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Bill Mitchell, ND

# What Needs to Be Healed?

## *How Bill Mitchell Influenced the Soul of My Practice*

Brad Lichtenstein, ND

The world of complementary and alternative medicine, and naturopathic medicine particularly, owe a debt of gratitude to Bill Mitchell, ND. Along with Les Griffith, ND, Joe Pizzorno, ND and Shelia Quinn, Bill was one of the co-founders of Bastyr University, or John Bastyr College of Naturopathic Medicine, as it was called at its inception in 1978. If not for Bill and his participation as one of the midwives of this institution, naturopathic medicine would probably not enjoy its acceptance and licensure in 14 states, the District of Columbia, the US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and several of the newer schools of naturopathic medicine would most likely not exist today.

Because of Bill's passion for teaching and naturopathic medicine, hundreds have been educated and graduated from Bastyr, and subsequently inspired to go forth to expand the awareness of naturopathy, herbal medicine and other healing traditions based on the wisdom of Gaia. Even those practitioners of complementary and alternative therapies (for the lack of a better term) who have never met or heard of Dr. Bill Mitchell owe some gratitude to the man.

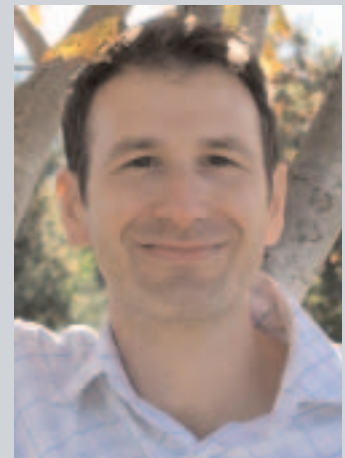
Bill was a brilliant naturopath. He was equally at ease drawing intricate diagrams of active biochemical constituents in plants as he was waxing philosophical about healthcare providers being a "branch of Gaia's immune system." So many people have Bill stories to tell; how he touched their lives and the dif-

ference he made in their careers. Personally, Bill reminded me how I think. While Bill readily shared his clinical treatment pearls, he emphasized how to think about the process of healing, the patient, and how the soul of the individual, as well as the practitioner, must be addressed in the healing encounter. For these reasons, each year I invited Bill to speak to first-year naturopathic medical students during their philosophy class, *The Vis Medicatrix Naturae*, or The Healing Power of Nature. I want to share a story he told my class, since he will no longer be able to communicate directly to the students; at least not in his previous physical incarnation. I believe Bill is still among us, however, imparting his wisdom, wit and stories with us. We just need to know where to look and how to hear them.

But before I share a Bill "case study," allow me to recount my personal experience as a patient of Bill, when I consulted him during my second year as a Bastyr student. I learned firsthand about Bill's talents for comfortably walking in both the so-called right- and left-brain worlds. At this time, I suffered from chronic bouts of gastrointestinal distress. Numerous visits to the student teaching clinic did little to change or even palliate my symptoms. Frustrated and angry, I sought counsel of a more experienced naturopath. I met Dr. Mitchell in the hallways of the converted elementary school housing our blossoming naturo-

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Lichtenstein is a licensed naturopathic physician living and breathing in Seattle, WA. His passion is shifting the healthcare paradigm from an emphasis on illness to one of living in peace and flow. Currently, he practices as a life coach and counselor, meditation teacher, biofeedback trainer, breathworker, energetic bodyworker, and movement and yoga therapist ([www.pranaplay.com](http://www.pranaplay.com)). For the past decade, he has been an adjunct faculty member at Bastyr University teaching counseling, yoga therapy, breathwork, movement therapy and naturopathic philosophy. Dr. Lichtenstein continues to travel throughout the US facilitating his *PranaPlay* workshops that emphasize the cultivation of fluid being through mindful self-expression, believing that body-centered awareness is the key to unlocking the doors to our innate wellness.



pathic university and found him amiable and approachable.

In my mind, it was an unusually sunny spring day when I walked into Bill's lower Queen Anne office. What a contrast to the teaching clinic, which strove for acceptance and hence wore an air of conventional medical sterility. Bill's office had a homey atmosphere of someone who was settled, grounded in himself and authentic about who and what he was, and certainly devoid of emphasis on image. Bill, and his office, conjured up images of old-time family docs intricately woven into the fabric of a community; known by all, physician to everyone.

I recall the waiting room, his office, and his diagnosis, though the majority of the visit remains inaccessible to me. It is the concluding moments, where he offers his treatment recommendations, which appear most vivid in my mind. Quercetin, a quarter teaspoon twice a day, the powdered form only, mixed with saliva and swallowed; homeopathic croton tiglium, 30C, 5 pellets twice a day for 5 days; and finally - sitting under a tree. In fact, the most important piece of the prescription, Bill said, was the tree. He then went on to deftly detail the mechanism of action and the biochemical and physiological properties of quercetin; he described the homeopathic essence, keynotes and symptom picture of croton tiglium; all as easily and automatically as when one reels off one's own name, address and social security number. Biochemistry, physiology, anatomy, botanical and synthetic pharmacology, homeopathy – Bill was completely at ease with each of these topics. Such knowledge was organic to him, ingrained in his psyche.

In the next breath and with a wave of his hand, he dismissed all he had just said. While my digestive

tract was indeed suffering, what really needed attention was not my gut. What need to be treated, or healed, were my mind, my emotions and my soul. Sure, food was being improperly digested, absorbed and assimilated. How could it be otherwise when my overactive mind was consumed with sorting out and making sense of everything in my life? More than the massive amounts of knowledge I was struggling to assimilate and digest from my classes, I was trying to sort out my life. My gut merely reflected the state of my questioning mind. I was sifting through every detail, from the minutiae to the existential; reflecting my mental state, my small intestine was working overtime, struggling to keep up.

*Sit under a tree*, Bill said. Observe and experience the tree. Listen for the wisdom that the tree nation has to offer you. Notice how it lives. Observe how it knows itself. Sit under a tree and feel its life force. Sit there until you hear what it has to teach you about how to be in the world. Thus ended the lesson and our appointment. As we parted, I asked Bill when I should return for a follow-up visit. *Schedule one only if you feel the need to do so. But first, sit under a tree.*

Over the next few weeks, I focused my efforts on the first two steps of his treatment plan, the medicinal ones, putting off his last and most important remark. I diligently took the homeopathic and the herbal remedy, longing for an immediate cure, something outside of me to fix me. After the allotted five days had passed, I discontinued the homeopathic, despite that fact that my symptoms had failed to abate to my liking. I continued taking the quercetin. I personally enjoyed the fact that I could taste it, mix it in my mouth and connect with the herb itself, rather than being separated from it by a gelatin coating.



For an hour or so afterwards, my gut felt settled somehow. Overall, my symptoms persisted. How could sitting under a tree solve anything? I wanted something outside of me to cure my ails.

I teetered between frustration and understanding for some time after my appointment. Despite my annoyance at his “sit under a tree” comment, Bill’s explanation about my racing mind, my churning emotions and my information sorting resonated with me. I had already taken a course on traditional Chinese medicine, and was well aware of the connection between the small intestine and sorting. Bill was far from off when he spoke of my mind racing, and not just in regards to my education. I was consumed by questions about my path in life.

Bill’s words continued to resound in my head. *What needs to be healed are your mind, your emotions and your soul.* How often have I stopped to ponder that question - What needs to be healed? This question seems fundamental, but rarely spoken. Attempts at curing or fixing fail to reflect it. A remedy or herb to cure my digestive ailments may overlook the true essence of my malady – my ever-churning mind. Sitting under a tree invited the opportunity to still my mind, and simultaneously direct my focus. It provided me a focal point, a *dristi*, in Sanskrit, to focus my wandering thoughts. Sitting under a tree engaged my mind and anchored my thoughts, providing a base to which to return when buffeted about by the constantly shifting and changing tides.

After a few weeks of unresolved symptoms, I knew I had to give Bill’s treatment plan a fair chance. Walking around Green Lake on an overcast Seattle spring day, I sought out the right tree, the one that wanted to speak to me. As I took my seat, I asked Tree if it was okay to rest against her awhile. Like Bill, Tree was friendly and inviting. Tree was not much of a talker, but she wasn’t the stoic type either. I recall a Quaker proverb coming to mind, “Speak only when it adds to the silence.” Sitting there in silence, Tree shared her wisdom by being who she was; sharing herself, revealing her true essence and lovingly accepting me without question. Tree loved me, regardless of my education, my grades and my career path. If I took the time to acknowledge her, her gifts would be revealed. In order to receive this, I had to hear her, open my ears, quiet the chatter of restless mind, and truly listen.

Is it really a surprise that my symptoms began to resolve after my silent conversation with Tree? While my mind continued to careen towards the future with shades of anxiety and worry, recognizing the impact of such practice was of vital importance. In Bill’s typical fashion of story telling, I will say no more about the experience. Instead, I invite you to sit under a

tree and reflect on it.

Back to sharing one of the last stories I recall Bill telling my class. A patient in his 70s went to see Bill complaining of back pain and arthritis. A retired fisherman who spent half the year on a fishing boat off the coast of Alaska, he matched that traditional stereotype. He was a man of few words, not much for talking about himself, let alone his problems, but wanting something to help relieve his pain. His body and disposition both were tight and inflexible. When the time came to devise a treatment plan, Bill spoke to the fisherman about diet, covering issues of food allergies to essential fatty acids. I’m not changing my diet, the man declared, closing the door on that avenue of care. No problem, thought Bill, we will explore another branch of naturopathic care.

As Bill began to discuss supplementation, including vitamins, minerals, herbs and even homeopathy, the man stated that he wasn’t one for taking pills, thereby limiting another set of options. Dr. John Bastyr (for whom Pizzorno, Griffith, Quinn and Mitchell named the school) often said that if he had one modality out of all in the naturopathic scope of practice from which to choose, it would be the one where he could use his hands. Following Dr. Bastyr’s perspective and skill at physical medicine, Bill offered the fisherman naturopathic manipulation. The fisherman returned for several more visits with Bill over the next few weeks. While mildly lessening his back discomfort, the man’s expectations of major relief were not met. Knowing that suggestions of yoga or exercises were verboten, Bill had nothing more to offer. Appearing neither disappointed nor surprised, the fisherman thanked Bill for his time and went on his way.

A year later, while reviewing his schedule for the day, Bill came across the fisherman’s name. With a bit of apprehension, he recalled the fisherman’s lack of enthusiasm for any of his past suggestions. When the time arrived to collect him from the waiting room, Bill hardly recognized him. While on the surface the fisherman looked the same, something had clearly shifted.

Sitting in the exam room, Bill noticed for the first time that the fisherman was smiling and actually looked peaceful, an affect Bill would not have used to describe this man in the past. Unable to contain himself, Bill asked, What happened to you? The fisherman then shared his story.

About six months ago, unable to sleep, a fairly usual occurrence, the fisherman found himself watching late night television. On PBS some doctor with a foreign accent, a guy named Deepak something or other, was speaking about healing. The fisherman admits he failed to understand most of what

the doctor was saying, but one point stuck in his mind – meditation. The doctor had talked about the benefits of meditation. The doctor suggested starting with one minute of meditation a day; once you are comfortable with this, add another minute. Continue the process of increasing your time until you get to 45 minutes to an hour, and watch what happens.

Enthralled, Bill inquired as to what had changed in this man's life. The arthritis and back pain are still present. Not much changed there. And he still had some bouts of insomnia. When asked how long the fisherman was meditating, he replied, about three hours, twice a day. Bill, and my students, were astounded. This somewhat curmudgeonly fisherman, uninterested in any lifestyle changes that involved diet, supplements or exercise, was spending six hours a day counting his breath. One in, one out. Two in, two out. Up to ten, and repeat.

Yes, the aches and pains remained, but they were of less import to him. Did the fisherman still know pain? Yes. Was it all-consuming? No. As a result of his meditation practice, he could now experience pain from a more detached state. He could witness his symptoms as mere sensations of the bodymind, while choosing not to respond to them, or rather choosing to respond to something else. For instance, during meditation, his mind might wander to his pain. He would then simply return his focus to his breath and his counting. He did not have to engage with the sensations. He did not have to tell the story that these pains will never go away, thereby causing him to constrict and contract around them, only tightening the bodymind more and increasing his level of discomfort. Experiencing sensations, emotions and thoughts in this manner freed

him from falling prey to them.

With that, Bill concluded his tale, thanked my class and left the room. Many times we treat symptoms, directing our time and energy to excising a problem, but is that what needs to be healed? Of course, that depends on the situation, the context and the person. Students and practitioners have said to me for years, when a person is in pain, you must make them more comfortable first. However, that still may not be true.

Bill showed me personally and through his stories, that what needs to be healed may not be the symptoms or pain that bring the patient into the office, as in the case of the fisherman and his arthritis. His diet was not in need of correction, and he did not need to swallow herbs, tinctures or capsules. Giving him pain medication or anti-inflammatories were unnecessary as well. When suffering, how often do we ask ourselves - and our patients, if we happen to be practitioners - what needs to be healed? Yet this is just a start. Further reflection is required. What does this healing look like? When will we know when we are healed? Without such inquiry, we are prone to wander aimlessly in the dark, consumed by symptom after symptom, wondering why we are never peaceful, satisfied or content.

As I write these words, I remind myself of Tree. In honor of Bill, his love and respect for Gaia and his dynamic, questioning mind, I invite you to disengage from any struggle for perfection, from right or wrong answers, and walk outside. Find a tree and ask her if you may pass some time communing with her. If she is amenable, sit down next to her, allowing her to support your back, and listen to her wisdom. What does she say needs to be healed?

