

With Strength of Body and Spirit Perspectives on Healing in the Ukrainian Community

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Ukraine has not perished, neither her glory, nor freedom. . . .
And we too shall dwell, brothers, in a free land of our own.

We'll lay down our souls and bodies to attain our freedom,
And we'll show that we, brothers, are of the Kozak nation.

We'll stand together for freedom, from the Sian to the Don,
We will not allow others to rule in our motherland. . . .

Our persistence and our sincere toils will be rewarded,
And freedom's song will resound throughout all of Ukraine. . . .

—translated by Ihor W. Slabicky¹

These words from the Ukrainian national anthem illustrate a prevailing quality of strength that can be found among many Ukrainians today. This quality is born of a long history of struggle involving genocide, occupation, battles for independence, and far-reaching diasporas and encompasses the realms of mind, body, and spirit. While the Ukrainian people are diverse and varied, this trait seems to transcend several differences found in the community, such as gender, immigration patterns, and religions.

This spirit and strength of character is also evident in many of the ways Ukrainians understand health and healing. The notion of living a balanced life, balanced in mind, body, and spirit is paramount in the value system of many Ukrainians. In this paper I will describe some of the fieldwork I did in the Ukrainian community in the Greater Boston area. I will focus on the overriding theme of strength and how it permeates notions of body, mind, and spirit in the areas of health and healing. We will see how these three areas are actually inseparable in many cases, and that it is difficult to categorize a given practice as purely “mind,” “body,” or “spirit.”

The Ukrainian community in the Boston area is a diverse one, and throughout the spring 2002, I had the opportunity to get to know people from various segments of the population. I focused on the Catholic and Orthodox church communities in

Jamaica Plain, but also spoke with non-churchgoers as well. While certain variations appear between the Orthodox and Catholic communities, as well as between recent immigrants and Ukrainian-Americans who have lived here for several generations, the consistencies in this holistic mindset of strength seem to draw Ukrainian people together, despite the diversity in the community.

In the area of body, tendencies include a value placed on eating good food, eating the right balance of food, and on staying active. Spending time outdoors is also valued, as is prolonging the capacity of the body to function. Many Ukrainians generally see themselves as physically strong and independent. When they do get sick with flues or colds, many usually try to take care of it themselves by eating certain foods or herbs, getting enough rest, and sometimes by using cold or heat to induce immune reactions in the body. Folk remedies are respected, though biomedical approaches are also utilized if they are believed to work. Garlic, honey, vodka, chamomile tea, and berries are some examples of foods believed to have healing properties. Many of the Ukrainians with whom I spoke frowned upon heavily processed foods laden with chemicals that are believed to cause cancer and other ailments. There seems to be a preference for eating home-cooked foods prepared from scratch, further demonstrating self-reliance in the ability to take care of one's self and one's family.

With regard to the mind, several components characterize the value placed on strength and health. Avoiding overindulgences of any kind seems important, as does minimizing stress in one's life. Maintaining a sense of optimism and a positive attitude seems equally important. The power of the mind over the body is a common concept among several Ukrainians. In fact, many people defined sickness as “believing you're sick.” If you see yourself

as unhealthy, then you are or will be unhealthy. Living a life that balances discipline and pleasure seems highly valued as people strive to maintain a sense of control over their emotions and desires. Humility is honored, and many of the Ukrainians I met avoid drawing too much attention to themselves. Further, the needs of the community seem valued above the needs of the individual, and helpfulness, teamwork, and brotherhood are goals toward which to strive. In general, feeling at peace with your life contributes to good health.

Finally, in the area of spirit, again we see the trait of strength. Despite years of Communism and the suppression of religion, Ukrainians seem to take their religion very seriously. While they often function in a very self-reliant fashion in the worldly sphere, much deference and respect is shown toward the church, the priest, and God. While the importance of religion varies from person to person, Christianity seems to be inseparable from Ukrainian national identity. The power of prayer in the healing process seems generally accepted by professionals and peasants alike. People will readily turn to the church in times of need. Masses are offered for the healing of individuals, and parishioners show their support by attending. Priests make hospital visits for parishioners and offer prayers, counseling, communion, confession, and anointing for the health of the individual. And in the church, ailments of body and spirit are intertwined and taken seriously. Privately, many people pray often, with special attention to the holy Mother Mary. Icons are used, as well as healing waters understood to come from the Jordan River.

Theologically, there is a strong connection between healing and the cleansing of sin. While some believe that illness is a form of God's punishment for sin, others believe that God does not punish for sin. Rather, sin results from us "missing the mark" somehow, and in a sense causing our own affliction. In either case, people often pray to be forgiven for their sins. With forgiveness, health is believed to return. In cases where one is unable to be cured, healing is still possible if people are able somehow to give meaning to their suffering. Likening themselves to Jesus on the cross is one way that some people reach peace with themselves and with God.

By looking at the role of the priests in the area we can gain further insight into the varied, holistic, and multifaceted approach to healing that seems to be present in the Ukrainian communities in the Boston area. Both the Ukrainian Orthodox and the Ukrainian Catholic priests understand their jobs to

include anything from visiting the sick in the hospital and offering sacraments, communion, and confession to driving parishioners to their doctors' appointments and making referrals to medical specialists or to other parishioners. They sometimes advocate on behalf of their parishioners in dealings with insurance companies, and they continually offer pastoral counseling, prayer, and support for those in their congregations who are sick.

The interface between religion and healing takes on still a different quality in Ukraine. The Orthodox and Catholic Churches themselves have suffered a long history of bitter conflict and controversy with each other. The source of conflict can be traced in part to the introduction of Catholicism into the already Orthodox region. Several Orthodox churches decided to adopt Catholicism, yet maintain their Orthodox rituals and traditions. Thus, a new rite of Catholicism had been born: Greek, or Ukrainian Catholic. During the Soviet era the Catholic Church was severely persecuted and outlawed in Ukraine. In fact, the only church permitted to continue to function was the Russian Orthodox church. At this point in history, many Catholic parishes went underground. Others outwardly converted to Russian Orthodoxy with plans to retain their true religion outside the trappings of the church. Within a few generations, however, many formerly Catholic parishes identified themselves as Orthodox. After the break up of the USSR, fights and disagreements broke out about who has the right to "reinhabit" which church property. This conflict continues to this day and was in fact exacerbated by the Pope's visit to Ukraine in spring 2001. While the Pope emphasized his visit as a mission of peace and healing, and while most people bought into this message, bitterness did arise, mostly from within the Russian Orthodox Church, which accused the Pope of proselytizing and seeking converts.

While conflicts between the Orthodox and Catholic persisted in Ukraine, here in Boston the two priests express only messages of peace, love, and reconciliation between each other. Members of each church will go to the other's picnics, dance concerts, and even worship services occasionally. According to both priests, it is a priority to communicate this message of peace and unity to Ukrainians who are struggling so much with these tensions in their land.

Indeed, both churches also serve as links between the Ukrainian community in North America and the Ukrainians living in Ukraine today. For the Orthodox and Catholic alike, the churches can be a refuge for new immigrants who are struggling with language, the stress of emigration, and the adjust-

ment of being in a totally different environment. Church members here raise money, food, medicine, and clothing to be sent to Ukraine and often act as hosts for Ukrainians traveling to Boston to receive medical treatment for afflictions caused by the explosion at Chernobyl'. The priest of the Catholic church has been making weekly announcements about a family from Ukraine who will be visiting Boston in search of better treatment for the Chernobyl'-caused blindness of one of the family. The priest has been asking for volunteers and donations to help this family, and parishioners have been encouraged to be sensitive to their needs once they arrive.

Along with the aftermath of the Chernobyl' tragedy, Ukrainians are also suffering from a failing health system since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Newly freed from the constraints of communism, this fledgling democracy is mustering its forces to address the social and economic infrastructure in the country. One Ukrainian American woman recently told me that "of course Ukrainians were strong, they *had* to be!" This woman was referring not only to the recent problems of establishing a market-based entrepreneurial system in the shadow of the Communism. She was also reflecting on Stalin's forced famine of 1932–33 in which millions of Ukrainians died of diseases, starvation, and execution. She also had in mind the German occupation during World War II and the centuries-old battles with Poland and Russia over land and autonomy. Perhaps some of these historic events have contributed to the development of resourcefulness and self-reliance within the Ukrainian culture.

We can see how this strength of character is indeed valued in the areas of mind, body, and spirit. Some examples help further illustrate this theme. One of the first trends I noticed was the tendency of several Ukrainians to utilize alternative or complementary forms of medicine. Several of the people I met regularly see chiropractors, go on meditation or yoga retreats, and practice homeopathy. When asked about this trend, many agreed that it was common, for several reasons. First, they value the holistic approach taken by complementary health-care workers, since it fits with their conceptions of health. In addition, in Ukraine, people are often used to spending more time with their doctors, so here in this country they often seek health workers who have more time and are less involved in the "big business" aspect of medicine.

Another example that illustrates the holism and strength in the Ukrainian conception of health is the practice of folk healing. While I did not find

instances of folk healing in Boston, people frequently alluded to it taking place in Ukraine, both historically and in the present. The folk healers referred to are generally older women who employ a fascinating combination of folk remedies and Christian prayers and beliefs in their practice. Authentic folk healers (contrasted with phony, television or internet healers) do not ask for money or advertise their services. They are known by word-of-mouth and treat their patients in their homes. They are believed to have received the gift of healing from their bloodline, and they treat not only physical ailments, but soothe the troubles of the spirit as well. Often people, including priests and professionals, will seek out folk healers if other means to end their suffering have not proven successful.

According to one informant, this practice has been discouraged by the Russian Orthodox Church because healers are often seen as witches who trick people into believing that they can be healed outside the church. From my observations, the Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic Churches do not seem to have taken similar stances. This may be because the healers, like doctors, are often seen as conduits for God's healing, and are usually trusted because of their reliance on God through prayers and incantations. They do not seem to threaten Ukrainians' sense of control over their health, perhaps because Ukrainians, as self-reliant and holistic in their approach, draw from a number of resources that are best suited to the individual and the specific situation, rather than place blind faith in supernatural forces.

One story summarizes, perhaps, this holistic strength of character that seems to permeate the Ukrainian consciousness. On a Saturday night in early May 2002, I attended midnight services for Easter at the Ukrainian Orthodox church in Jamaica Plain. The services began solemnly at 11:30 PM Saturday night and concluded around 3:30 AM Sunday with the joyous tradition of the "blessing of the baskets." Though some people grew weary as the services stretched into the wee hours of morning, the physical posture and stature of the parishioners remained quite tall and still, reminiscent of every Ukrainian mass I've attended. At one point the congregation left the church to circle it three times by candlelight, anticipating the imminent resurrection of Christ.

As we circled, a woman next to me struck up a conversation with me. She told me how her mother had just had a stroke two days ago, and was therefore unable to attend services. She explained how her mother called her in the middle of the night to say

something was wrong and that she should come over. As her mother had used a calm and clear tone of voice, the woman didn't even ask what was wrong. She simply went over. Once there, she found her mother sitting calmly on a chair. Her mother explained that she had fallen and that it had taken her over an hour to crawl to the phone. They went to the hospital and, once there, her mother continued to have a positive attitude. She was talkative, friendly, and maintained a good sense of humor. She surpassed the doctors' predictions in her rapid recovery, and was almost immediately up and walk-

ing around. The woman concluded by telling me that, though her mother was very old, she was healthy, and very lucky. I answered that she also seemed quite strong, at which point she turned to me, paused, smiled, and exclaimed, "Well, of course. She's Ukrainian!"

Note

1. Translation copyright 2000 by Ihor Slabicky. <http://pages.prodigy.net/l.hodges/anthem.htm>