

Christiane Northrup, M.D., '75: A state of mind

By Jennifer Durgin

Put your hand on your heart," says Dr. Christiane Northrup as she places her left hand on her own chest. "High heart up here, and low heart down here. This is your low heart," she explains, patting her right hand on her lower abdomen. "We're going to energize your low heart, babe, okay? That's our plan."

The woman Northrup is talking to believes that a hysterectomy has permanently ruined her sex life.

"I'm going to have you close your eyes," Northrup continues, "and I want you to smile—this is an inner smile." The advice that Northrup is dispensing is almost as unusual as the location of this consultation. She and the woman are not in a medical exam room but on the set of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and Northrup is leading the entire audience—as well as Oprah herself—through a qigong (pronounced "chi gung") exercise.

"And," Northrup instructs, "I want you to breathe into your heart and smile. Send that smile into your heart. Feel your heart opening like a flower. Mmmmmmm. And now send that energy down to your low heart. Okay, exhale and send it down to your low heart. Breathe back into your high heart. Keep the smile going, and now smile down into your low heart with your right hand and now feel it growing warm down there." The audience is rapt.

"Where's my low heart?" Oprah asks. Her innocent question breaks the serious mood, and the audience erupts in laughter.

"Right here!" Northrup says, moving her hand down a little more. "Right here."

"Ohhhh, there it is!" Oprah says, smiling broadly. "Oh! It's there!"

"You can make it even lower," adds Northrup, "but for television we're going to make it right here." She pats her pelvic area again and then instructs Oprah and the audience to use their consciousness to smile. "We're putting our attention down there," she says, pausing, "because energy follows thought. Energy follows thought," she repeats, "and you have energy in your hand."

"Energy follows thought" could well be Northrup's mantra. For more than two decades, she's been writing and speaking about the power of the mind to heal—or harm—the body. "Every thought we think," she says a few weeks after her appearance on *Oprah*, "every

Grew up: Ellicottville, N.Y.

Education: Case Western Reserve '71 (B.A. in biology); Dartmouth Medical School '75 (M.D.)

Training: Tufts New England Medical Center Affiliated Hospitals (obstetrics and gynecology)

TV appearances: *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Today*, *NBC Nightly News* with Tom Brokaw, *The View*, *Good Morning America*, *Rachael Ray*, and more

Little-known fact: Played the harp in the Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra

Newest pastime: Ballroom dancing

Favorite recent read: *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert

"By the way," she adds, "hope is a biochemical state in the body that promotes healing."

emotion we have, is a biochemical reality in the body." While conventional medicine has begun to acknowledge and examine a mind-body connection, Northrup takes the concept much further—to a level that many physicians consider heretical.

For example, in her first book, *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*—which has sold more than 1.4 million copies since it was first published in 1994—Northrup goes beyond giving the standard physiological explanation for fibroids, a common gynecological problem. Fibroids "result when we are flowing life energy into dead ends, such as jobs or relationships that we have outgrown," she writes in the book. "I ask women with fibroids to meditate on their relationships with

other people and [on] how they express their creativity."

Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom also includes a section on chakras, seven energy centers in the body identified by yoga philosophy. She suggests that energy blockages in the chakras can be related to everything from chronic neck pain to Parkinson's disease.

Northrup hasn't always been this comfortable giving advice that is so far afield from mainstream medicine. In the early 1980s, when she was part of a private group practice, she was much more concerned about the opinions of her medical colleagues. "I used to close my office door before I would talk to a woman with breast cancer about nutrition," she admits. "I was afraid that my colleagues would see and would criticize me." She promoted a high-fiber, whole-foods diet to decrease circulating estrogen levels and lower blood sugar. She saw people get better with that approach.

As the years passed, Northrup found herself more and more drawn to alternative, non-Western medicine. She joined the American Holistic Medical Association (and later became its president) and gave lectures at the East West Foundation, an organization founded by Michio Kushi, who popularized the macrobiotic diet in the United States. Northrup herself, and her two young daughters, began to follow a vegan diet, meaning they didn't eat any food derived from animals—no milk or eggs as well as no meat. More and more, she integrated nutrition advice and supplementation into her practice, though always "within the bounds of what was considered reasonable" by her colleagues, who were firmly rooted in conventional medicine.

Jennifer Durgin is DARTMOUTH MEDICINE magazine's senior writer.

Eventually, she says, she felt she was living a “professional double life. One part of me told patients what I really believe, in the privacy of my personal office, and the other part, the ‘official’ me, held back a bit, or a lot, in the hospital and around many of my colleagues.” For example, in 1980, when she was featured in a cover story about holistic women’s health in *East West Journal* (now *Natural Health*), she bought all the copies that were in stock at a local store in the hope that no one she worked with would see that issue of the journal.

In 1985, she finally broke away from conventional medicine and cofounded Women to Women, a small gynecological practice in Yarmouth, Maine, run solely by women and incorporating natural and preventive approaches to care.

The benefits of the practice were twofold: she would have a less hectic schedule—and therefore more time for her children—and she would be able to practice medicine the way she wanted to. She’s been dispensing her own brand of medicine ever since.

In addition to *Women’s Bodies*, *Women’s Wisdom*, she has written *The Wisdom of Menopause* and *Mother-Daughter Wisdom*; hosted six public television specials; and appeared on *Oprah* 10 times. Her next book, *The Secret Pleasures of Menopause*, is due out in October of 2008. Although Northrup left Women to Women and stopped seeing patients in 1999, she believes she’s now having as much, if not more, of an impact on women’s health. “At a book signing, you can steer a hundred women in the right direction in an hour,” she says, “and I don’t need to worry about being sued.” (Obstetrics and gynecology is one of the most heavily litigated specialties.)

“My heart goes out to my profession,” Northrup adds. “When you open your heart to somebody and you tell them the best thing that you know, and then they come back and sue you, it’s like a knife in the heart. And I have been there far more times than I would like to admit.”

She has plenty of naysayers, even among adherents of holistic health. One former patient hosts a website in which she berates Northrup for not being holistic enough. And her books spark praise and criticism in equally passionate terms. For example, one reviewer on Amazon.com calls *Women’s Bodies*, *Women’s Wisdom* “a bible for women’s health,” while another says that it “combines sound advice



BARBARA PEACOCK

DMS alumna Northrup has shared her mind-body philosophies with millions of women in three books, six public television specials, and 10 *Oprah* appearances.

with utter claptrap.” Many women take issue with Northrup’s contention that a woman’s negative thoughts and emotions about herself may cause physical illness. “For generations, women had to suffer through male doctors telling them that their real physical problems were ‘all in their head,’” continued the “claptrap” reviewer. “Now we have a female doctor ready to tell us that our cramps or infertility are just manifestations of our unconscious.”

Northrup’s books and presentations do include standard, evidence-based medical information, together with more theoretical ideas about energy and mind-body connections. Her aim, she explains, is to combine “the best of conventional [medicine]—which is what I learned at Dartmouth,” with alternative

therapies—from qigong, yoga, meditation, and acupuncture to herbal and vitamin supplementation and good nutrition.

However harsh the criticism she draws—from conventional and alternative quarters alike—she seems to brush it off. “You get to the point where you know what you know, you’ve seen what you’ve seen,” she says. She feels it’s her duty to share what she believes, no matter how “out there,” as she puts it, the advice may be.

For example, she mentions the teachings of Bruno Groening to the mother of a child who is profoundly deaf. A German doctor who died in 1959, Groening believed that healing energy surrounds all people and they need only to absorb that energy to cure any illness. “For me, talking about something like Bruno Groening, telling a mother of a deaf child that there is hope, that nothing is incurable, that’s why I took the Hippocratic oath,” says Northrup. “It’s malpractice to me to not [say] this. If I as a physician have this kind of information, if I have done my due diligence, if I have checked the healings, talked to the physicians, met . . . some of the people to whom this has happened, then as a physician how can I not offer this information to as many people as possible so that they can choose?”

As offbeat as some of her ideas may sound, Northrup sees a tie between conventional medicine and the kind she practices. Both, she says, “are helping people and offering them hope. By the way,” she adds, “hope is a biochemical state in the body that promotes healing.” She’s found yet another way to put “energy follows thought.” ■