

Leprosy – The Importance of Feeling Pain



“Leprosy also known as Hansen disease named after a Norwegian physician Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen who identified the causative organism in 1873, is a skin and nerve infection caused by Mycobacterium leprae. Since biblical times, the disease continues to be an important cause of peripheral neuropathy, disability and disfigurement [1]. Worldwide, 2 million people are estimated to be disabled by leprosy. In 2010, 228 474 new

cases were detected and the worldwide registered prevalence was 192 246 cases [2,3]. World Health Organisation (WHO) targeted leprosy as one of the diseases to be eliminated from the world as a public health problem by reducing the prevalence to less than 1 case per 10,000 population based on the use of multi-drug therapy (MDT). Despite the success of MDT, endemic pools still exist in some countries that attained the national elimination threshold [3-5].

Malawi attained the WHO leprosy elimination status in 1994. Nationally, it still maintains this status where in 2010 the country registered a total of 632 leprosy cases out of 14 million people, representing 0.5 cases per 10,000 population.”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3492035/>

When I was a young woman, I lived in Malawi between the years 1974 – 1978, At that time it was common to encounter lepers begging outside of the local grocery store in Blantyre. It was an enormously distressing sight to see beggars with their stumps wrapped in tatty and filthy rags sitting on the sidewalk hoping for a few pennies to be thrown their way. Sometimes they would get insistent and follow you to the car holding out their stumps wheedling in desperate, pathetic voices, “Please, Madam, please”

I became very interested in the disease. It is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium Mycobacterium leprae that affects the skin, eyes, nose and peripheral nerves resulting in nerve damage that results in reduced sensation and inability to feel pain. It is for this reason that in rural, poverty struck areas of Africa and India, the extremities can be eaten by rats, be burned in open fires, get hurt, wounded and infected without it being noticed or treated and so the digits and nose are lost leading to horrible disfigurement and disability.

It was a revelation to me to think of pain in this way – a friend that keeps me whole, healthy and attentive to what the body needs.

In exactly the same way, emotional pain that is numbed out, denied, repressed and dissociated will result in us not being able to assess situations in our lives that are dangerous to us, that will

infect us, and leave us disabled and disfigured emotionally. To know your pain, to be in relationship to your pain, is to know what external threats need to be avoided. If you cannot feel the emotional pain of your early needs not being met, then you will never know how to avoid people that cause the same harm to you. You will never be aware enough to bring the healing balm of love to those hurt feelings and unmet needs. You will just continue to lose more and more parts of yourself. This is why people that have been abused in childhood continue to be in situations that “burn” them. They do recognize what it was that burned them in the first place. They put their hand in the fire again and again, so to speak.

Your feelings inform you – they are accurate barometers of what is dangerous to you. They need to be befriended and brought into full awareness. If Leprosy is diagnosed soon enough it can be cured very simply these days. However, for those that were not diagnosed the neuropathy continues to be a problem through-out their lives. And so, make it a practice to know your feelings as soon as you can, instead of numbing them out. They are there to tell you about life and help you experience the whole of life, fully and completely and safely.

Consider how you were infected with the bacterium leprae emotionally as a child and taught to numb out the feelings you had in response to abuse and neglect. Now cure yourself of this leprosy by getting back the feeling and being in relationship with it with only love and acceptance... this is the antibiotic you need before there is long term neuropathy of the feelings.