

Wellness

Wellness, an odd word that splays itself across a broad range of ideas like a body-builder in an ill-fitting suit. It is essentially an adjective that has overextended itself into an unquantified noun. Unlike its sister-states-of-being – happiness, sadness and illness – the -nessing of the word «well» is quite unnecessary. There is no heroic metaphysical quest associated with the pursuit of wellness. You went to the sanatorium to get better, but do you go to the wellness hotel to feel «weller»? But that is not a word, because if you are well, there's not really much to improve on. Undaunted by its own incoherence this aspirational adjective has spawned an industry, one that seeks to make contemporary narcissism natural.

It speaks to a shift in our relation to the very concept of health. Wellness became a thing in the 1940s, as Western governments sought to improve the standard of living for its war-ravaged and malnourished populace, encouraging them to shift their focus from the threat of foreign armies to their individual well-being and so improve their health and the health of the social body as a whole. Health became part of the pursuit of self-fulfilment, which spawned the doctrine of positive thinking, which became the practice of self-help. These neologisms created new deficits, a world of new short-comings for us to succumb to. One antidote to this modern malaise was wellness. Go on, treat yourself, you deserve it, affluenza is an affliction, this is the cure.

But unlike sanatoriums where patients lay around just breathing in, no one can afford to languish in a wellness hotel, where hard-earned cash is exchanged for skin-softening treatments and the chance to «switch off». The new inhabitants of the old sanatoriums lose themselves in a range of expensive pore-gazing activities in an attempt to feel better than well, because they have not been feeling themselves lately. In pursuit of holy «wellness», what they mean is «niceness», they want to feel nice, they want to be nothing more than luxuriant puddles of sensation, to float in a cloud of essential oils, unlikely to be contemplating how they might themselves be more essential. Before returning their plumped-up and pampered carcasses to the spiritual vacuum of their daily lives, and so on.

But let us not object to the notion of well-being, a wise pursuit (compared with its idiot cousin) and in itself an antidote to Western medicine's tendency to focus on the treatment of symptoms, over strategies for maintaining overall health. In fact the pursuit of health through a sense of one's well-being has somehow become synonymous with that other strange term «alternative medicine». Conventional medicine has long pursued that Cartesian logic of the mind-body split, which it co-opted when

it wrested itself from an eternity of folk medicine, whereby diseases were attributed to divine retribution for sinful behaviour and treatments were focused on plants and prayer. Descartes' dualism demythologised the body, showing us for the blood bags we are, paving the way for the proper study of physiology. Yet clearly there are some useful untruths at work in the power of faith over one's health or modern medical studies would not have to allow for the influence of the so-called «placebo effect», whereby test subjects sometimes improve even when receiving fake medication because they believe they are being cured.

We now know again what has always been known: that health is multidimensional, our mind and bodies are part of complex living systems whose myriad of interconnections we have yet to map. Worth noting the precise wording of the World Health Organisation's 1947 constitution that inspired this word «wellness»: «Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity». The freedom to pursue this state-of-being is a human right and not a luxury. Go to the mountains. Go and fill your eyes with one of those magnificent and hostile horizons. Lean in to the climb as the blood beats through your ears. Meditate upon this sight of natural might and feel yourself so small and insignificant that you are thereby cured of all your noxious pretensions. Gaze upon them, feel free of the need to think about yourself at all, and let the mental and the physical find their natural alignment.