By Lani Kwon Meilgaard

If you’re like me, after reading the title above, you’re probably asking yourself, “What the heck is anthroposophic medicine?” I knew “anthro-” means man, and “-osophic” means study, so it had to do with medicine related to study about human beings, but beyond that I was a complete novice.

According to the Physicians’ Association for Anthroposophic Medicine: “Anthroposophic medicine works with the idea, intrinsic to most healing traditions, that in addition to physical matter the human being contains life force, soul, and spirit. Anthroposophic medicine seeks to understand each medicinal plant and mineral substance qualitatively, via a contemplative approach to nature, which adds much to the conventional materialistic view of pharmacology. Anthroposophic physicians view illness in the context of their patient’s path, seeking to support each patient’s full individuality.” Thus, anthroposophic medicine provides a complementary, holistic approach to standard Western medicine, which often misses out on the spiritual component in healing and health care. Moreover, anthroposophic medicine focuses on more than an individual’s diagnosis and standard medical treatment. Anthroposophic doctors see patients in the larger context of their environment and life purpose.

I first heard about anthroposophic medicine when Mara Gibson, Secretary of the Board of Directors of Community Supported Anthroposophic Medicine (CSAM), contacted Crazy Wisdom by letter last spring. She asked if we might consider interviewing Dr. Quentin McMullen and Dr. Molly McMullen-Laird, who have been practicing in Ann Arbor for over a decade. Both doctors specialize in Internal Medicine, were trained in Western medicine and are MDs. Molly earned her medical degree from Tulane School of Medicine in New Orleans, and Quentin received his medical degree from Louisiana State University School of Medicine. They also received research information related to healing and Rudolf Steiner, a visionary Austrian scientinst and philosopher who lived between 1861-1925 and who created anthroposophical medicine, among other groundbreaking ideas. There is a small store stocked with books, postcards, homeopathic treatments and biodynamic, all-natural body-care products by Weleda and Dr. Hauschka that the McMullens prescribe for their patients. (Biodynamics is a Steiner-inspired agricultural system in which the farm is viewed as a living organism that can support itself with farming practices that honor the natural rhythms of the environment, plants and soil.) There is also a portrait of philanthropist Anna Botsford Bach in this room above one of the bookcases. According to the retreat center materials, “Dr. McKenzie, an obstetrician, built the Anna Botsford Bach home in 1916. The building was then purchased by Anna Botsford Bach in 1927 and used as a home for elderly women until 2002, i.e. 75 years of service!” The McMullens purchased the house in June 2003 and have since offered retreats for “ambulatory individuals with chronic illnesses, or anyone seeking a restorative regimen” with the goal of eventually operating a full-time facility.

There is a healing, relaxing feeling about the house, a sense of peace and restfulness. The living room, across and up the hall from the library, features a piano and furnishings gathered into a circular arrangement. Everyone in the retreat gathers here each morning after breakfast to sing in harmony. Some patients are prescribed music therapy later in the day, which focuses on “harmonizing the activities of inner organs through directed listening and playing on therapeutic instruments;” and/or therapeutic eurythmy and spatial dynamics, a method “using archetypal and focused movement to harmonize and strengthen the body and soul.” Dr. Quentin McMullen joined us at this point in the tour, and I had a chance to talk with him about his experience as a doctor at the retreat center, CSAM and the Rudolf Steiner School, where he is also the school physician. Quentin has a calm, reassuring presence, as well as an easy-going nature that conveys confidence in his work. Like Molly, he was dressed casually in slacks and a long-sleeved shirt. He told me, “Though relatively new in the United States, anthroposophic medicine has been practiced in Europe in hospitals and out-patient clinics by fully trained medical doctors for over eighty years. The Rudolf Steiner Health Center was modeled on the Lukas Klinik in Arlesheim, Switzerland.”

The art room, at the end of the hall, has large windows, allowing in natural light, and is where artistic and color-light therapy are offered. In artistic therapy each patient uses drawing, watercolor painting and/or clay modeling in a prescribed way that focuses on the process, rather than the end product, to encourage healing. In the color-light therapy patients are exposed to color and light to encourage “strengthening the soul.” According to their brochure, another anthroposophical healing method called speech formation therapy involves “transforming the breath and discovering the inner life of speech through rhythmic speech exercises.” Thus, anthroposophical medical therapies focus on the physical bodies of the patients, but also on the emotional, mental, and most importantly, the spiritual or soul parts of the whole.

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In alignment with this philosophy, the McMullens realized that designing an effective in-patient recovery program would involve healthy daily routines, such as the patients eating nutritious foods and the staff using environmentally-friendly cleaning products. The dining room, to the left at the end of the hall, is where organic, biodynamic meals, prepared by cooks trained by Dr. Molly McMullen-Laird, are served three times a day when the retreat center is in session. Molly most closely follows the Lukan Klinik diet plan for cancer patients because it is largely vegetarian, easily digestible and highly nutritious, and she also uses several recipes that were passed down in her family. Staff use only biodegradable and perfume-free laundry and cleaning agents in the center. Each patient receives specialized anthroposophic nursing by supervised staff, including treatments such as “compresses, nursing massage and footbaths,” and each patient has an individualized schedule, ongoing visits with their doctor and a prescribed treatment plan, unique to their recoveries. Evening lectures on anthroposophic medicine, nursing, food and nutrition, as well as community and social events, such as concerts, round out the schedule.

Later, in early August, I visited the Community Supported Anthroposophic Medicine (CSAM) outpatient clinic on West Stadium. The CSAM is a modest one-story, brick building with a massive skylight in the center, providing natural light over the reception desk. The lobby featured a tropical fish tank in the lobby and magazines such as National Geographic, Smithsonian and Lilipoh: the Spiritual Life, a quarterly publication dedicated to the anthroposophical approach to health and living. The aroma of healing herbs, like yarrow and lavender, drifting from the pharmacy and store adjacent to the lobby gave the place the familiar, comforting feeling. There were chairs in the waiting room along the wall for adults, while a play area with child-sized chairs and a table was set up for children. Molly and Quentin said that when they first opened the practice, “members of the patient organization donated many of the furnishings, almost like a community barn-raising.” This gives the lobby a homey feeling.

The building used to be pediatrician Dr. Graves’ office and, like the Rudolf Steiner Health Center, it has the historical ambiance of a supportive, healing place. Additionally, it is carpeted with interface carpet tiles made from recycled carpeting, which ensures that they are eco-friendly and do not give off harmful gases that could harm chemically-sensitive patients. The McMullens consulted with architect Robert Black of Sun Structures, who also designed the Leslie Science Center, when redesigning the facility to fit their patients’ needs. The building houses examination rooms painted with “lazurc” paintings, a Steiner technique, using pastel washes of color. There are also shelves for the medical records, storage space for medicines, herbal infusions and treatments, an infusion room with three recliners for those patients receiving treatments for cancer, a kitchen, bathrooms at either end of the back hall and a laboratory/storage room. I found the out-patient location to be inviting and comfortable, and I was honored to sign their guest book at the end of that visit.

In October I was delighted to be invited back to the in-patient Rudolf Steiner Health Center for the final day of an autumn retreat that was in session. I had an opportunity to talk with qualified staff and several patients, who were very generous with their time and personal stories. In the interest of maintaining the patients’ privacy, I asked how each person would like to be identified in this article, and most opted for first name and last initial. They had all signed release forms upon entry into the retreat, but I also wanted to respect those who did not wish to be interviewed and who preferred to focus on their own healing and recoveries while at the center.

I joined the staff and patients for morning coffee and later for a delicious, organic, biodynamic lunch. Tony B. was recovering from side effects of standard chemotherapy. “The caring of the physicians has been important to my recovery.” He added, “The soul is also important; the artistic pursuits help in recovery.” Barry S., recovering from two strokes, said, “It was a long road to recovery.” He has been to the Rudolf Steiner Health Center eleven times in the past four years, and his wife, Lynn, who was visiting, said he has made tremendous progress. While most of the patients at the center are recovering from chronic illnesses or injury, some participants are seeking a relaxing health retreat. As Robert H. explained, “I came mostly for the relaxation and rejuvenation and out of curiosity.”

The McMullens’ children, Sara, 25, Lydia, 19, and Samuel, 12, sometimes help their parents at the center or CSAM. That day both Lydia and Sara were there, Lydia was helping in the kitchen and serving breakfast and lunch, and Sara was facilitating the singing of rounds such as To Stop the Train, Jubilate Deo and Dona Nobis Pacem. At first I felt a bit shy, but I soon found it was a fun, uplifting experience to sing with the others. After reciting a verse, which blessed the house and the people in it, each of the patients followed schedules specifically designed for their individual recoveries, while I settled in the hall and then the library, making myself available to those who wished to be interviewed.

Judy H. shared, “I didn’t feel well a good bit of the summer, and there didn’t seem to be any particular medical diagnosis. I wanted to address what I assumed were issues of stress.” She added, “I didn’t want to work with someone who saw my body as a mechanical machine. I wanted someone who could address body, soul and mind holistically.” Anne B. generously showed me what she did during eurythmy therapy and told me, “Eurythmy is from the Greek word, which means ‘beautiful movement’. Everybody innately has this quality within him or her. They just have to bring it out. It’s visible speech and visible music, a healthy form of movement.”

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The McMullens’ daughter, Sara McMullen-Laird, who is an Art Therapist, talking with a patient at the Rudolf Steiner Health Center.