



Tooth and Consequences

By Wendy Marks
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I've just been through a very long period of not feeling well. Usually I'm in pretty good shape and take care of myself as best I can in body, mind and spirit. That, of course, includes my meditation practice, regular exercise and eating reasonably well. I was aware that my energy level was gradually decreasing and I was needing more sleep, but I attributed it to the cooler weather and many other unrelated things.

I started to feel ill in August, and by Thanksgiving things had gotten completely out of hand. I was in extreme pain. Like the poster of little faces at the doctors office, my pain was a 10, and the following week I ended up in the hospital for five days.

I knew I had a sinus infection over the summer; I get one about every five years. I don't tend to take them all that seriously, being someone who practices integrative health by nature, but if things don't resolve using natural methods I will resort to an antibiotic, as these types of infections are most often bacterial, and occasionally an antibiotic is the best solution in difficult to resolve infections.

This time, I had taken the antibiotics and just got sicker and sicker. Second rounds were tried. When I still had not improved, I went to the Emergency Department at Massachusetts Eye and Ear the day after Thanksgiving. By that point I couldn't see out of my left eye and the swelling and pain were still extreme. They refused to let me see a doctor, just sent me home and said I could have an appointment with one of the ENTs... in 33 days.

The following Monday I was back in the ER, this time at Beth Israel Needham. My iris was in the corner of my eye, which was too swollen to close. My face looked like a mask. They did a CT scan, gave me more antibiotics, and also sent me home. I had committed to the Western medical model, meaning antibiotics, but that only resulted in extreme pain, a Marty Feldman eye (I'm dating myself here), and a hugely swollen face.

It was ultimately my own knowledge of my body, and a fever of 105, that got me to an ear, nose and throat specialist. I literally walked into the office and said, "I'm not leaving until somebody sees me." The doctor took one look at me and said, "Go home, pack a bag and go to Beth Israel Boston emergency room. I'll arrange for you to be admitted." I felt as though I had just jumped into a movie about somebody else's life. I haven't been in the hospital overnight since my child was born over 30 years ago.

In the hospital I was told by the head of infectious diseases that this was a Western medicine-caused illness. All of these antibiotics had knocked out my very strong immune system and left me vulnerable to anything that walked by. OK, I thought, I guess this makes sense and it supports a lot of my thinking around antibiotics and their use. (Of course that means another article to come...) That was true, but they had still not found the source of the continuing parade of infections. In the end, it was my own persistence that led to the discovery of the real reason for this infection: I almost died of a tooth implant.

The Ugly Tooth

At Beth Israel I was given 13 different IV antibiotics. They were concerned that I wasn't going to survive the infection because it was right next to my brain. I did survive though, and am recovering... but things still didn't seem right.

I still couldn't see very well out of my eye, my face was still swollen, and all I wanted to do was sleep. And by the way, I couldn't open my mouth more than an inch or so. After being discharged from the hospital, there was another round of doctors who seemed a little befuddled— basically just pleased that I wasn't running a high fever and that the swelling was slowly going down. But I knew I wasn't better. The ENT ordered another CT scan (I'm probably glowing by now) and thought that it might be a good idea for me to check my upper teeth.

So, what was the actual reason for my severe illness and continuing infections? They were the result of a tooth implant done years ago that went bad. This CT scan discovered an opening from my upper jaw next to the implant, directly into my sinuses and all the way up to my eye socket. I had been to the dentist last spring for this tooth, as it had become loose, and I left with a new screw and was told the X-ray looked okay. That was almost a year ago. I had assumed all was well. But it wasn't.

I'm still waiting to have the implant removed (another article about implants and invasive procedures that involve the teeth will be forthcoming)— and then I can finally be in working order.

The Tooth Will Out

I'm not sure I'm at a point where I have the lessons from the saga yet. I think I'll write several articles about how doctors— dentists, eye doctors, infectious disease specialists, general practitioners and so on— don't communicate with each other. It's known as the "silo" situation in medical care, where patients' data isn't shared among health care professionals. If anyone had looked at my whole face, it would have been obvious that the source of infection was a tooth. But no one did and therein lies the tale.

Part of the story is about the need to be your own advocate and to trust your knowledge of your body and how it works. I'm using Western herbal and Ayurvedic methods to strengthen my body at this point. Needless to say I'm a little wary of any more antibiotics. They may have made the situation much worse by killing off the less difficult bacteria and leaving room for the more virulent strains.

I'm not yet at the point where I can say This is what I should have done and this is how I should have avoided the situation. The only way I can feel okay about what happened to me is to share my experience and what I have learned, so that others will be able to look outside the box and trust themselves to know that something is wrong, even if people are saying something else is going on. I don't believe that anyone who treated me didn't care or didn't have my best interest at heart. They just didn't do a very good job of doing their job. They didn't look beyond the obvious signs of their specialty. They didn't communicate with me or each other.

I'm going to be okay. The worst case scenario is that I'll have some damage to my vision and perhaps to my sinuses, but those are acceptable things— a lot better than being dead. However, I think that leaving the power of healing to others can sometimes be dangerous to our health. With our own strength and a team of healers that we trust (which I believe should include alternative / holistic thinkers), we can move forward in healthier ways. I'm still quite a bit emotionally scarred by this experience. At first I looked for a villain, and then not finding one, I realized that we just have to trust ourselves when something is wrong, and not let ourselves be talked out of it.

In the hospital I meditated two hours each day. I came to see the experience as a process of learning and growth. In upcoming articles I'll be discussing other aspects of this whole experience, because the only way I can make sense of it is to give it some meaning, and hope to have it help others.

Namaste,

Wendy