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Metaphoric Disease and Its Effect on Humanity

Metaphors are used in medicine as a way to help us understand and cope with the construct of illness when in turn, they further alienate us from our capacity for comprehension. Illness, suffering, pain, and disease are very complex topics that cannot be defined by one particular term or phrase. Statements such as “hang in there” when there is no place left to hang portray levels of ignorance or lack of empathy due to the difficulty of being able to truly understand how an individual is feeling. Using metaphors in medicine erases our humanity and allows for generations of medicine that focus on the body and not the mind. The metaphor of mothers as unsung protectors described by Eula Biss in *On Immunity: An Inoculation* is harmful because it forces women to feel as if they might “curse their child by their own carelessness” if they don’t follow what society tells them, while Frank Bures’ metaphor of the body as a machine in “On the Body as Machine” tears away what defines a human and puts it into brutal and convenient terms.

In the book *On Immunity: An Inoculation* by Eula Biss, the author discusses the connection between protection and motherly instinct. Society dehumanizes mothers when it removes the fact that they are still women. Mothers are expected to be these protectors and unsung heroes that should know everything when it comes to treating their children. Biss reflects on when her son first received his flu vaccination, and comments, “I remember asking the nurse if the vaccine my son was receiving contained thimerosal, but I was asking more out of due diligence than true concern” (Biss 11). This was in response to a discussion with other mothers, where unfamiliar terms were used when describing what was in the vaccines. The author felt

obliged to then ask the nurse this question, rather than from genuine concern. Mothers are consistently criticized for their parenting skills and are not allowed to show weakness or uncertainty. The association between a protector, an educator, and a mom does not allow a mother to make mistakes. There is a reason we always turn to our mothers when we have a question, and they will always find a way to have an answer. We are often ingrained with the ideology that mothers always do everything right for their children, and contain the ability to keep them protected at all times.

Protection and safety when it comes to motherhood are constructs that allow mothers to feel a sort of guilt constantly. Biss recalls being told “All that matters is that he is safe” when her son was an infant, leading her to wonder if that was all that mattered and if she could even keep him safe (Biss 5). This in turn puts pressure on a mother, especially a new one, that her purpose is to keep her child safe. Although new motherhood is most certainly about the newborn, it is most importantly about the *mother*. Labeling a mother as a protector and *solely* a protector does not allow them to flourish as a person or take time for themselves. Biss continues to mention the stories she was told as a child of parents getting tricked into making bad gambles with their children’s lives. From childhood, these metaphors of how to protect children have shaped the way the author herself has parented her child. Biss, like many other mothers, does not want to “accidentally say to the devil, ‘*You may have what is beyond the mill,*’ only to discover that what is standing beyond the mill is [her] child” (Biss 5). The author has this constant urge to do anything to protect her son from fate, knowing that she can’t.

The body is also constantly compared to that of a machine. For years, children have been taught that “the body is a machine, and food is its fuel.” However, this association with the body as hunks of metal and not a living, breathing, complex system of organs that help sustain life

strips away any ability to empathize and show compassion to heal. In the article “On the Body as Machine,” author Frank Bures writes, “We imagine ourselves to be machines made of meat and bone. We see the doctor as a mechanic whose job is to find the broken parts and fix them” (Bures, “On the Body as Machine”). Medicine has increasingly become the treatment of body without mind. Doctors themselves lack emotion when dealing with illness. When an individual goes to the doctor, they expect their doctor to “fix” their problem. They don’t necessarily look to their doctor for emotional support or advice on mental well-being, more so someone with a toolkit to become “perfect” again. There is a sort of dissociation between body and self, and the body becomes an “it” to be cured, while the psychological portion (or “self”) is considered separate.

It is deeply rooted in American culture to associate most things that relate to the body in terms of mechanics. Eula Biss reflects on how Americans call vaccines “shots” which favor guns, compared to the British “jab” (Biss 12-13). Similarly, the body was cast as a car needing a yearly tune-up in metaphors from the 1920s (Bures, “On the Body as Machine”). In America, we jump to anything that would give us a definite answer instead of searching for the reason. Since reason takes time, convenience has always been a key part of this nation. We see it in American food, fast fashion, education, etc. These shortcuts that we take are seen in all aspects of American culture, especially in medicine. A prime example is the first artificial heart that was made in America. It failed as an “easy fix” for a damaged human heart, mainly because the heart is more complex than an ordinary pump (Bures, “On the Body as Machine”). Not only is this an accurate representation of how this metaphor of the body as a machine is a failure, it also represents how in our efforts to understand healthcare through metaphors, we have been further uneducated by our own hands.

Both of the metaphors concerning motherhood and protection as well as the body as a machine have lasting implications on our understandings of suffering, pain, disease, and illness. These metaphors have completely changed the path of American medicine. In response to these “militaristic metaphors,” doctors and patients are pushed to over-treatment because they always feel that something needs to be done when nothing does (Bures, “On the Body as Machine”). Eula Biss felt obliged to ask about medical terms that she didn’t particularly care for, but she felt as if it was her duty to explore these medical options for the sake of her child. It is so common to immediately turn to modern medicine to treat every problem we have because of the obsession with being “fixed.” Large amounts of money are spent keeping patients alive at the end of their time because the quantity of life has become more important than the quality of life. America has been terrible at dealing with chronic conditions because we choose not to help people live with them (Bures, “On the Body as Machine”), which connects to Biss’ statement that “It did not seem unlikely that our government favored the interest of corporations over the well-being of its citizens” (Biss 9). The choice to fund “life-saving machines” to keep someone’s heart pumping instead of spending the time to give their life meaning shows just how much we choose convenience over care.

Most people don’t realize how when metaphors fail to completely sway how we think, they confine our thoughts. Instead of taking something that we know and being able to analyze something we are unsure of, we have managed to use metaphors to take something that we know and strip it of its humanity. Metaphors are supposed to be used to help us understand the world around us. If we take the time to use metaphors to heal our minds instead of “fixing” our bodies, we can finally cure the disease of medical metaphors.

Works Cited

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