

BOOK REVIEW

THE GOLDEN THREAD: A Quiet Revolution in Holistic Cancer Care. by Pat Pilkington

This is an account by one of the founders of the Bristol Cancer Help Centre of how the Centre came to be established.

Pat Pilkington was married to a young curate who had an interest in spiritual healing and life after death. Both of them were interested in spirituality, as distinct from organised religion, an interest which had been sparked by a friend who had gone through what we now call a near-death experience. Many conversations on spiritual healing, or treating the whole person, took place between the young couple and their guru friend as they tried to answer the questions: Where do we come from? Why are we here? What happens when we die? Pat became convinced that the only reason we are here is to love one another and to serve humanity in any way we can. Both she and her husband, while not belittling normal medical treatment, saw spiritual healing as a way to see and treat the whole person, not just the machines which are our bodies. She writes:

“I believe that inside each of us is a deep part of our being that goes beyond mind and body... that gives us a sense of connection and confidence and graces us with ageless wisdom and perception. This is our inner spirit and what I call the Golden Thread.” She goes on to tell how they and their healer friend eventually set up a healing centre, to which they occasionally invited naturopaths, homeopaths, osteopaths, yoga and meditation practitioners and other complementary therapists. One of these was Penny Brohn, an acupuncturist and practitioner of Chinese medicine, who soon became a firm friend of Pat's. But at age 36 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. While awaiting her mastectomy operation Penny had time to think, realising that she had not “been herself” for some time, having suffered the recent loss of both her parents and going through the stress that such a bereavement often brings. Could it be true that things had changed physically in her body, reflecting the change in her low spirits? In her Chinese medical practice she had been used to taking into account what was going on in her patients' lives before and during their illnesses. Finally, she postponed her surgery and went to a clinic in Bavaria, known for its alternative and sometimes controversial treatment of cancer.

Pat accompanied her and they talked together about a plan to set up a “safe place” for people with cancer in England. The planning gave Penny renewed vitality and when she returned home she found that there was no need for the mastectomy. Penny and Pat together set up the Bristol Cancer Help Centre with a ‘normal’ doctor as the first medical director. He had become disillusioned with his practice, feeling that often patients were reluctant to change their lifestyles or beliefs, preferring to take pills. But he had observed that often the only patients who were willing to accept change, to try anything and to focus on helping themselves, were those suffering from cancer.

The new centre was run by volunteers and at first was open only one day a week. Then Prince Charles came into the picture, as President of the British Medical Association, when he accused doctors of becoming “estranged from nature”, lacking “sympathetic communication with the patient’s spirits”. Later he heaped fuel on the fire by accepting an invitation to formally open the new Bristol Cancer Help Centre, which had then been running for three years. But then came the testing time. The BBC made five programmes following clients of the Centre entitled *A Gentle way with Cancer* but was leaned on by some of the medical profession to cancel the showings. In the end a compromise was reached, adding a question mark to the title and agreeing to a sixth programme including a discussion with three medical practitioners. A research study on comparing survival rates of Centre patients with other NHS patients was agreed to, funded by the Imperial Cancer Research Fund and the Cancer Research Campaign. The results seemed at first devastating - showing that those who had been to Bristol as well as following orthodox treatment were more likely to relapse and die than the control group. But then it was found that the Bristol patients were often those who were years on from their first diagnosis compared with the control group, so that in effect apples were being compared with pears. The Lancet put out a correction and even the Cancer Research Campaign acknowledged that the researchers had made an “honest scientific mistake”. A group of patients who had benefited from the Bristol Centre set up a support group which made headway in refuting false allegations and in a TV programme entitled *Cancer Positive* they managed to elicit apologies from both original funding bodies. When Penny’s cancer eventually returned both she and Pat concentrated their efforts on the role of palliative care and Pat says “I began to question at what point in the life cycle should we move from a determined fight to get well to preparation for death.”

This is something we all have to face and in Pat's own life became an important next step, as her 'guru', her husband and finally her friend Penny approached this point. As an admirer of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, whose work on death and dying had always inspired her, Pat became clear in her belief that instead of offering false hope of a cure one should be seeking a greater purpose, a deeper meaning and finding another way forward. The Bristol Cancer Help Centre was re-named the Penny Brohn Cancer Care in memory of the co-founder.

I myself went to the Centre in 2000 after my own cancer surgery and chemotherapy, and found it an inspiring place where I learned to change my lifestyle and appreciate all the good surrounding me, to live in the present and seek the deeper meaning of life. Our own ESCA is similar in many ways to Bristol and, as one former cancer patient said recently "I imagined ESCA might be a dark and somber place, concentrating on sickness. But it is quite the opposite – happy and inspiring!"

Sally Alderson