**Book Report & Reflection—Chronically American**

Darlene Flakes

College of Professional Studies, Creighton University

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Deborah Sue Storlie

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**Introduction**

Conventional medicine looks through the lens of biomedicalism and reductionistic thinking to find answers for the chronic illness that plagues us in America. To find healing and wholeness we must look inward to our Spirit, which is countercultural to our American ways of life. *Chronically American* explores the impact that American ideals have had in creating a nation of chronically ill people. It also explores ways to find solutions.

**Our Past and Present Reality**

The United States is facing an unprecedented state of chronic illness, with the top ten causes of death each year labeled as chronic illness. Heart disease, cancer, stroke, obesity, diabetes, anxiety, depression, stress, are all seen as commonplace. We are not a healthy nation. Health consists of wholeness, a connection to all the things, people and spaces around us. Health is correlated with our attitudes, behaviors, purpose, social identity, economics, abilities and activities, spirituality, and beliefs, to name a few. To examine these non-biomedical factors would give insight into what makes an individual or a community healthy.

**Chronic Stress**

The concept of stress has changed over the years. Borrowed from physics, the term stress was defined as a strain on a physical object by an external energy or power. Today, the term stress is used to describe an emotional or psychological condition, often in a chronic state. Stress may be caused by various reasons including physical, psychological, or social constructs, financial burdens, unhappiness, or worry. People are unique and experience stress differently. If stress is chronic it causes complex bodily functions that may cause disorder in the body. Chronic stress is attributed to up to 85% of diseases and illnesses. It is theorized that the source of stress is often deep-rooted due to the social and political constructs that define our American way of life.

**A Look-Back**

Our world history has been categorized into periods which describe the culture of the time. The Modern Era, 1500-present, characterizes the American culture. Developments during this time have increased our stress in America and have adversely affected our health and well-being. Our roots in modern science and math with the belief that the physical and the spiritual are disconnected, and with the role of God being diminished in our society, has resulted in a loss of wholeness and in a loss of transcendence.

With the expansion of European countries into the Americas during the Middle Ages came the impact of the philosophical ideal of modernity on social life. Bureaucracy, capitalism, self-orientation, perfectibility, biomedical reductionism, food supplies and the shift from collectivism to individualism are the origins of the chronic stress that is so prevalent in our society. These developments have helped form our American healthcare system. Biomedical reductionism has driven disease treatment options and has failed to address the whole person, such as contributory social factors for chronic illness. Individualism is a causal factor for stress in our society, affecting physical and mental health, including in the healthcare system with its impact on physician burnout. With transnationalism and technology came the social evaluative threat era that leads to poor health. American institutions of Healthcare, Big Food, and Big Pharma are deeply rooted in the profitability of capitalism and politics and have prevented individual and communal power and agency to obtain good health.

To gain insight into the chronicity of stress, the origin of chronicity’s must be viewed along with modernity and from the vantage point of the interrelated economic, cultural, social, political and environmental factors alongside the biological factors that influence personal behavior and chronic illness. A shift in healthcare from capitalism to whole person care is needed for the sake of our country and our people.

**A Look Forward**

America’s capitalistic, consumeristic, and individualistic ideologies have made us to be the greatest and most powerful nation. However, these strengths have also been weaknesses that have adversely affected a large majority of the people who live in this country, particularly those who are “minoritized”. These ideologies have widened the wealth and the health gap, causing a health/wealth gradient that has caused inequities across the population spectrum.

The impact of American systems and institutions influence our colonized lifeworld, leading to chronicity’s which lead to the enduring stress which leads to long-lasting illness. To regain personal and communal agency we must participate in communicative action which will enable us to collectively regain power and resist colonization.

Research has shown that interconnectedness is important for the health of an individual and a community. The Lifestyle Medicine model of healthcare emphasizes the transformative process of tinkering for care practices usage, based on individualization and development of provider/patient relationships. Providing whole person care is essential to treating illness, connecting the outer physical with the inner person. Understanding the unity of God and all things is necessary in understanding and managing chronic illness.

**Transcendence**

To have well-being is to be whole. To be whole, one must transcend, rise above self and realize that the self is a small part of the greater universal whole. This can be realized through social connections, but most profoundly through connection to the Divine through reflective contemplation and meditation. This connection to the Divine Creator provides connection to inner self. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, philosopher, and scientist, believed that separating our physical selves from our spiritual self leads people to search for transcendence substitutes and peace through the outside world, through means such as technology, food, money, sex, power, fame, and knowledge, which causes overstimulation and leads to stress. The Relaxation Response is one way to mitigate the effects of cortisol on the body when stressed. A relationship with God is another way, creating freedom of choice regardless of the influence of powers that reduce our personal power and agency to limit stress.

**Conclusion**

Evolution is part of God’s Grand Plan, and it is good, regardless of the fact that the Modern Era and our ways of life in America have contributed to chronic illness because of the social constructs that impact chronic stress. The reunification of science and religion, recognizing that they are both necessary parts to achieving wholeness, is vital to achieving well-being. When we look to get wholeness from the outside world it leads to chronic stress, anxiety and fear. When we look within to find transcendence, posturing ourselves to receive from God, the Divine, it is there that we find freedom based on a love that conquers fear. Doing so connects us with ourselves, each other, our world, enabling unity, relationism, and collectivism that allow us to heal and be well.

**Reflection**

Stress. Everyone seems to have it, in some form or another. Some battle physical stress, some battle mental stress. Regardless of the source or type, all stress that becomes chronic leads to chronic disease.

Our healthcare system is inundated with chronic illnesses caused from stressed-out individuals. Stress costs our U.S. approximately $300 billion every year (Mohney, 2018). If 60% of adults are living with at least one chronic disease, is the cause of most of our stress, and therefore our chronic illnesses, a result of our American modern way of living?

In googling stress in America, poll after poll shows that Americans are experiencing more stress today than in the 1990s (Mastroianni, 2020). What accounts for this? Social stressors, global stressors, financial stressors, pandemic stressors, technological stressors, relational stressors, occupational stressors, social constructs, structural violence stressors, to name a few.

Things certainly seem to be more stressful for my generation, the baby boomer (BB) generation, than they were when my parents were my age. One major difference in our ways of living is that when my parents were my age, most people went to church and turned to God when dealing with stress. The Modern Era has given us many advantageous advances through science and technology, but it has changed the way we acknowledge that God is relative to the whole. Opening our hearts to God through contemplation and reflection and meditation are extremely effective coping mechanisms for chronic stress, unifying our outer and inner being and worlds.

Some people in the BB generation wish we were living in back in days of simpler times. But evolution is a good thing. The problem is that people are trying to cope with stress by searching for peace in all the wrong things, places, and faces, substituting transcendence with coping mechanisms found in the outside world, substitutions that cause more stress. For example, different people handle stress differently. I eat less when I’m stressed, some people eat more when stressed. The availability of unhealthy foods from our food supply, coupled with excess nutrition, contributes to physical consequences such as diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disease and emotional consequences such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders.

Is my body or mind dis-eased? Do I have stress? Are my inner cosmos and outer cosmos aligned? Do I have dualistic walls and individualistic tendencies to judge, defend, and evaluate? Do I see myself and others as part of the whole? Do I live in relational peace? Am I connected to my Divine Creator? These questions, and more, occupied my thoughts, causing me to pause, to reflect, as I read the book, *Chronically American*. It’s ability to cause one to reflect on one’s relationship, or lack thereof, with the Divine Creator, God, really resonated with me. Having defined and graphically explained practices of contemplation and meditation in stillness allows one to understand and feel comfortable engaging in such practices.

Conventional medicine looks through the lens of biomedicalism and reductionistic thinking to find answers for the chronic illness that plagues us in America. To find healing and wholeness we must look inward to our Spirit, which is countercultural to our American ways of life. Health consists of wholeness, a connection to all the things, people and spaces around us. Health is correlated with our attitudes, behaviors, purpose, social identity, economics, abilities and activities, spirituality, and beliefs, to name a few. Research has shown that interconnectedness is important for the health of an individual and a community. The Lifestyle Medicine model of healthcare emphasizes the transformative process of tinkering for care practices usage, based on individualization and development of provider/patient relationships. Providing whole person care is essential to treating illness, connecting the outer physical with the inner person. Understanding the unity of God and all things is necessary in understanding and managing chronic illness.

We, humans, are created as triune beings with body, spirit, and soul. We live in a body, we have a soul (mind, will, emotions), and we are spirit beings. Our outer and inner beings need to be connected to achieve wholeness. Connecting with our Creator is the only way to achieve this well-being that we so desperately need, individually and communally.

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