

SOLACE

Thomas Merluzzi – The work that I do has to do with coping with cancer. How do people think about a terminal illness or a serious illness, in terms of who's in control of the outcomes. And one of the things we have found is that people's religious beliefs, ideas about God and what God does has a huge impact on how they think about the future, when they have a serious disease. So for example, we have asked people: do you feel that the outcomes of your illness is your responsibility or God's responsibility? And we find that there are two big camps of people: people who feel they are responsible for doing what they need to do and they are responsible for the outcomes that result from that. Another very large camp of people, basically say: God's in control. Or: I'm a partner with God... Now, what we have found is that idea is so powerful, who's in control... Those people actually have a much higher quality of life, they're less depressed, they have higher coping skills, they are more hopeful... In other words, I'm not here alone doing this, someone else is taking over... What's interesting is, when you think about that, that's an idea that God exists, and that God is powerful, and that God has some control over the course of disease! So it's really a belief, and to some extent rather arbitrary, isn't it, I mean, some people can believe, then some people don't! It's not like required! So the idea is that those people who do believe that, actually do better on the coping side of cancer, I'm not talking about longevity, I'm not talking about whether they live longer, whether cancer goes away, but basically their quality of life is far better than those people who feel like, this is my responsibility! So it's really an amazing thing, that ideas in one's head can have that powerful effect on one's life!

I'm just looking at, as a social scientist. What people do, and how they manage their lives, and how this concept of God, if you will, plays a role in that. Some people do believe in God, but also believe that God has required me to be responsible for my life and the outcomes that come from that. This harkens back to the Stoics, basically Stoic philosophy was, you are responsible for your behavior, you are morally responsible for your behavior, but outcomes are the result of Fate, or the Gods! And there's some plan there! That will be part of a grand plan, even if I don't know what the plan is!

What impresses me though, is that these are merely ideas and beliefs in one's head! There's no proof that all this happens! So it's basically, the engine in this is a strong belief, that allows people to endure enormous amount of pain or suffering, but somehow they can endure them, because this belief provides them with some solace... So our own research follows along this idea that beliefs and thoughts and ideas are extremely powerful, and inform how people might navigate this complex world.

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