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The Writer As Activist

By Eric Shapiro

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THE WRITER AS ACTIVIST: Eric Shapiro Elaborates on Alternative Mental Health.

Almost two years ago, before the release of my first book, "Short of a Picnic," I began writing nonfiction Internet essays that, like the book itself, deal with mental health. I say "deal" with mental health instead of "dealt" with mental health because these essays, five or six of them altogether, continue to be read. I know that people still read them because some folks e-mail me about them, sharing their personal stories and requesting elaboration on my part. In addition, the pieces have appeared in various places without my prompting, which means not only are they alive, they are multiplying.

"Short of a Picnic" depicts mentally ill characters without suggesting remedies; the back of the book even warns readers about this. My nonfiction essays, however, are all about remedies. Such are the two sides of my experience of mental disorder. I've wandered many dark corridors, but I've also known the sweet taste of relief. When writing about the latter, I never expected to engage this many readers. That shows just how thick I am: I assumed that people would be more interested in the dramatic dark side of my experiences (my fiction) than they would be in the inspirational light side (my nonfiction). Leave it to a youth like me to forget how much the masses relish happy endings.

With no shortage of irony, the essays I crafted to draw attention to my book have drawn attention to themselves, making me into an accidental activist. Before I started hearing from appreciative readers, I had underestimated the power of relating my positive tale. But now I comprehend the power. And I intend to wield it (here and again) for anyone in need. This essay is more ambitious than my previous ones. I intend to make a general case in favor of alternative mental health. In the past, I've plugged acupuncture, discussed the appeal of spirituality, and questioned the value of diagnoses. Allow me to step back for a wider view. Allow me to explain why alternative treatments work. For those of you who don't need convincing, I thank you for your time; you should probably take your business elsewhere. But for those of you in pain, for those of you who dread waking up in the morning, for those of you who fear you won't be able to stand it much longer, I humbly offer the following.

The Writer As Activist

The person writing this essay has had prolonged exposure to acupuncture, shiatsu, homeopathy, massage therapy, reflexology, and a macrobiotic diet. All of these modes of healing work, and I will do my best to explain how. My explanations will be low on formal jargon, for I am not an expert and would never claim to be. I am merely a stunned, joyous witness.

Before I move on, I offer a kick in the rear of all skeptics. I recently watched an episode of Showtime's tastefully titled series, "Bullshit!", wherein Penn and Teller — those esteemed contemporary philosophers — made a half-assed attempt to disprove alternative health. Their analysis consisted of little more than having some traditional doctors scream "It's all nonsense!" into the camera. To be sure, traditional medicine is fundamentally different from alternative medicine. The former treats illnesses; the latter treats individuals. The former aims to eliminate symptoms; the latter aims to promote holistic balance. The former is often defensive; the latter is often preventive. I happen to believe that both schools of treatment can work. To each his own. But I personally prefer alternative medicine.

Upon entering the alternative medical world, one is encouraged to accept the following two principles (among others too numerous to discuss): (1) Our bodies are possessed of a natural ability to heal themselves, and that ability can be triggered via treatment. (2) We are all composed of highly sensitive energy, the imbalance of which leads to illness, and skilled healers can help us to balance our energy.

Though one doesn't have to believe in these principles to heal, one does have to understand them to grasp how most alternative therapies work. The first principle is more initially trustworthy than the second, for we all agree that something — some life force — is sustaining our existence. Whether we call it "God" or "matter" or "the flow" or what have you, we all realize that some internal engine is propelling us through our lives. So it logically follows that this engine has a sustaining, healing element. We see this element in action when our cuts turn into scabs and our bodies eliminate waste. Our bodies strive for constant efficiency. The job of the alternative healer is to enhance this natural efficiency.

The second principle — the presence of energy — tends to set off more alarm bells. The concept carries an unfortunate air of "hocus pocus." People tend to believe what they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell, and energy does not appeal directly to our five senses. So how then does one accept the idea that a healer is going to balance something of hers that is insensible? The best answer is: Make an appointment with an alternative healer and "see" for yourself. The present answer is: Although our senses bridge the gap between our inner and outer worlds, we should not be dismissive of post-sensory possibilities. Could our five senses possibly grant us access to all that there is? Most of us believe in God, so what is so fundamentally irrational about believing in energy? Whenever two people have a conversation, they typically exit the conversation feeling altered, for they have traded energy. Energy is everything; everything is energy. The skilled healer has the ability to progressively interact with this fundamental layer of existence.

The following modes of healing have all inspired my "inner physician" and balanced my energy. To put it more plainly: The following modes of healing have all helped to change my mind from a distressing and uncomfortable realm into a landscape of relative peace (though, like anyone in the world, I still have my moments of torment). The knowledge that I can turn to these treatments at any time fills me with an overpowering sense of optimism and comfort. Anyone who's tired of perpetual mental duress

should pick up the Yellow Pages, locate an experienced practitioner, and bask in the wellness that results. Should you fail to do so, I can only quote a salesman from "Glengarry Glen Ross": "Your excuses are your own."

ACUPUNCTURE. I have had great success with acupuncture. Those of you who fear needles needn't worry; acupuncture needles are practically invisible and hardly penetrate the skin. The needles — sometimes as few as three or four — are strategically placed in different points on the patient's body. The patient's energy is tangibly impacted; myself and countless others have been known to shed tears upon acupuncture tables. It is not uncommon to leave an acupuncturist's office feeling like you are floating on a cloud.

SHIATSU: To the best of my understanding, shiatsu is acupuncture without needles. Shiatsu practitioners go after one's trigger points with their fingers. Truth be told, I personally have found shiatsu to be softer and gentler than acupuncture as far as energy is concerned. In other words, a shiatsu cloud is even softer than an acupuncture cloud.

HOMEOPATHY: Unlike the last two, homeopathy has nothing to do with reclining on a table. The homeopath administers sweet-tasting concoctions known as "remedies." Remedies look like tiny white

pills and taste like exotic candy. You sprinkle a remedy under your tongue and — wait a while. It's that simple. The skilled homeopath will have listened closely to your case history, taken detailed notes, and selected the appropriate remedy (from a list of thousands) to cure what ails you. If it doesn't work after a few weeks, you move on to another remedy. I personally have had only mild success with homeopathy. But my cousin who had a seizure as a child took a single remedy and hasn't had another seizure in over a decade. And his whole immediate family swears by homeopathy. These are credible people of uniformly sound minds, so I grant homeopathy a place on this list.

MASSAGE THERAPY. I belong to a special club of people who are lucky enough to be engaged to massage therapists. I'll do my best not to brag about her (though it is pretty swell when I have a headache and she relieves it within 90 seconds). Massage therapy is tops for people in the throes of mild mental distress: occasional anxiety, shallow depression ("shallow" in the literal sense, not the superficial sense!), insomnia, transitional stress, et cetera. Once, when I was in the midst of a five-alarm panic attack, a massage therapist cooled me off within thirty minutes. Massages make you sleep sounder and have luscious dreams. Bob Hope supposedly had one massage a day for his entire life. All 100 years of it.

REFLEXOLOGY. Despite what Penn and Teller say, your feet are a map of your entire body. The various parts of your feet correspond with the various parts of your body. This is why, when I have a sinus headache, my girlfriend (who's also a reflexologist!) need only massage my toes before I'm feeling dandy again. Reflexology is inordinately effective and relaxing. I envy any person who is about to experience it for the first time.

A MACROBIOTIC DIET. "What could my diet possibly have to do with my mental illness?" That's a question I asked myself after an acupuncturist told me to eat healthier. I regret that I didn't listen to her advice until three years later. My pasta, hamburgers, potato chips, and bologna sandwiches were just

too good to pass up. Nowadays, I've scrapped meat, dairy, sugar, caffeine, and alcohol. My diet is a personalized version of the standard macrobiotic diet. By eating more soy, tofu, tempeh, vegetables, and fruit, I've rid my body (and, more importantly, my brain) of destructive toxins. I've been bothered by almost no obsessive thoughts since I began doing this. Do I have my bad days? Of course; that's life, baby. But my mind is clearer, my body is lighter, and my energy level has never been higher.

I've left out yoga, meditation, energy healing, reiki, herbs, aroma therapy, somato emotional release, magnet therapy, and other modes of healing that I've had only passing exposure to. But I have faith in all of them, because I have faith in alternative medicine. It has treated me very honorably. It has made my mind a safer, healthier, and more constructive place. This isn't because I'm lucky. Nor is it because I'm delusional. It's because it works. Afflicted readers can either trust my testimony or remain trapped in the darkness.

Ordinarily, I like to close my essays with sharp, potent one-liners, the nonfiction equivalent of punch-lines. I'll resist doing so with this one, because this essay is not for me. It's yours. Take it, leave it, dismiss it. I've done my part. It belongs to you.

Eric Shapiro is the author of "Short of a Picnic."

What Publications Should Look for in a Technology Writer

By David Geer

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What to look for in a technology writer.

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A good technology writer is a good investigator. A professional technology writer takes time to get to know you, your publication, and your goals. What do you really want to get out of this project? A great writer will ask because a disciplined professional needs to know.

A good technology writer is a team player. Professional writing requires top-notch communications skills on all levels, not just in the text of your articles and features. The writer you want should be able to carry on a dialogue with you and your team to discover your needs, and to make sure that they are met.

A good technology writer is prepared to work with you and your team until you're satisfied. Consultations, revisions and changes should be built into the fee. These are part of the process and should be foreseen by the writer.

Finally, a good technology writer instills confidence. After providing the necessary requirements and

information, you should feel comfortable letting the writer drive where the story is concerned. You should be able to rely on their responsiveness to your queries. You should be assured that they will deliver all that you expect and more.

About the Author David Geer is chief technology writer, technical journalist and owner of Geer Communications, which helps print and electronic publications meet their content needs. E-mail him at David@GeerCom.com, call him at 440-964-9832, or check out the Geer Communications Website at www.GeerCom.com.

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