

A TEMPLATE FOR WORKING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS



Chronic illnesses represent a threat to life. For this reason they invite an approach which is so different to that with which we might confront a broken leg or a common cold - irritation, perhaps or resignation. Put simply, if the chronic illness has the potential to take away everything we are then surely the invitation is to mobilise everything we have - all our inner and outer resources - in an attempt to restore our health. This is often reduced to 'fighting' the illness or meeting the challenge 'head-on' and, while there is of course a place for such mindsets, this expression of wilfulness risks obscuring other ways in which we may work *with* the illness. Some of these derive from philosophies and modalities which may stand outside our culturally limited frame of reference. In this short piece I'm introducing a template based on the ancient esoteric symbol of the Tree of Life, which can prompt us to explore different healing pathways without overreliance on any particular one. It may be that this template prompts us not only towards a balanced approach to managing chronic illness but also towards a meaningful synthesis of different approaches which can change the context in which we view ourselves and our state of health.

The Tree is classically to be walked in whole or in part in a ritualised way from the bottom to the top in a zigzag. (I have numbered the spheres for the sake of clarity.) However, those suffering from chronic illness may realise they have got 'stuck' in one particular sphere and so may find relief from taking themselves elsewhere on the Tree to connect with a potentially very different set of perspectives. Spheres at either side of the Tree offer complementary influences.

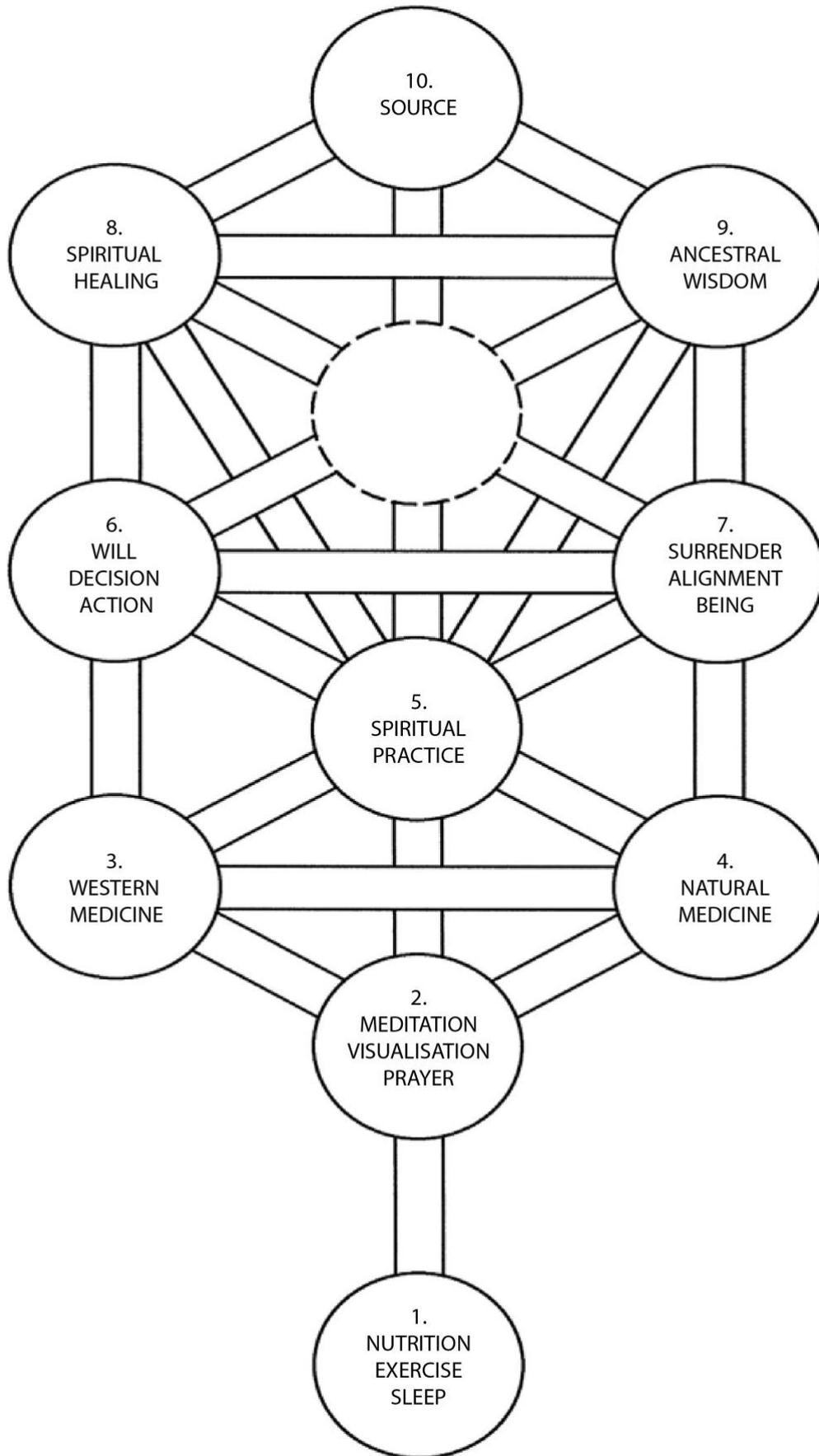
So if we turn to the diagram below we will see the sphere (1) at the base represents certain fundamental needs of the human body: nutrition, diet, sleep and exercise. If the body is not receiving what it needs at this basic level then it is further compromised. Clearly some bodies will not be able to move, in which case exercise may not be an option. However, attention to diet and nutrition may then assume greater importance. This sphere draws us closer to identifying our needs.

The next level up on the Tree (2) contains visualisation, meditation and, if one is so inclined, prayer. A common accompaniment to chronic illness is fear. With meditation one can learn to conquer or at least reduce fear, and with visualisation one can overwrite it with powerful visions of getting better or of the life we wish for beyond the illness. The transformative effect of a simple smile has been validated by science. For some prayer can strengthen one's bond with a higher being, thereby lightening the burden of the illness; to be a recipient of prayer means one is open to an act of grace and heartfelt intention sent by one person towards another.

Next up is (3) Western medicine, which is usually defined as allopathic (more on this below). This will be the default option for most people living in the Western world, but that does not mean it should be adopted uncritically. Instead one might be encouraged to reflect on what is 'the best of the West', which could include the availability of advanced scanning and monitoring equipment, a relatively well integrated healthcare system (at least in some countries) and (if you are lucky) free, taxpayer-funded provision of life-saving drugs.

On the other side of the Tree, and providing a contextual balance to this, lies Natural Medicine (4). There can be great benefit from consuming natural plant and herbal medicines on their own, many of which have been part of the human medicinal diet for thousands of years. In fact many pharmaceutical compounds are derived from Nature. The path linking Natural Medicine to the base of the Tree allows for further exploration of what a healthy, natural diet might look like for the chronic condition being worked with in today's world. Homeopathic medicine (the counter-cultural

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alternative to allopathic medicine) sits in this sphere along with other vibrational medicines, usually associated with the East.

We then move up to the large sphere in the middle of the Tree (5), which represents a place where we can integrate all our understanding, feelings and intuitions derived from working at the lower part of the Tree. The idea here is that such integration can serve as a focal point for the patient's spiritual practice which could include, for example, psychotherapy or Yoga. Even if spirituality is not a concept that the patient is comfortable with, chronic illness undeniably has the power to touch a higher dimension within the human being - that of meaning: 'why me?' or, less rhetorically, 'what am I here for?' A spiritual practice can therefore function like a container for an expanded vision of the self as well as for holding the bewilderment that can come from an experience of the deeply threatening and unfamiliar. Over time this container can allow for a development of the quality of one's consciousness which, without the illness, might never have come about.

Moving up and to the left (6) we find Will, Decision and Action, balanced on the right (7) by Being, Aligning and Surrender. Most of us know people who have fought chronic illness with all the strength they could muster and others who have quietly succumbed. This path on the Tree helps us see that there can be a balance between doing and being. In other words we have choices at almost every moment as to how to respond to our illness. Our Will turns out to be a remarkably dynamic, multi-faceted inner resource which can develop through the demands of a life-threatening or life-shortening illness. But it will require a moderating and regulating intelligence to do so. The more we align our minds with our bodies - and indeed with our sense of higher purpose - the more integrated will be our decision-making around what is right for us at this challenging time.

At the top left is the sphere (8) containing Spiritual Healing and Wisdom. Again this may be a category with which the patient may not be comfortable. However, the existence of the path connecting the central sphere with this one suggests that healing can flow from spiritual practice. In fact both healing and self-healing can be taught and learned. Mindfulness meditation has been shown to lead to a range of beneficial biochemical changes in the body and brain. And since meditation of all kinds can also shift our consciousness and values it is surely fair to describe it as a form of self-healing. Spiritual healing, of which Reiki is a well-known example, is really just taking this process a stage further towards directing energetic or cellular change where it is needed. Intriguingly, by virtue of the fact that this sphere is located on the left side of the Tree, it is connected to the technophile branch of Western medicine. In recent years all sorts of 'healing machines' have emerged in the West. The fact that not all these follow the allopathic model is a reminder that the allopathic approach does not have a monopoly in the culture.

Moving to the top right sphere (9) we find Ancestral Healing and Wisdom. Science has taught us of the power of genetics in influencing our disposition to certain chronic illnesses in the family tree. This information gives us options as to how we approach genetically transmitted illnesses. But in the West we are less likely to be exposed to the ancient notion that our ancestors remain connected to us, and indeed that energy can continue to flow between deceased ancestors and living family members. Studies in trans-generational trauma show that all sorts of experiences can drop down a generation or more (up to 15 generations, according to one recent study). This understanding - very new to the West - can help us see our illness in a new light and a significantly enlarged context i.e. as something potentially complex which may require working through for the health of the whole family system. In the same way that the mid-life crisis may fill us with existential terror so can illnesses like cancer propel us to look at our own life - and life in general - in a transformational way.

Above all these is the next and final level (10) which can variously be described as Source, the Divine, God, the Gods or the Transcendent. This reminds us that all human life, indeed all life, is considered sacred in many of the world's ancient traditions. It is only very recently, as millions of species have begun to disappear from our planet, that we have separated ourselves, particularly in the West, from this old belief. So if we are able to hold a context of the Sacred this allows us to situate ourselves in a deeper, far more meaningful space than the atomised random assortment of cells and molecules that materialist science would have us believe ourselves to be.

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There's one more thing to say here about this template. As the saying goes, wherever there is light there is shade. Thus each sphere brings with it both illumination and shadow. So far we have focussed purely on the former, but the latter can manifest in a number of ways. At the base we might opt for a much-hyped or extreme diet without pausing to reflect on its practicality or appropriateness for our own condition. Or we might insist on returning to a demanding exercise routine which reflected the person we were before falling ill rather than the one we are now. Prayer can turn into an exercise in narcissistic solipsism, while meditation may become too structured or repetitive, thus no longer leading us to an authentically aligned place in ourselves. Western allopathic medicine in its extreme forms is really about brute suppression of symptoms (through cutting out, burning or poisoning) which can all too easily blind us to the 'God in the illness' (the original meaning underlying the Greek word for therapy), but is so much part of the contemporary culture that it often passes unnoticed. Nutrition also barely gets a mention in Anglo-American medical training. As for natural medicine, the jury is out on whether it can on its own cure chronic illnesses in statistically significant numbers particularly in view of the multiple assaults facing our immune systems in today's world. Exclusive reliance on herbs as a badge of pride can even, through aligning with the ego, jeopardise the body's survival chances. And as to what can go wrong with our spiritual practice, if we are in a lot of pain or fear then we may simply not be able to do it. And if we shut ourselves off and make it a solitary activity then we may inadvertently turn ourselves inward and away from external sources of healing or wise advice regarding our health.

In Sphere 6 we may discover that excessive preoccupation with action can interfere with the body's natural ability for healing itself. Or in Sphere 7 we may show excessive deference to the medical profession, thus disempowering ourselves from asking questions or taking important steps along what is our own path to walk.

In Sphere 8 we may find ourselves in the hands of people on their own power trip, offering us a distorted version of spiritual healing and wisdom - so choose wisely. In Sphere 9 we may unconsciously find ourselves overidentifying with one particular branch of our family tree - perhaps the one carrying a history of illness rather than the one which epitomised resourcefulness or resilience. More generally if we are split off from the ancestral realm and its accompanying worldview then we may not know if there is something required of us by the ancestors which could even relate to our health issue.

And lastly how can the Divine Source be distorted? That is a huge question! One answer might be when we presume we can drag the Divine down to deal with the ego's most basic preoccupations, thus collapsing the entire sacred structure. The ego is of course generally hostile towards any authority other than its own. But The Tree of Life as a model of the universe offers 3 planes: the realm of the personality, the realm of the soul and that of the Divine. The ego is fated not to be able to reach the Divine without dissolving itself and allowing the soul to mediate this connection. But it follows that the ego is blocked from seeing the deeper game playing out - even orchestrated - in which illness is often a necessary factor.

Summary

I put this template together in the weeks immediately following my own diagnosis of chronic illness. Having meditated on the (Kabbalistic and Celtic versions of) the Tree of Life for a number of years, I've witnessed first-hand the power of esoteric symbology to reorder consciousness (mine and others) through experiences of awe, surprise and delight. Because chronic illness can so easily take us to a place of fragmentation this integral model seemed particularly well suited to support people with similar health conditions. As with anything esoteric there will be layer upon layer of meaning that one can discern from reflecting on this model. In this blog piece I am really only offering a surface tour. It has certainly helped me rediscover my balance when I have noticed myself at various times in the past couple of years leaning too heavily to the right (overexcited, perhaps) or the left (overidentified with test results), or not listening to the left (under-appreciating medical expertise) or when my spiritual practice has got too 'busy' (overthinking) or when I have simply been trying too hard to get better in one way or another (overcomplicating and overexerting). By working with this ancient system one walks many paths and travels deep within oneself, such that one may lose the

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sense of identifying the illness as an adversary. And if pain allows, one may find a space opens up not just for raw fighting but for exploration, curiosity, even gratitude.

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