But it is still home where we are most comfortable and relaxed. Problems arise when we fall out of touch with our homes and find ourselves, in a sense, homeless. When we avoid going home we don’t know what is going on there and burglars and pests take over easily. The same is true with our physical home – the body. It can be ill, painful, and in distress, but it is still our body. When we start avoiding being present in our bodies, then disease can take over and spread. Once we find our way back home by becoming present in our body, we can take care of it, and allow its innate wisdom and health to come forth.

Too often, however, we find it hard to be home. We do everything to avoid feeling physical pain – a common way we disconnect from our bodies. Consider the number of painkillers used every day in the attempt to block out pain. Let me give you an example of disconnecting from my own body. A couple of months ago my back went out. I was in a great deal of pain, so I stopped moving that part of my body, really I stopped moving my whole right side of, until a massage therapist pointed this out to me. It was very helpful for me to see how automatically I had disconnected from my pain. Once I put my attention back into the painful area, and started to do the movements that were possible, I was on my way to healing.

As I said earlier, when we start focusing on health rather than disease, we stop attempting to fix our clients by taking their pain away – attempts that generally provide only temporary relief, anyway. Instead of pulling from our bag of techniques for the right fix-it tool, we start listening to the expression of life and health within each and every client. We help them through our educated touch to become present in the places in their body that are healthy, where they feel good, strong and comfortable. Once both practitioner and client are aligned with those healthy parts it is easier to come home to painful, dysfunctional parts and give them the attention they need. When we are both present in those parts, what I understand to be an inner wisdom comes forth that helps the healthy systems in the body inform the dysfunctional parts about how to work more effectively. This is a holistic process that involves body, mind, and spirit – the entirety of the person.

I have been a student, practitioner, and instructor of Cranial-sacral work for over 15 years. Over this time, I have discovered how well this modality lends itself to helping clients recognize that they are healthy and beautiful, despite the problems and discomfort they experience. Cranial work focuses on the fluids of the body, particularly the cerebral spinal fluid. This fluid is understood to be the most physical expression of a person's soul, a person's essence, and to transport life force throughout the body. It has a fluctuation throughout the body that is present in a fetus and continues for a while after the heart has stopped beating at death. When the cranial practitioner works with this fluid by listening to its fluctuation, the client's brainwave slows down and drops into alpha wave. In this state, the ego's controlling and protective nature subsides and a deeper inner wisdom – the wisdom of the soul – comes forth. This wisdom knows what is not working in our bodies, minds, psyche, and in our lives. It also knows what is needed to reestablish health. In areas of pain and disease, the life force is bound up, does not flow, and therefore is also not available in other parts of the body. With the presence of a skilled practitioner, the cerebral spinal fluid, in which life force is transported throughout the body, moves naturally towards this bound up energy. The energy gets loosened up by the force of the fluid, reintegrated into the flow, and thus made available for the whole body again. In this way, not only does the presenting issue go away, but also the person feels more energetic and restored throughout. Instead of labeling dysfunctional parts, we learn to understand them as an expression of life. Once they are listened to and feel heard, they relax and move toward more flexibility and increased choices, and ultimately greater health.

While this may sound very esoteric, I think it is relevant to our practices because aligning with health is the most healing approach I know. Let me give you a sense of how this applies in practice. For example, take the case of a client who comes in and complains of ongoing headaches. The cranial practitioner might take the person's head in his or her hands, and become very present and still with the client, letting the usual chatter of his/her mind quiet down, listening to what is happening in the whole of the client. Next the practitioner starts listening to the ebb and flow of the cerebral spinal fluid, listening, feeling for the healthy, unique way it moves through this particular client. The practitioner forms a strong alliance with this healthy flow as a baseline for the whole treatment, attempting to stay in contact with it at all times.

Once the client drops into a slower brainwave pattern, the ego relaxes and the inherent deep wisdom of the client can be heard. The client recognizes that he or she is being seen and received as healthy. And, just as in a conversation with a friend who sees our strength and beauty, we might reveal our secrets and what is close to our heart, so too, the body begins to reveal its story. The practitioner might then notice bound up energy in a specific part of the body. This energy might be bound up due to a physical or emotional trauma. The practitioner might be drawn to the masseter, a major muscle involved in chewing (and in teeth grinding). While the masseter is gently listened to it naturally relaxes, realizing that there is much more to it than tension. The practitioner then may move to the mandible itself, and might even feel sadness welling up in herself that she realizes is not her own, while holding this mandible. So she stays there, gently listening and feeling to whatever might come up. After a while, like after a good cry, the sadness subsides; the mandible starts moving more freely in alignment with the flow of the fluid. The client might have feelings or images arise, too, during the treatment and might recall particular experiences. After the masseter and the mandible released, the practitioner will let him or herself be drawn to other areas of the body,

continuing to stay deeply connected to the healthy flow of the cerebrospinal fluid while hopefully finding the original pattern setter (which in this example might be in the pelvic area) for the headache that brought the client in.

In the scenario above, the practitioner is following what is referred to as an inherent treatment plan – a “plan” that he/she receives through listening deeply to the client’s body as opposed to a plan based or predetermined protocol. This kind of treatment is highly personal, always original, and far more effective and enduring than any protocol ever learned. The practitioner identifies with the unconditional health expressed through the cerebrospinal fluid of the client and not with symptoms or pathologies. All this can happen without a word exchanged between the practitioner and the client (although the process can be supported by therapeutic dialogue). Gentle, listening touch increases the client’s sense of healing and helps him or her consciously recognize the place of familiarity, health, and home. What a wonderful journey it is to find our way back home and our way back to being fully present within our bodies and our lives!