

Being Sick Well

“But when Jesus heard it, he answered him, saying ‘Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole.’”

Luke 8:50

Clergy and faith community/parish nurses have at some time encountered members in their churches who cope very well with unremitting chronic illness. They have sunny personalities, their caregivers find them a joy to be around and often those who work with them have no idea that they have a chronic illness. Perhaps more often, you have encountered people who are embittered by their illness, paralyzed by all that they are unable to do, and are stuck in a state of overwhelming depression, especially when they first receive a diagnosis.

Jeffrey Boyd’s book written in 2005, *Being Sick Well* was written as a self-help book for those people with chronic illnesses as well as their caregivers. The book is a series of interviews with people who have serious chronic illness. Boyd has compiled a list of strategies that people have used to deal with their illnesses, to remain positive and to be an inspiration to those around them. Boyd’s use of the stories of many sufferers and their caregivers is most helpful because one can “step into the shoes of another” and “feel” the personal experience expressed.

Boyd has a rich background for making him a credible author of this book about how to be sick well. He is a mathematician, ordained pastor, and is a psychiatrist and currently chair of Behavioral Health at Waterbury Hospital, a teaching hospital affiliated with Yale Medical School. Boyd who was a caregiver to his first wife Pat, after she suffered two heart attacks as well as two strokes can write from his own experiences of accompanying her through many chronic illnesses. They include diabetes, kidney failure, bypass surgery on Pat’s legs, which subsequently had to both be amputated above the knees. Further, Boyd describes that Pat went blind and her hands became numb. He also deals with as chronic illness of his own—depression.

There is a separate chapter for caregivers. One issue of care giving is the need for respite. Boyd points out that with our increased number of aging persons, Alzheimer’s disease patients have doubled. Their caregivers rarely get any respite and are in danger of illness themselves. It is often a spouse—dealing with his or her own issues of an aging body—whose care giving duties quickly become non-stop for a loved one. It takes a toll on them and frequently care givers end up dying first. Boyd offers suggestions and hope for people who can become overwhelmed with the stress of care giving.

Boyd’s background as a mathematician enables him to explain well what he calls “the largest epidemic ever”—chronic illness. The problems with managed care, people living longer, the ethics of keeping terminally ill people alive for a few months more by expensive chemotherapies or surgeries are all discussed in the chapter on the epidemics of chronic illness.

I recommend this book for clergy and parish nurses who counsel any one of the forty-five percent of Americans who struggles with chronic illness and their caregivers.

By Jane Givens, RN, FCN, Presbytery of Lake Michigan, July 2008