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BECOMING A WHOLE PERSON MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL

REFLECTIONS FROM AN ORU
MEDICAL STUDENT

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Abstract

This article is a reflection about the legacy of whole person medicine by a graduate of Oral Roberts University School of Medicine.

My name is Dr. Clay Powell. I serve as Associate Director of Residency at In His Image in Tulsa, Oklahoma. As a 1985 graduate of the Oral Roberts University School of Medicine, this is my story of how the vision of combining healing and medicine impacted my journey as a medical professional.

I grew up in Florida in the Methodist home of parents who took us to church regularly. When I was twelve years old I gave my life to Jesus and many of my family were born again during that time as well. My parents were invited to join a prayer group that introduced us to the reality of relationship with Jesus Christ and the experience of the fullness of the Holy Spirit and by the time I graduated high school, most of my family were living out the Spirit-filled life. As I prepared for graduation in 1977, my

parents became interested in Oral Roberts University after watching Oral Roberts on TV talking about his vision to build a medical school. Inside I was always interested in becoming a doctor, but because I was shy I was thinking I would pursue a degree in engineering. I decided to enter junior college in Florida and during my sophomore year, through some encouragement from a mentor, I started to embrace the calling to pursue a career in medicine. On a trip to visit various schools where I could finish my undergraduate degree, we visited the campus of Oral Roberts University (ORU). I was very impressed by what I saw on campus. It was beautiful and modern. But more than that, I was excited about the idea of a place where I could receive my education in a vibrant spiritual environment. I knew this was where I wanted to go. When we came home from the trip, I was determined to prepare myself for coming to ORU in the fall. I even purchased the *Miracle of Seed Faith* so I could learn all about Oral Roberts and his teachings.

When I arrived at ORU in the fall of 1979, the medical school had already begun and the building of the City of Faith was underway. It was a very exciting time to be a student. We heard Oral Roberts share about his vision of merging the two streams of healing and medicine through whole person medicine in the ORU School of Medicine. He was committed to raising up doctors who would be not only excellent physicians, but would be empowered by the Spirit to minister to people's spiritual needs. Roberts believed that when a doctor correctly diagnoses and treats a patient, it is the same result as praying for someone for a miracle. Both were a form of ministry and both were from God for the healing of his people. He emphasized the naturally supernatural as well as the supernatural being natural. I loved the vision and thought to myself, "That is the kind of doctor I want to be!" But what impressed me most was how academically rigorous the education was at ORU. I really had to study to get good grades.

After graduating with my pre-med undergraduate degree, I had to decide which medical school I was going to attend. ORU was one of several dream schools I had on my list. In December, Dr. Milton Olsen, the Dean

of the ORU School of Medicine, phoned me and offered me a spot at ORU. I was thrilled to be accepted and notified the other schools I was no longer available.

The ORU program was a four-year program that was not unlike most programs consisting of two years of basic sciences such as anatomy, physiology, histology, pathology, pharmacology, etc. After, we were required to do two years of clinical rotations. What was unique was the educational philosophy that sought to integrate prayer and medicine. This meant that they emphasized the highest level of medical excellence by equipping doctors to come to the best diagnosis and treatment of patients. But we were also trained to provide spiritual care by offering to pray for our patients and pay attention to the spiritual needs as much as the physical needs. Although many of my classmates came from diverse backgrounds and Christian traditions, we were all united in the desire to practice medicine as a form of ministry. ORU was the only place that saw medicine in that way and we had the sense that we were part of something unique in the field of medical education.

One of the greatest strengths of the medical school program was the way each of the faculty modeled and mentored the vision for spiritual care of patients. We watched as they would assess the patients' physical and spiritual needs in an effort to treat the whole person. It was not uncommon for patients in the City of Faith to receive spiritual care by the attending physicians, then later by the faculty and residents, and by the chaplains and prayer partners. The spiritual component of the patient was well attended to in this model. While medical professionals are now recognizing the importance of the spiritual needs in the practice of medicine, this approach was radical in those days. And we knew we were on the cutting edge of this holistic approach to health care.

The City of Faith was representative of the excitement we felt as students in seeing ourselves as pioneers in providing whole person care. People came from all over the United States to be treated at the City of Faith. And all of them came "expecting a miracle." There were some who

got gloriously healed, both medically and supernaturally. But there were some people whom we walked with through their diseases. And, of course, some people died in the “City of Faith.” The tension of that reality was not lost on us. We as a medical community knew God was a healer but we also knew that Christians suffer and die from the same diseases from which others die. In the same way that not everyone was healed in Oral Roberts’ tent meetings, not everyone who came to the City of Faith was healed or cured. Roberts would tell us, “All people who believe in God and trust him get healed. Some get healed immediately, some get healed eventually. But all get healed ultimately.” That was important for us as doctors because it freed us from the expectation that the only accepted outcome was that people would be instantly healed in the hospital. That was just simply not the case. We wrestled not only with that tension within ourselves; we also had to help the patients walk through those tensions as well.

The vision of healing through medicine did a great deal to help us navigate the pressure to emphasize healing over medicine. We were taught that if someone got healed of pneumonia through correct diagnosis and treatment, it was the same as miraculous healing but through other means created by God. It was instilled in us that we were to be excellent in medicine or we were not glorifying God as doctors. I remember the dean telling us, “If you pray for everybody but practice bad medicine, that is a bad testimony. That is not what this medical school is about.” We believed that God is the one who heals and that our responsibility was to do the best we can medically and spiritually to minister to the needs of our patients. We truly believed that God was raising us up to provide whole person care and to be the type of doctors that did not relegate the spiritual care to someone else, but who incorporated it into our own practice.

Following my graduation, I returned to Florida to do my family medical residency. At that point I had to decide what to do with this training. When I was accepted to the ORU School of Medicine I signed a paper that said I would dedicate my life to medical missions as God leads me, whether at home or around the world. But this was only possible

because Oral Roberts had a vision to raise the money to subsidize the costs of School of Medicine students. It was his hope that if graduates finished medical school without debt, it would free them up to be able to use their medical training in global medical missions. For the first few years of my medical career my wife and I and our little one-year-old son went to Guatemala, Central America, and served as medical missionaries for two years. We did clinics and we hosted medical teams from the United States. We helped with nutrition centers because Guatemala had just been through a civil war and a lot of people were displaced and malnutrition and disease were big issues. For two years in Guatemala we were asking, “God, is this what you're calling us to full time?” At the end of that period of two years of serving him on the foreign mission field we felt God released us to come back to United States.

While we were in Guatemala in September 1989, we were staying in a missionary house that had cable and on the ABC evening news, Peter Jennings announced, “Today Oral Roberts announces the closing of the ORU Medical School.” I was just stunned. My heart was sad because I thought, “This was a good thing! Students are graduating and doing medical missions around the world. Students were being great doctors in the United States and some had joined faculties of medical schools in the U.S.” I found myself in disbelief. “How could his pioneering effort, this great adventure into whole person medicine, suddenly come to an end?” It was a sad moment for not only the graduates, but for those who were still students. Fourth-year students were allowed to finish and graduate, but the first-, second-, and third-year students in 1989–1990 were faced with the difficult situation of trying to transfer mid-year into other programs.

The dream of a medical school that merged prayer and medicine was over, but the effort to live out whole person medical care did not end in September 1989. It has lived on through many of us students. When we returned to the U.S., I joined the faculty at the program where I did my residency in Orlando, Florida, and there I exposed the medical students to the idea of whole person medicine. A few years later I was invited to join the

faculty at In His Image with Dr. John Crouch and we have continued to train doctors to excel in the best of medical care with the added aspect of spiritual care. By this time, the concept that ORU medical students had been implementing was being adopted by the broader medical community. Rigorous academic studies in medical journals were being published that show that spiritual care is good for patients and having people pray for patients is good for patients. The world was watching as this healing evangelist from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was building a medical school and a hospital. They may have thought he was crazy, but I think that what ORU helped do was bring spiritual care to the forefront of the conversation about whole person medical care.

The legacy of the ORU medical school is one that has proved to the world that Christians could be medically excellent and yet recognize the role of prayer in medicine. As our graduates went into residency programs around the U.S., ORU graduates brought with them the reputation as well trained. But, beyond the academics, graduates were people of good character who could be counted on to show up, to work hard, and to treat people with kindness and respect. The qualities instilled in us to be the best at whatever God wanted us to be carried with us into our various medical communities. That was a testimony to the world that ORU School of Medicine was a legitimate force for good in the medical field.

ORU instilled in me, as a doctor, a dependency on the Holy Spirit in how I practice medicine today. For one, the Holy Spirit prepares me for ministry because of his work in developing the fruit of the Spirit in my own life. Ultimately, patients do not care how much I know as a doctor until they know how much I care. The compassion needed to listen, empathize, and care about patients is ultimately an outflow of the Spirit. But I also depend upon the Spirit to take the excellent medical training I have received and use it in a way that helps people. When I approach a medical challenge, I ask, “God, what do I need to know that will help me be the best doctor for this person?” With their permission, I am able to pray with them or provide spiritual counsel in the midst of providing quality medical care.

Many times, God will help me with words of knowledge or wisdom or discernment to help me treat my patients. Sometimes God may give me the gift of faith to believe with that person that God will do something supernatural for their situation.

This is the legacy of my time as a graduate of Oral Roberts University and the vision God gave Oral Roberts to “raise up students to hear his voice, to go where the light was dim and his voice heard small.” I was challenged to live the Holy Spirit-empowered life in order to be God’s witness into the realm he called me: the field of medicine. This is the legacy of the ORU School of Medicine that has been lived out in the lives of the over 200 graduates that were students from 1977–1989. I feel very blessed to have been one of the few who got to experience this unique pioneering journey to bring whole person medicine into every person’s world.

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