

SUBURBAN LIFE

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PHILIP SINGER

New choices in medicine

Not happy with your physician? Been told it's "all in your head"? Your insurance deductible is more than you think is fair? You've been told your condition is not treatable? Try an alternative healer. Michigan has them all. Herbalist for PMS, weight loss, AIDS; acupuncturist for pain; crystalographer for energy; bee venom for multiple sclerosis and others.

All of these, and much more, have one characteristic in common - they are outside the traditional medical mainstream, and your physician probably thinks they are all unworthy, unproven, non-scientific hushes.

However, despite what the American Medical Association may think, there is a very good chance that if you are non-black, between 25 and 49 years old, with a high school, college or graduate school education and a good income, you have patronized one or more of these "unconventional" practitioners.

According to a survey published in the prestigious "New England Journal of Medicine," it seems that in 1990, about 425 million visits were made to alternative therapists. This is a greater number of visits than were made to all U.S. primary health care doctors (383 million). Also about \$13.7 billion was paid to them, about \$10.3 billion non-reimbursable, out-of-pocket payments.

Indeed, Congress has created an Office of Alternative Medicine, within the National Institute of Health, and your tax money is currently being spent on about 30 research grants.

Although the research is being funded by your taxes, a little known Michigan foundation, the Feter Institute, has been a major stimulus to this kind of mind-body-spirit activity. It has committed in 1993 about \$5 million for research and publicity in the mind-body-spirit connection.

Last year, the Office of Alternative Medicine invited me to present my views and videotape documentaries at a conference in Washington, D.C. The turnout from fringe-quacks to M.D.s and beltway politicians was impressive.

After many years as a medical anthropologist who has studied and made documentaries around the world about alternative, non-medical therapies, I am convinced that alternative healers in America are making a serious mistake in trying to justify what they do to the medical academic establishment.

Alternative healers do not adhere, and are not expected to adhere, to the same kind of safeguards (malpractice insurance, ethics committees, pathological review conferences) of physicians.

This is because alternative practitioners use therapies that are basically magical and supernatural - where the practitioners and their methods are never responsible for failure. This is understandable when we realize that about 96 percent of Americans believe in some kind of supernaturalism and miracles.

I want to emphasize that generally neither medicine nor alternative therapies focus on the social causes of disease, but the one makes an appeal to success, the other to spirit.

Sometimes an effort is made to appeal to both worlds. In a class I teach to health care pre-professionals, a student brought me a press release from St. Mary Hospital in Livonia celebrating a healing miracle involving a 79-year-old New York woman diagnosed with diabetic neuropathy. According to the hospital promo, she was miraculously healed due to the spiritual intervention of Sister Mary Angela, who died in Poland in 1899. The Diocese of Buffalo determined it was indeed a miraculous cure.

I suggest it was necessary to get the clinical records from the Vatican Office of the Causes of the Saints, including the reported 32 medical tests ordered by the Vatican in confirmation of the miraculous cure.

The student tried to get the data, but was unsuccessful. In any case, as a Catholic, he did not believe it was necessary.

I think that in offering grants to prove the scientific validity of alternative therapies, the federal Office of Alternative Medicine is repeating my mistake, that is, believing it is possible to integrate "alternative cultural authority" with "medical scientific validation."

Do I believe there is something worthwhile in alternative therapies? Yes! The placebo effect, which kicks in when a person believes in what is given to him as "medicine."

Indeed, it is the placebo effect which when compared to drugs in double-blind tests often proves to be more effective than the drug. The placebo effect can release an entire biochemical cascade in the body. Placebo is unconscious mind over matter. It can be a sign of prayer, prayer, massage, indeed any alternative approach, and it can have a powerful effect on the disease. So, instead of dismissing something as "placebo," let's study it.

Philip Singer is a documentary filmmaker, a professor of health, science and anthropology at Oakland University in Rochester Hills and a volunteer at MetroVision, which serves Farmington and Farmington Hills.



Desolate land: Very few trees and other vegetation can be found on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in Shannon County, which is the poorest county in the United States, according to Philip Singer, anthropologist.

life on the RESERVATION

The life and struggles of the Lakota Sioux Indians are graphically illustrated in a documentary currently running on cable Channel 12.

Efforts of the Lakota to assume control of their lives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs are shown in "Snapshots in Complexity: The Lakota Sioux of South Dakota."

Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi residents have been watching the documentary since last year when two area cable producers visited the South Dakota reservation.

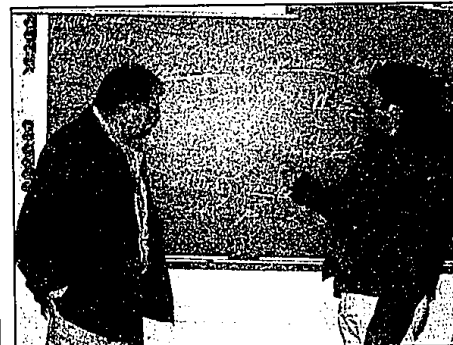
Philip Singer, a professor at Oakland University in Rochester, and Todd Whitman, a MetroVision production specialist, made the trip last winter after Singer was invited

to the reservation by the principal of Wounded Knee District School.

The Wounded Knee Massacre, where hundreds of Indians were murdered, is in Pine Ridge and is shown in the documentary.

"The reservation has the reputation of being the most hostile and militant of all reservations," said Singer, a Southfield resident and professor of health science and anthropology.

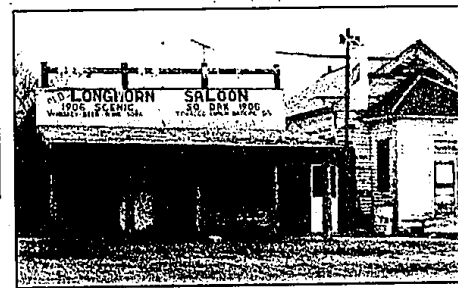
MetroVision has since invited American Indians from the metropolitan Detroit area to watch the film in the Farmington Hills studio. As a result, Rochelle Vaughn, an American Indian, has helped produce other shows that illustrate local issues related to the American Indian. These shows are also being shown on Channel 12.



Traditional lesson: Tom Harvey, a full-blooded Lakota Sioux Indian who teaches in the Wounded Knee School District, explains the linguistic characters of the Lakota language. Teaching the Indian language in the schools had been forbidden until recently.



Spiritual leader: Olivia Fourier (left) is the great-granddaughter of Chief Black Elk, who was considered the early 19th century spiritual spokesman for American Indians. A saloon. (below) outside the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation announced in English and Lakota that Indians are allowed.



Local songwriter, poet reaches high note

BY DIANE GALE
STAFF WRITER

Mary Pennington took a bumpy road to fame. Before Hollywood and New York discovered her, the Farmington Hills woman had her share of struggles with a poor childhood, cancer and other problems.

Born and raised in a Kentucky family that was so poor her parents couldn't afford to send their children to school, Pennington got married when she was 17 years old. She had seven children.

Recently she had two songs, "These Spillins' I'm Feelin'" and "The Rings Mama Word," recorded on a cassette album, America, produced by Bop Records.

While most of her songs are inspirational, some are love stories and some recount a moment in her life.

For instance, after her mother gave her some

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rings she returned home and wrote about how it made her feel. That's how "The Rings Mama Word" was written.

Pennington has had eight songs recorded in Nashville and another recorded by Sunrise records in Hollywood.

"Since then I've had cancer, and I've been writ-

ing when I'm in and out of the hospital," said Pennington, adding that she had a radical mastectomy. The cancer is currently in remission.

Two years after the surgery she was assistant at her job working midnights as a nurse assistant at St. Mary Hospital in Livonia.

"I loved it, and I still miss it," Pennington said. "All my patients used to say I was so good to them and that I would get my rewards."

She wrote a poem about that hoping to inspire other workers to be kind to the patients. It was published in the St. Mary Hospital newsletter.

Getting recognition for her writing has been a substantial accomplishment considering she didn't get her high school diploma until she was 44. She finally had time, after raising seven children, to fulfill a lifelong dream.

"It made me feel good to know that my daddy