

Introduction
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How do we experience medicine of the person today?

Introduction to the topic

What has changed in the doctor-patient relationship in medicine, in society and in us doctors over the past 75 years? What does this mean for our medical practice today and in the future? We want to address these questions over the next few days and try to rediscover the true essence of medicine of the person. We all know from personal experience and through talking to our patients how complex a person is and how many levels of interaction are possible. It is already difficult enough to translate these aspects into our everyday medical lives, which are characterised by tightly scheduled appointments, technical diagnostics and economic considerations. But before we look at medicine of the person in today's world, let's take a look back at the life of Paul Tournier, whose way of practising medicine gave him a comprehensive view of the human being. What could be more obvious than to let him speak personally? The basis for this is a radio interview he gave to Gérard Kuntz in 1976, which was published in a book by Charles de Roche / Ernst Reinhardt in 1978 'Paul Tournier: A Life - A Message'.

We also want to get closer to the person of Paul Tournier through the eyes of some of his companions who were lucky enough to know Tournier personally (Paul Tournier's *Medicine of the Whole Person*. 1973, Word Books Publisher, Waco, USA).

But let's start with the radio interview, in which various topics were addressed.

❖ About his childhood and professional training

Gérard Kuntz: Can you tell us how you became the man whose books and contacts have helped so many people with their problems?

Paul Tournier: You want me to tell you almost my whole life in one sentence, so I need to try and find the moment that was a turning point, or just the decisive point in my life. I think the event which marked me the most was the death of my mother...

G. Kuntz: How old were you at the time?

P. Tournier: I was six years old. My father, who was already quite elderly, died three months after I was born.

G. Kuntz: So you were an orphan at a very young age.

P. Tournier: Yes, and you can imagine the bonds that formed between my mother and me as a result of this bereavement. Then my mother fell ill; it lasted several years, during which she also had an operation. Her death left me in a state of extreme spiritual isolation. I was taken in by my uncle, who took great care of me. But the shock of separation was so strong that it was as if I had entered another world. I became unreceptive to all contact with the outside world; I spent my childhood like a little savage.

G. Kuntz: In one of your books, you say that when you walked into a drawing room one day, you were overcome, shocked and delighted in equal measure to hear that people were talking about you.

P. Tournier: Yes.. I still remember the effect it had on me; it shows to what extent I had the impression that I didn't exist and didn't matter to anyone.

G. Kuntz: But what strikes me as so extraordinary is that this shy and withdrawn child that you were became a such a sociable man.

P. Tournier: Perhaps it's those who are missing something who appreciate it the most. I have indeed had great difficulty in establishing personal contact with others, and therefore I have undoubtedly been able to appreciate the importance that this lack of contact can play in a person's life... Now I am considered a specialist in human relationship, whereas this is a domain in which I personally have had great difficulty...

G. Kuntz: Were you brought up in a Christian environment?

P. Tournier: Yes, absolutely. My father was a pastor. I received my religious instruction from his successor; but he was an old professor of theology, and his teaching was a little theoretical. It was rather the intellectual route that brought me out of my loneliness, through my studies, but above all thanks to a professor who invited me to his house and with whom I was able to have discussions, an intellectual dialogue.

G. Kuntz: You mentioned in one of your books that this teacher was more or less the origin of your vocation to specialise in human relationship.

P. Tournier: I'm sure it was! I can even say now, as I am a psychotherapist, that he was my first psychotherapist. He sensed that this young pupil, who didn't speak to anyone and who was ill at ease with him, simply needed someone to reach their hand out to him. And he invited me to his home. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but he was the first person to draw me out of my loneliness.

G. Kuntz: He invited you to his home. It's just that which was so important.

P. Tournier: Yes. When I entered his house, I was impressed by his library. Then he said to me: 'Why don't you have a seat?' And I didn't know what to say.

G. Kuntz: You became a person for him?

P. Tournier: Yes, he took an interest in me. He spoke to me, he gave me the opportunity to express myself. I think that was my first time of basically feeling I was a person, i.e. discovering oneself, discovering one's existence, being able to express oneself.

G. Kuntz: After your studies, you practised traditional medicine for several years, and at the same time you were very involved in church life, as you also mention in several of your books. Nevertheless, you felt unsatisfied on both these levels, didn't you?

P. Tournier: Perhaps. Above all, I felt the need for a synthesis that I hadn't found. On the one hand, I was the doctor I had learnt to be...

G. Kuntz: ... a technician?

P. Tournier: Yes, as honestly as possible. And on the other hand, I had religious activities, debates, Bible studies, a parish council and so on...; but it was very intellectual. I was inspired by Calvin; I immersed myself in theology, but in my life there was no correspondence between theology and medicine.

G. Kuntz: There was no bridge between the two?

P. Tournier: The bridge is the human being, as soon as you come across human problems.

G. Kuntz: And then this bridge was gradually built? You first became aware of this lacuna, which caused you a certain dissatisfaction and caused you to go on a quest... how did you come to establish the link between the technician and the doctor, the intellectual and the human being?

P. Tournier: My teacher wasn't enough for that... he introduced me to the intellectual relationship and the conflict of ideas. Subsequently, I was active for a time in the Red Cross and in the church; but everything remained at the level of ideas. My deepest problem, my problem with relationships, was not solved at that time. I could speak in front of 2,000 people, but I couldn't get involved or surrender myself, not even in the first years of my marriage - to a woman who came from the same background as me, in a very harmonious marriage.

G. Kuntz: Basically, you experienced a certain loneliness in all this activity.

P. Tournier: A certain loneliness, an inner barrier... Oh, how many people know this inner barrier! For me, I needed a second liberation, which I experienced with someone who had just been liberated themselves.

G. Kuntz: Could you tell us about this experience, since it could be of benefit to those listening to you?

P. Tournier: After years of involvement in the church, I felt that nothing was bearing any fruit. I was active in the church, but I didn't have a mission to accomplish! Can you see the difference? I felt that I was missing something, but without being able to define what it was and then I met a Dutchman who had just lived through a very intense spiritual experience, something completely different from anything I had come across. With him, it wasn't a discussion of ideas, but something he had experienced! He told me about his life and the transformation that resulted from his spiritual experience. As for me, I was in the habit of giving talks, but that day my conversation with this man consisted of talking about my own life. And for the first time, I dared to share my suffering as an orphan child.

G. Kuntz: You were able to share the deepest part of yourself.

P. Tournier: You can't make contact with others unless you're prepared to pay the price. And that price is to give of yourself. As long as you only express things that you have read in books or in the Bible, you remain impersonal, even if you say things that are of great value and common to all people. That which is personal is that which you have experienced yourself.

G. Kuntz: Yes, that's true. But you take a risk when you expose yourself like that...

P. Tournier: Sure, but you don't have to recklessly open yourself up to just anyone. Jesus even admonished us not to 'cast our pearls before swine'. Of course, there are not only 'swine'. This brave Dutchman in particular gave me confidence, as he was the first to be completely open about himself.

G. Kuntz: And everything began to change in your life.

Paul Tournier: In contact with him, I had a fundamental experience of the human community that can be found through God's presence.

G. Kuntz: So God's presence is not a topic of discussion, an idea... Is it a reality?

P. Tournier: You can discuss God philosophically as much as you like without in the least bringing about or experiencing His presence. The encounter with God, according to his will, is closely linked to a human encounter. Certain people have met God in solitude, but afterwards they needed others.

G. Kuntz: But then, Paul Tournier, hasn't this discovery of the community also transformed your medical practice?

P. Tournier: Yes, it's very strange. When you change yourself, you have the impression that it's the others who change. I was quite amazed to see how people spoke to me in a personal way.

G. Kuntz: Because you were open to them?

P. Tournier: Probably. People have much more intuition than you might think. They sense that there is someone here with whom they can talk about what really important to them.

G. Kuntz: Something I've never spoken to anyone about before?

P. Tournier: Yes, there are secrets in every life. That's what threw me in that moment. I thought I knew my patients because I was their family doctor: I knew their grandmother, their parents and so on. And suddenly these people started telling me things that they had never confided in anyone before. This made me realise the distance that separates objective knowledge from what you can find by opening yourself up personally.

G. Kuntz: Did you gradually switch to a different kind of medical practice?

P. Tournier: I led a double life for several years. It is very necessary to say that. You understand that if you're interested in a person, you have to take the time to listen to them, and you don't have time to do that during the medical appointments. So, I started inviting those who opened up to me to come round in the evening so that I could talk to them quietly by the fire. Thus, during the day it was the traditional doctor's office, and in the evening, there were companionable conversations by the fireside. I didn't claim to be practising medicine then, it was rather a sort of pastoral ministry.

G. Kuntz: And these conversations became more and more important?

P. Tournier: I eventually realised that this was also the practice of medicine, in the sense that these conversations played a role in the health of my visitors. At the very least, they were awakened to the sense of personal responsibility that is necessary for good co-operation between doctor and patient.

G. Kuntz: Did you more or less dismiss traditional medical practice at that moment?

P. Tournier: Oh, no! In fact, I would like to emphasise that it is pointless to put these two aspects of medicine in opposition to each other.

G. Kuntz: So you are a man who synthesises the two?

P. Tournier: Absolutely! The more you are aware of the essentials, namely the personal relationship, the more you also need to master the medical technology. And the more specialised you are, the more you need to rediscover a sense of the person. There are not two types of medicine. There is only one: the one that consists of treating people as well as possible.

G. Kuntz: Incidentally, you have written a book on this subject, which we will talk about if you wish, because I believe that this is a crucial issue. It's called « Maladie et problèmes de vie » (Médecine de la Personne) 'Illness and Life Problems' (Medicine of the Person).

Several times in your works you talk about the importance of 'quiet time'. Where did you learn about this 'quiet time' and what exactly is it?

P. Tournier: With my Dutch friend! That's what connected me so strongly with him. We invited him to come to a church conference and he spoke about 'quiet time'. At the end of the meeting, I stood up and said: 'I would like our friend to tell us how much time he devotes to his 'quiet time' and how he does it. He replied: "That's hard to say. Sometimes it takes time to calm our own thoughts and to find God...". This vague answer annoyed me and I spoke again and said: 'I'm asking you to answer me clearly: how much time do you need for this?' He replied: 'An hour on average, sometimes a little more, sometimes two hours, but rarely less than an hour.' When I returned home, I was a little confused. I was fully engaged in spiritual activities, but this friend had set me a challenge! The next morning, I got up an hour earlier than usual, very secretly, without making any noise, because I would have been annoyed if my wife had noticed.

G. Kuntz: So that was a very personal experience.

P. Tournier: When you feel that you are doing something crucial, you feel the need to keep it a secret, even from your wife. So, I went into my office and said to myself: 'I want to see what it means to listen to God for an hour..'

G. Kuntz: You have to start by being silent.

P. Tournier: Yes. Of course, my mind was teeming with thoughts ... It was tedious, you know! I looked at my watch from time to time, because I wanted to be honest: an experience is an experience! And at the end of the hour, I realised that God hadn't spoken to me. Then I decided to continue, and at the same moment the thought occurred to me: 'Hold on, maybe it's God who is telling me to continue.' It was a mixture of scepticism and faith.

G. Kuntz: So at the end of the lesson, you realised that you had to persevere and that this came from God.

P. Tournier: Yes, and for a long time I talked about 'listening to God'. But that's a bit of an oversimplification, because in this moment of reflection, our own thoughts play an enormous role - thoughts for which we ask God for guidance.

G. Kuntz: Can you contrast your own thoughts with those of God?

P. Tournier: Please note, I don't compare one with the other, ! From the moment you want to ask rational questions: 'Did God say it or not?', you fall into doubt and can no longer see clearly. You have to be naive; by the way, Jesus said that: we need the mentality of a child. It's amazing to see how children perceive all this.

When you say to them: 'Listen to what God says', they immediately think in terms of the Gospel, which is wonderful! That's why you have to become a bit childlike, stop asking yourself what comes from God, what comes from yourself or from your subconscious. It's a certain naivety that has basically never left me and that is probably more important in my professional ministry than everything I've learnt.

❖ About the phenomenon of fear

G. Kuntz: Your book « De la solitude à la communauté » ('From Loneliness to Community') is about the spirit of independence as a major obstacle to personal relationships. Incidentally, this word 'independence' is causing a furore. Everyone is talking about it and everyone wants to be independent. So you're saying that this exaggerated claim to independence leads to loneliness.

P. Tournier: Yes, because it turns people against each other.

G. Kuntz: But isn't it legitimate?

P. Tournier: True independence is dependence on God! But you can't say that to people who have no experience of God and for whom this idea seems terrifying. You have to have experienced it to understand that, on the contrary, dependence on God leads to the fulfilment of this need for autonomy that is in every human being.

G. Kuntz: How can the fact of depending on God free us from dependence on people?

P. Tournier: It's like this! People who really depend on God have a spiritual independence from all the prejudices of their class, their milieu and their tradition. You can only free yourself from all these taboos through this freedom of spirit.

G. Kuntz: And only God can give us this freedom?

P. Tournier: I think so... How many people pay tribute to their upbringing, the ideas they have adopted and the cramming that they have been obliged to do! 'Conditioning' say colleagues. Yes, you are conditioned! You think you have freely adopted this or that view, but you got it from the mass media (author's note: 1976! What would Tournier say about social media?). Very few people are free from all this. What can best set us free is precisely a shattering experience that tears us away from ourselves and brings us into the freedom of the children of God, as the apostle Paul says.

G. Kuntz: And when you have realised that God can give fully satisfy us , then you can 'let go'?

P. Tournier: I find it difficult to answer you because I am aware of the diversity of ways it can happen. It's different for everyone, God has certain tricks. I can't say: 'This is how it happens!' Incidentally, that's people's obsession: when they have had an experience, they want everyone to have the same one... For me, I am very aware of the diversity of paths. The transforming experience comes from God, but in quite different ways for each person.

❖ Illness and life problems (Medicine of the person)

G. Kuntz: This sense of medicine of the person is therefore not only found among Christian doctors. However, as a Christian, you were able to take this contact with the patient even further, as you led them onto spiritual ground. Can you tell us exactly what the spiritual part of your approach was?

P. Tournier: Yes. I have been accompanied and surrounded by many colleagues from different spiritual outlooks. Some sought above all to find a more complete medicine and to grasp man in his totality, but without any reference to religion. Rather than forming two camps, the humanist and the Christian, we seek dialogue between us. I have never taken sides, either in favour of one or the other. For example, certain very devout colleagues would like to make a credo or a religious statement a prerequisite for medicine of the person; but I have always resisted this because we have but one goal: to treat the sick as well as possible.

G. Kuntz: But with your concept of what a medical person is, aren't you turning the doctor into a kind of lay confessor?

P. Tournier: That's what he's turning into! It is not at all my opinion that the doctor must have a religious position at the beginning; however, if a true dialogue is established with his patient, sooner or later religious problems will arise such as the meaning of life, the meaning of illness, healing, death or the afterlife, etc. You can't have a dialogue about human problems without encountering metaphysical questions.

G. Kuntz: Yes, but in this area the doctor is just as helpless as the patient.

P. Tournier: Yes, they have to go on a quest together and at least be honest with each other, i.e. address the problems instead of covering them up.

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Having heard Paul Tournier's own words about his personal development and his way of entering into a relationship with his patients, I would now like to quote some of his companions. Their experiences with Paul Tournier were published on the occasion of his 75th birthday in the book 'Paul Tournier's Medicine of the Whole Person' in the form of short essays in 1973.

Jean de Rougemont, Surgeon, Lyon, France

Though you, like any capable and conscientious physician, examined, formulated a diagnosis, and prescribed treatment, you were very interested in the influence played by the patient's psyche. You must have observed that many men and women had problems with themselves and consequently with those around them and society in general. These intimate problems you very felicitously called "life problems". Your major objective was clear. Your obvious compassion for people in pain aroused their need to pour out their troubles to someone. For, especially in modern society, silence and solitude oppress those who cannot or will not unburden themselves, perhaps after an unfortunate

first attempt, with a member of the family or even a professional counsellor. Well, in your case, they finally found someone who would listen and try to understand without judging them. Sensing your receptivity, your personal touch, the timid expressed their feelings and the distrustful let themselves go. Suddenly, or bit by a bit, you discover their secrets, hard to carry within, hard to accept. So, patients poured in, both because of your professional reputation and because the unique quality of your approach became known through word of mouth. As for you, you learned what results can be obtained from a totally dedicated doctor. ... By your conduct, Paul, you demonstrated that emotional involvement is quite simply a synonym for kindness. Kindness is expressed in the tone of voice, and in the silence, through the attitude, the gestures, the face, the expression. Technique helps the body. Kindness permits the physician thriving in his profession to apply it to the troubled soul, to whom he can bring peace and comfort. This very effective action goes hand-in-hand with greater availability to the patient. In many ways your language was new to many of your believing patients. Because of your obvious tolerance, it did not offend those who were declared agnostics or atheists. All of them felt comforted and your enthusiasm moved them.

Robert D. Bone, Internal Medicine, Corsicana, United States

Medicine of the person invariably leads one into a spiritual dimension. Perhaps it is here that I have received the greatest benefit from Paul Tournier. First, he translated the Christian faith for me into a way of life which I can share with my patients and colleagues. It is not necessary to become a pastor or a priest to effectively share our own feeling and knowledge of God. Secondly, it has been very helpful for me to see the way Paul Tournier accepts the religious experiences of other people as uniquely their own. He apparently feels no necessity to “correct” their experiences and to make them conform to his ideas. It speaks of deep spiritual perception to hear the protestant physician recommend that the catholic patient returns to his priest for a specific malady of the wounded soul which has made the body ill. The third benefit has come from the humility with which Dr. Tournier shares his theology. Great knowledge or experience is sometimes overpowering and may be made to seem out of reach, yet his translation of biblical lessons into the daily experiences of a human situation has the opposite effect. He shows that the personal experience of faith is easily within our reach.

Jacques Sarano, Gastroenterologist, Valence, France

Paul Tournier is inspired and an inspiration: medicine of the person is not learned from manuals, but one can have the good luck to meet Paul Tournier..... Medicine of the person is not so much a question of knowledge or competencies as it is a way of being attentive and listening. Not so much knowing as knowing how to involve oneself completely, of necessity, in the therapeutic relationship. Experience has shown the impressive efficacy of listening, of personal exchange, of silence, of a way of being in the ensuing release, the maturation of the conflict and finally the downfall of an impregnable fortress, against which the most scholarly of techniques had been powerless to achieve anything. Medicine of the person, then, is not a new pharmaceutical or psychotherapeutic technique. Nor is it a Sunday psychology or a poor relation of specialists in the “sickness of the soul”. And every time we get too smart, begin to proselytise, become didactic or scholarly, an evil genie will reduce us to ashes: the déjà-vu, the good old everyday homespun psychology or worse: soul healing! I scarcely dare to say the word disciple of Paul Tournier. Though he is a presence, a

splinter in our flesh, a challenge, a spirit. Let us agree that we have nothing to teach to anyone and that we will always be apprenticed to medicine of the person. A spiritual transformation under the auspices of organic and psychosomatic medicine: that, for me, is medicine of the person.

References :

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