The Palmer Philosophy of Chiropractic – An Historical Perspective.

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PALMER PHILOSOPHY
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These were times of great change in the U.S. The nation was recovering from the searing ordeal of the Civil War, and was beginning to accelerate towards its destiny as a great free and democratic industrial, economic and military power. Rapid expansion was taking place in agriculture, industry, technology, science and education. In religion and philosophy many new movements and variations of old beliefs and concepts arose and were widely discussed. In health care, naturopathy, allopathy, homeopathy, osteopathy, eclectic medicine and physical therapy were in vogue or about to be developed.

It was during these years that D.D., a deeply religious man, became interested in spiritualism, a popular and well accepted religious movement at that time. Tracing its roots back to ancient Egypt and Babylonia, and still practiced today, spiritualism was based on the belief that, after death, the spirit leaves the body and continues to live and evolve. One of the nine principles of spiritualism stated that “the phenomena of nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.” This concept of an “Infinite Intelligence” was later to become a foundation stone of D.D.’s chiropractic philosophy.

He also studied another well-respected movement, theosophy, which was “the study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies, and sciences...” Of particular interest was theosophy’s aim “to reconcile orthodox religion with the rapid advance of science in that time.” The combination of religion, philosophy and science was later to be a feature of his writing.

Eventually D.D. was to move again, to the coal mining boom town of What Cheer, Iowa, to be near his family. There he ran a grocery store, and on 14 September 1882 his wife bore him a son, Bartlett Joshua Palmer.

During his years in What Cheer, D.D. became aware of Paul Caster, a famous magnetic healer in the nearby town of Ottumwa, Iowa. Magnetic healing had been developed in Europe by the Austrian Franz Mesmer, beginning in 1773. Although Mesmer was hounded by the forces of orthodoxy, magnetic healing spread in popularity. It was introduced into the United States in the 1830s, and was recognised by law in the state of Ohio. The magnetics believed that the human body, and its parts, possessed magnetic fields. Derangement of these fields led to disturbed harmony in the body, and disease. The healer worked by precise movements, making ‘passes’ over, or rubbing or kneading, the effected or related areas, including the spine. Babitt gives a fascinating description of the specific procedures and concepts of magnetic healing. Some of these holistic concepts will be very familiar to the chiropractor. For example, the advice given for patients: “When the magnetist arouses a dormant system, do not be alarmed if you feel worse for a while.” This sounds much like the reaction some patients experience while under chiropractic care.

D. D. was apparently highly impressed by the work of Caster, and began to study magnetic healing.

THE GOLDEN DECADE OF D.D. PALMER

In 1887, at the age of 43, D.D. set up practice as a magnetic healer in the city of Davenport. This act began what Gierow termed “the golden decade” of D.D. Palmer. Growth of his practice was spurred on by distribution of his publication, The Educator, which contained testimonial-style advertising commonly used at the time. During his practice hours of 1 to 6 pm he saw 50 to 100 patients daily, and his income grew to be very substantial. His gold-lettered sign, at over 42 metres long, was the largest in the city.

It seems reasonable to imagine that, while passing his hands over the spines of patients, D.D. might have noticed areas of muscle spasm, tenderness or bumps. Possibly this, combined with his knowledge of the structure and function of the human body, and of manipulation carried out in other times and places, gained during his years of reading and self-education, led to his giving the first chiropractic adjustment to Harvey Lillard in September 1895.

This was no chance occurrence, for D.D. stated, “There was nothing ‘accidental’ about this, as it was accomplished with an object in view, and the result expected was obtained.” When, shortly after, a patient with heart trouble responded to an adjustment, D.D.’s inquiring mind “began to reason.”

D.D. was honest in acknowledging that his discovery owed much to contributions from others. At the suggestion of his friend and patient, the Reverend Samuel Weed, he named it “chiropractic,” from the Greek words meaning “done by hand.” This was “in honor and remembrance” of the fact that these principles “were direct from the Greeks,” via a mysterious Dr Jim Atkinson. He also stated that:

“The basic principle, and the principles which have developed from it, are not new. They are as old as the vertebrate...I am not the first person to replace subluxated vertebrae, for this art has been practiced for thousands of years. I do claim, however, to be the first to replace displaced vertebrae by using the spinous and transverse processes as levers wherewith to rack subluxated vertebrae into normal position...”

As D.D. began to practise and learn more about his exciting discovery, events of great importance took place in rapid fashion.

In 1897 he was nearly killed in an accident, and he realised that if he died, chiropractic would die with him. He then began to teach it to others. In 1902 his son B.J. graduated from his school. Later that year, D.D. left Davenport, taking his money and possessions with him. Just why he did this is unknown, but perhaps he did so to avoid legal persecution. The Iowa Medical Practice Act defined all healing arts as the practice of medicine, and he had not been examined and licensed by the local medical board, as was required for anyone to practise any healing art. It is known that D.D. had publicly castigated the local medical society and clashed with a committee of that group’s committee investigating what constituted the legal authority for the practice of medicine in the state.