

IN SEARCH OF OSTEOPATHY-3

“ALL IS WRITTEN TO ME AND I MUST GET AT WHAT THE WRITING MEANS.”

WALT WHITMAN, LEAVES OF GRASS, 1855

It is a distinct pleasure to be in Madrid for the launching of the Spanish translation to my book. Greetings to my new Spanish friends, Buenos Dias! Unfortunately, that is pretty much the extent of my Spanish. My thanks to the John Werner College of Classical Osteopathy for this opportunity and to Gail, Paco, and all those who worked so hard on the translation. I love the book and especially the cover with Dr. Still words in the background, for his words are the theme of my talk.

Initially I wanted to find out what was American about Dr. Still instead of what was eccentric, although there was plenty of material for that. Here was a man who presented himself as a ‘philosopher’; who dabbled in spiritualism; who lugged around a sack of human bones and called himself a ‘Lightning Bonesetter’; who tackled people from behind, wrestled them to the ground to correct what he saw as a structural abnormality. He appeared to be a simple man with simple tastes. His clothes were often pinned together with an old nail. I often wonder why his wife would let him out of the house like that! Beneath that façade, however, was a deeply complex personality with a fascinating and inspirational message. I thought there was more to Dr. Still’s story and his philosophy than first met the eye. I became curious as to the origins of the science he spoke and wrote about so eloquently and passionately. I asked the question, why was he so passionate about science?

All historical developments are meaningless except in their historical framework. My approach was a chronological narrative, the backbone of history. Obviously, Dr. Still’s ideas did not arise in a vacuum. Some the concepts were as old as the Greeks, especially Aristotle, but the further one goes back in history the harder the origins are to pin down and the obscure they become. Dr. Still, himself said that he went back to the ancients for answers, but found none there. I also tried the ‘ancient’ approach but soon became mired down, so I followed Dr. Still’s advice and stayed with him in his milieu. Even this is difficult. Ideas are in the air and it is hard to tell who is borrowing from whom. In order to describe the story from Still’s perspective, I delved into his world. I tried to get under his skin, to understand the world he lived in, his problems, who he hung around with, his solutions, and most of all, and the most difficult, his words. Words have meanings and Dr. Still chose his words carefully. By narrating the story in chronological order, by not looking backward or forward, Dr. Still’s words began to speak to me.

The story that Dr. Still came upon the idea of osteopathy in a flash of revelation had permeated the profession. This story was partially Dr. Still’s fault, for he said no one else helped him with the development of his philosophy. Unfortunately, this perception severed profession not only from the historical context in which Dr. Still developed his ideas, but also osteopathy’s place in the scheme of the history of science and philosophy.

It was not my intention to rescue Dr. Still from historical oblivion, but he was an engaging and witty companion. He was also illusive, baffling, and exasperating. He seemed unwilling to share with me the true origins of his philosophy, yet through the years I became quite fond of him. He sometimes wrote little notes in the margins of his own books and in books he had given to his students. In one of those notes he explained why his wife, Mary, tore pages about spiritualism out of a book on religious denominations. Another note said cryptically, "You are up to no good." I took that one personally. As far as the origins of his science, he was deadly silent, or so it seemed, for the clues were there all along.

At first, Still's interest in spiritualism and magnetic healing did seem to be a blot on his credibility. A superficial scanning of the literature did nothing to encourage me. It was only later that I timidly opened the can of worms called phrenology. I almost gave up hope, but gradually, unexpected and stunning connections began to evolve, and the roots of osteopathy began to take shape. Even though Dr. Still's historical and scientific past was awash in spiritualism, magnetic healing, phrenology, and bone-setting, I came to the conclusion that those connections were not so embarrassing after all. Later, I had my own revelation when it became clear to me that Dr. Still was preaching evolutionary philosophy.

Before I plunged into the literature of the evolutionary movement, I could only see inspiring sermons - full of common sense, but with no overt references to the origins. But now, seeing with new eyes, it all became crystal-clear, leaving no doubt that Dr. Still was writing within the framework of the nineteenth century bombshell of an idea-theory of evolution. The foundation for Still's philosophy and mechanical principles of osteopathy was based on the scientific principles behind Herbert Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. Dr. Still's words began jump off the pages. 'Nature selects and associates', of course this is natural selection. "Nature's laws that govern animal life"— evolution. And the similarities go on. All of a sudden osteopathy was no longer a sect or a cult, but a part of the history of philosophy and science, a fascinating and vital part that had been ignored by historians of science and medicine.

The task of an historian is to understand what happened. We may never really grasp the truth because we were not there, but the least we can do is to stay within the evidence. Perhaps a great deal of osteopathy's problem is historical. Soren Kierkegaard said, 'We live in the present, but we understand in the past.' The profession cannot move forward unless they can agree on what osteopathy is. I once asked Dr. Still's granddaughter, Jane Denslow, if she thought osteopathy would fade away if the M.D.'s ever incorporated osteopathic principles into their practice. She said, "No, there are too many interpretations about what characterizes osteopathy." This is so true! As early as 1903, an article in the Journal of Osteopathy, cited at least 23 definitions of osteopathy. The confusion continues to this day. If osteopathy is conceived of proceeding from nothing, just a revelation on the Kansas prairie, with no basis in history or science, and lapsing into nothing, there can be no scientific interpretation and no science of osteopathy. Dr. Still cannot be studied in isolation. The truth cannot be found by citing similarities to one and similarities to another with opposite conclusions. It is not good to mix philosophies and Dr. Still did not. Competing interpretations can be complementary, illuminating certain aspects, but will they lead to a consensus? Where can we find the consensus that will guide D.O.'s in their practice and inspire osteopathic students?

There seem to be many D.O.'s living in different universes. In that case, no debate is possible. The meaningful needs to be separated from the meaningless. If not, the search for the origins and the essence of the basic principles of osteopathy are lost in confusion and obscurity, and obscurity leads to mysticism. Can there be there a "correct" view of the past? If one assumes that there is no reality to discover, that no truth can emerge, then one is left with only a smorgasbord of unconnected opinions with each group or individual free to choose which one they like. If history cannot discover truth, one might as well not even begin. Is there a common denominator? I believe that common denominator is to be found in the science and principles that provided the foundation for the theory of evolution.

The importance of history lies not only in the facts, but more importantly in the context of the words. Dr. Still is impossible to understand by reading only his books and addresses. But concepts that appear mystical and obscure take on a fresh and illuminating meaning when we understand him within the framework of his era. Without that framework, one can, as Dr. Still said of some of his D.O.'s, wander after 'stranger gods'.

So where do we turn? We go back to his words and put them in historical context. There was no place in the official osteopathic histories to indicate that Dr. Still might have, in some way, been influenced by the theory of evolution. But there is no way that Dr. Still could have been isolated from the debates. From Kansas to Missouri, his circle of friends were scientific-minded. They were free-thinkers-free-religionists, liberals, phrenologists, mesmerists, and spiritualists. Yes, in the nineteenth century spiritualism was touted as a science.

One needs to read between the lines in Dr. Still's writings. It was reported by a reliable source that Dr. Still's favorite philosopher was Herbert Spencer and his favorite naturalist was Alfred Russel Wallace. Dr. Still did not ever mention Herbert Spencer nor Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer with Charles Darwin, of the theory of natural selection, but their footprints are all over his pages. Dr. Still was a man of his times. He was not ahead of his time. He did not leap-frog existing science. He was right in the thick of the debates and all the latest scientific, philosophical, and religious discussions.

Anyone who takes the time to read Spencer will be surprised at the depth of his knowledge of science and complexity of his concepts. Spencer is commonly known as the man who coined the term, 'survival of the fittest'. Actually, it was a phrase which he used in a derogatory way to describe the theory of natural selection. Spencer published, 'The Development Idea', as evolution was then called, seven years before Darwin and Wallace presented their papers on the theory of natural selection. His theory differed from theirs in that he believed that the mechanisms that caused evolution or change through time were more complicated than just natural selection.

Through the years, Spencer has been defamed. He was set up as a straw man-misrepresented as cruel and heartless by historians with communist and collectivist agendas. Spencer's belief in capitalism, laissez faire economics, his Eighteenth Century philosophical beliefs in individual freedoms were the same as the concepts put forward in America's Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights- American and Spencer shared the same DNA. But those beliefs became dangerous and increasingly under fire as the big government began to gain more power. The defamation continues today because historians

continue to cite the blatant, incorrect Spencer quotations by the intellectual historians without checking the original sources.

Spencer's evolutionary philosophy was the dominant theory from the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century. It was the reigning theory when Dr. Still opened the doors of the American School of Osteopathy. What happened after that is a long, complicated, and haunting story. It has been said that no one reads Spencer anymore. Don't believe it. Today, scientists are trying to re-invent the wheel. Read Spencer and Dr. Still and read the literature of the complexity theorists. Just browse through the research findings in the fields of Epigenetics, Autopsies, and Symbiosis- all concepts, among others, foreshadowed by Herbert Spencer. Spencer's ideas are all over their pages. It is said that they went to the wastebasket of forgotten theories. I think they went directly to Spencer-for it was all there, tied up in a big bow just waiting for them. And so it was for Dr. Still. Read the literature and you will see the relevance to osteopathy and OMT in modern research via Spencer's ideas. You don't have to adopt the complexity ideas to osteopathy- they were already yours. Today, for the second time in history you are in the right place at the right time. Osteopathy is not just an approach -it is much, much more. OMT is you distinctiveness and I don't know how one can practice osteopathy without it.

Some say that it cannot be that simple. There is more to osteopathy than Spencer's mechanical principles-the science of how the body works. Because of Dr. Still's reverence for nature, some think his ideas originated from German Romanticism or American Transcendentalism. But Dr. Still does not belong in that category. He was an objectivist. He said, "I invite you to feast at the table of reason". His words were the words of science: reason, facts, cause and effect, verify, falsify and demonstrate. To an objectivist, knowledge is acquired through association and experience. He emphasizes the importance of the five senses. These words are used throughout Dr. Still's writings in such abundance that we must pay attention.

On the other hand, the American transcendentalists, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and the German Romanticists were subjectivists who did not trust the five senses, who relied on emotions and feelings for truth; for them knowledge was innate and they rejected science ;they turned inward for meaning; they looked back in nostalgia rather than to the future and progress. So the origins of Dr. Still's philosophy cannot be found by following just a love of nature.

Dr. Still did not say, 'I invite you to a feast at the table of German Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Christian Science, the occult religion of Theosophy, or the Eastern religions of Hindu Brahminism, Buddhism, and others. The spiritual crisis had led some to find their meaning there. Although the mind played a prominent place in Dr. Still's philosophy, it was not in those religions that he found his peace. Sometimes pieces of a puzzle suddenly fit together. In one paper, Dr. Still admonished some of the D.O.'s for 'wandering after stranger gods'. In another paper, called, 'Then and Now', he set the record straight.

He wrote: 'Who or what genius of mind, motion and perfect work is behind the curtain that veils the human eye and mind, now and always, from an atom to a world? The honest philosopher says, he has no knowledge of who or what is behind that impenetrable curtain; he sees the work only and says,

'beyond that all is conjecture', and stops. Dr. Still continued, 'He has reported perfection in kind, form and functioning as far as he has been able to judge...I contend that our day and our generation is far ahead of all combined, and we are fully able to prove our superiority by a show up in the arts and sciences on land and sea. If so, why go to them and ask them to let us adopt their ideas of God? They tell us they have never seen him. They never spoke to him nor he to them. We think he does to us. Then why should we go back for light when we know that we are their superiors in all departments of learned philosophy? If we accept their meager ideas of God as wise truths, why not adopt their methods of ship-building as the best and most suitable for our day and generation? Why not go whizzing over the land on our asses and camels in place of creeping along on railroads as we do.'" Signed 'Pap'.

The basic ideas behind western and eastern religions are similar, but Still pointed to a basic difference in the absence of science in the Eastern pattern of thought. They are subjective, hoping to find inner truth. Dr. Still was trying to tell his students to follow the arrow to science. Don't get sidetracked and lulled into comfort by the passive philosophies of the East.

It was unlikely that Dr. Still would jump off the scientific bandwagon and slip into some murky, esoteric form of unverifiable mysticism. Dr. Still kept pointing to science and that was his message, but what about his spirituality? Dr. Still's words have moved many D.O.'s in their deepest feelings. I know some of those D.O.'s. Dr. Still's books that were donated to the museum were mostly battered by numerous readings-the covers hanging by threads. A bookseller would describe the condition as 'poor', the lowest of all ratings, but to those D.O., Dr. Still's concepts were priceless.

Is it possible that Dr. Still's science extended into his spirituality? As long as the context is unknown, many different interpretations can be made. As long as it is one person's 'opinion' against another person's 'opinion' there can be no real debate. One may say as a Pragmatist, 'It may be true for you, but it is not true for me.' But I ask how can a thing be true and untrue at the same time?

Knowing about Dr. Still's interest in spiritualism muddied the philosophical waters. In this belief, he was not alone. Spiritualism was touted as a science and in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was given the benefit of doubt while its claims were investigated. Psychical societies were formed to expose the frauds and to probe deeper into the mysteries of consciousness. One of Dr. Still's students recalled that the Old Doctor called this the 'new psychology'. Again, it was Dr. Still, the scientist who believed that the mind and consciousness could be scientifically studied.

Dr. Still inspired his students. His science was wrapped in sermons. His meanings sometimes were clear but other times he drifted off into poetic nonsense. One always left with a warm and fuzzy feeling after reading his words, even if one didn't know exactly what he was trying to say. Is Dr. Still's spiritual side important to the practice of osteopathy or is it just his personal world-view and his answer to the impersonal, cold, world of the Darwinists, lacking in purpose, design, progress, perfection, or any hope of immortality? Can we lop off Dr. Still's spirituality from the science? Or should we?

After the Civil War, a new generation of naturalists emerged. They were, for the most part, scientifically oriented, comfortable with science and evolutionary ideas. They, too, were seeking truth and meaning.

Some ventured into the Eastern religions and some remained in the fold of Christianity, embracing a scientific Christianity. It was with this latter group, the scientific theists, where we find the essence of Dr. Still's spirituality, a spirituality that has inspired D.O.'s for over one hundred years.

In 1874, an American philosopher and historian, John Fiske, published, 'Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy'. Fiske was a devotee of Herbert Spencer- he even took Spencer's volume ,First Principles on his honeymoon. One can only imagine the conversations that took place with Fiske and his new bride. Fiske's volumes are a condensation of Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy with a twist-he advocated a religious attitude of science and the cosmos. I ordered those books four years ago because of the Spencer connection with America. As I read Fiske, I was struck by the philosophical similarities to Dr. Still. Recently, I was reading Dr. Still's writings on the museum's website and came across this:

Dr. Still wrote: 'Life and its attributes. We know life fills and does all work as a chemist through the whole domain of nature. It's motto is 'C.P.'"

Later I found another reference to 'C.P.' in a paper most likely referring to the organization of the American School of Osteopathy. He wrote: 'Father Ryan, a C.P., called my attention to the fact that...I looked at the trunks of trees only...(I)didn't examine the top to see if they were suitable to go into the building I wanted to construct...(I)need some good heads with intelligence...the best men and minds.' There may be other references to C.P., but together with Still's writings, that was enough evidence to make the generalization that Dr. Still, was a Cosmic Philosopher. An early D.O., Carl McConnell, wrote, a: "Still was no Pragmatist nor a Subjectivist. He was more an Objectivist or an intellectual. His philosophy is wrapped up in and dependent upon science'. (JAOA, Aug. 1915, p. 648)

To Fiske and other thinking people with Christian backgrounds-or even spiritualist leanings, for spiritualism did not stray far from Christianity -Spencer's reconciliation with religion as just being the unknowable, scientifically unverifiable, was not quite enough. They believed that one could be a scientist and still retain a religious sense of awe and wonder in the worlds that science revealed. As other fields were re-orienting themselves to the realities of evolution, Fiske believed that religion must undergo the same adjustment.

Cosmic Philosophy was based upon the affirmation of God's existence and not denial of it-but it rejects the idea of a personal God. It was a new philosophy based upon the doctrine of evolution and a faith based upon scientific knowledge. The religious attitude of Cosmic Philosophy is identical with religious attitudes of Christianity, but a religion enlarged and broadened beyond its former bounds. It is not a destruction of religion, but a substitution. It was a philosophy that could appeal to agnostics, Catholics, Protestants, and all denominations. Indeed, it was a world-view that could be incorporated into everyone's religion or non-religion.

Fiske described, as Spencer, a universe in constant motion whose beginnings were incomprehensible and whose ends were unimaginable. He wrote: '...the universe as evolved in accordance with discernible physical laws throughout a lapse of time to which human thinking can assign neither a beginning or an end..'

Dr. Still echoed that same thought but in his more poetic flair. In one of the museum's donated Autobiographies, Dr. Still had penciled, 'See page, 381'. On that page was this:

'All this I saw and more. I saw great stellar worlds give birth to other stellar worlds. I saw those worlds live, grow, and die, and the offspring thereof repeat in accordance with nature's law the same process of exhibition and retirement just as children of men pass through the various phases of physical life.. With reverential eyes I saw this part of a whole whose beginnings and end we know not.'

Cosmic Philosophy accepted Spencer's principle of persistence of force which admitted to some power which transcends our knowledge and perception....an unconditional reality without beginning or end. Fiske wrote: 'There exists a power, to which no limit in time or space is conceivable, of which all phenomena, as presented in consciousness are manifestations, but which we can only know through manifestations.

Dr. Still repeatedly told his students to study (God's) manifestations. Cosmic Philosophy is Spencer's evolutionary philosophy injected with intelligent design and the hope of immortality. Fiske wrote: 'If the words to describe this 'being' sound like traditional concepts of a 'God', it is because we lack the language to discriminate between the two ideas.' He told his readers that it was acceptable to use the terms 'Intelligent Being' or 'Divine Architect' as synonyms. We find Dr. Still invoking those synonyms. But he did not force the concept on his students. He wrote: '...Whether 'God' be an individualized person or not, I will leave that for the reader to decide.' (J of O, Aug. 1898, p. 101.)

The English scientist, Thomas H. Huxley promoted science in essays which he called 'Lay Sermons'. Student's and patients were treated to Dr. Still's weekly addresses where he not only described his mechanical principles, gave what amount to sermons in scientific theism. One of his papers was called, 'Anatomy from the Pulpit.'" So, Dr. Still, the Cosmic Philosopher, was a scientist through and through. We cannot separate Dr. Still's idea of osteopathy from Cosmic Philosophy- it was one and the same. But that doesn't mean that Cosmic Philosophy has to have a place in the principles of osteopathy. It is a personal world-view. Dr. Still defined osteopathy from many different angles, but in all the definitions of mechanical and dynamic, the science was the emphasis. People came in droves for his treatments. He told his D.O.'s that they did not need to talk about matter, motion, and mind to the patients. All the patients were interested in was getting fixed.

Some may criticize the Old Doctor on the grounds that his ideas were not original. Yes, he did borrow ideas from others, but science is built on the shoulder of others. To his credit, he did say he did not invent the science, but was just fortunate enough to discover it. We must remember time and place. We must remember that Dr. Still and others were describing, not particularly new ideas, but new applications set in the framework of the new science. Spencer did influence Dr. Still as he did many others, but Dr. Still went further-he tried to apply the principles to the actual practice of healthcare, and this no one else attempted to do. Given the time and place, osteopathy could not have originated at any other time in history.

What was the medical profession's response to evolutionary theories?. Well, initially, not much. Darwinian ideas gave no guidance for everyday medical practice- they only led to research. Committed

to killing disease with drugs, the benefits of Spencer's holistic philosophy fell on deaf ears. On the other hand, not only did Spencerian ideas on how the body works offer plenty of justification for Dr. Still's therapy, they also pointed to unlimited areas of research. Some say osteopathic principles are so broad as to be meaningless, perhaps they are so broad as to be fruitful. You have a philosophy of healing that mainstream medicine is trying to embrace, but hasn't the vaguest idea how to practice.. You have a naturalistic and scientific philosophy that science is finally investigating, but remember that was yours to begin with.

We all know the benefits of OMT, but testimonials will not further your cause. It's time to get down to the nitty-gritty business of controlled clinical research. Today's scientific technology allows some of your claims to be tested. Can you lower blood pressure? Can you reduce hospital stays and readmission? Can you reduce or lower the amount and number of drugs patients are taking? Dr. Still said that some of the early successes at the A.S.O. were attributed to taking the patients off their drugs. That seems to be a worthy cause today. Indeed, the question to be answered is this: can you heal with your hands?

Some are revisiting and revising the osteopathic principles as put forward by the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine in 1953. I am not sure why, but one set of provisional principles was troublesome. Many of the concepts were basic except for the addition of the word, 'spirit'. If osteopathy is a science, why throw an anti-concept like spirit into the mix? First of all, it is context-dropping- meaning the word is just dropped into the conversation without a definition. Secondly, the word adds nothing to the meaning of osteopathy. Both lead to wide and varying interpretations, and the word 'spirit' is a scientific dead-end. Be careful with your definitions and principles. Don't get rid of them. Better yet, stay with Dr. Still's science and pull the rest of that damn squirrel out of the tree!

In a paper dated 1915, the Old Doctor wrote 'His Last Appeal' :

He wrote: 'There is an alarm at the door of all osteopathic colleges. The enemy has broking through the picket. Shall we permit the osteopathic profession to be enslaved to the medical truth? I am making an international call for all simon-pure D.O.'s who are willing to go on the fighting line without being drafted into service...Osteopathy is still in its infancy. I have only brought forth the principles and truth, which I have turned over so the profession who has the wisdom and enough moral backbone not to offer any compromise with the enemy...May my grand army march on. If we cannot have the pure osteopathic principles taught in our schools, I hope the faithful will rally around the flag and we will build an international school that will offer no compromise unless it is the golden truth.' Well, I guess the ball is now in your court. I sincerely wish you all the best in that endeavor.