

Accept, Retreat & Surrender:

How to Heal Yourself

by Dr. Bernie Siegel, author of *Love, Medicine and Miracles*

Dr. Bernie Siegel is a physician who has cared for and counseled innumerable patients. He embraces a philosophy that is at the forefront of a society grappling with medical ethics and spiritual issues. His best-selling books include: *Love, Medicine & Miracles*; *Peace, Love & Healing*; and *How to Live Between Office Visits*.

If you view illness as an opportunity, then when you get sick, you can ask yourself, "Okay, what can I learn from this disease. What do I need to look at first?"

When I began working with the group Exceptional Center Patients, I noticed many of the group lived longer than their doctors expected. I wanted to know why. I began to observe and inquire and noticed that the long-term survivors were the ones who began to pay attention to their feelings. As they expressed their emotions, made wise choices and became more spiritual, their bodies benefited. The physical changes were the side effects of an altered life.

Physicians call the most dramatic healings "spontaneous remissions." Once we have labeled them, we learn nothing from the people in whom those remissions take place. We cannot afford to ignore these remarkable successes. We are all at risk for a great many diseases, and as the world gets smaller the list of things we are exposed to grows larger. We need to learn from people who recover and people who stay healthy.

In his novel *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn wrote of self-induced healing, which is a much better term than "spontaneous remission." Solzhenitsyn chose a rainbow-colored butterfly to symbolize healing. The butterfly represents change and the rainbow represents all of our feelings and emotions. We need to let the butterfly of change and emotional growth touch our lives if we are to heal.

One of the gloomy patients in *Cancer Ward* reacts to the talk of self-healing with this complaint: "I suppose for that you need to have a clear conscience." He is right. You do have to have a clear conscience. When you do the work necessary to clear your conscience, then the joy of living returns and the physiology of optimism restores you.

If you are ill or facing adversity, you can begin to heal yourself by following the paths others have followed. Forgive yourself and others, live with hope, faith and love and watch the results in your life and in the lives you touch. Remember that success and healing refer to what you do with your life, not to how long you avoid death.

What approach should you take to your illness? I have three words of advice: accept, retreat and surrender. Those three words might scare you if you were an inexperienced warrior going into battle, but others who have employed these tactics have won great victories.

You need to accept your situation if you want to be empowered to change it. I don't mean you need to accept any particular outcome of a disease, but you need to accept that the disease exists in your life and you are a participant. Once you accept that the disease or other misfortune has become a part of your life, you can marshal your forces to eliminate or alter it. If you avoid thinking about it, deny it or feel hopeless, you cannot play a part in changing it and your life.

Accepting the situation does not mean accepting someone else's prediction about what will happen to you. No one knows what your future will be. Do not accept that you must die in three weeks or six months because someone's statistics say you will. You are better off denying your illness completely than accepting a prediction that sounds like a death sentence. The best course, though, is accepting that you have problems while denying anyone's predictions about how your situation will turn out. Individuals are not statistics.

When I say "retreat," I don't mean withdrawing in the face of a more powerful opponent. For me a retreat means withdrawing to a quiet place where I can be aware of my thoughts and feelings. The quiet place may be anywhere; the source of true peace and quiet are inside me. In my retreat I withdraw from all the demands of life, but at the same time I am fully alive to myself and my loved ones. I do not always retreat alone. I can retreat with those who are close to me so that we can heal our forces and prepare to take on life when our retreat is over. When we return we are ready to fight for our lives. My wife Bobbie and I regularly retreated when our five children were young. We needed the space and time to restore and heal ourselves.

When you have accepted, retreated and prepared yourself to fight, then you are ready to surrender. Again, you do not surrender to outcomes but to events. We waste so much energy fighting the nature of life. Accept the nature of life and surrender to it. When you do, you will have peace. When our energy is restored, we stop fighting things we cannot control, and we can start building our lives. Surrender is not about doing nothing; it is about doing the right things.

When you surrender to the illness, you continue to receive your treatments, explore your feelings, repair your relationships and do all the other work of healing. But while you are working, you are saying, "Thy will be done" and not "My will be done." Surrender the pain, fear and worries and you'll be able to keep love, hope and joy in your life. As the Serenity Prayer tells us, leave it to God and rest.