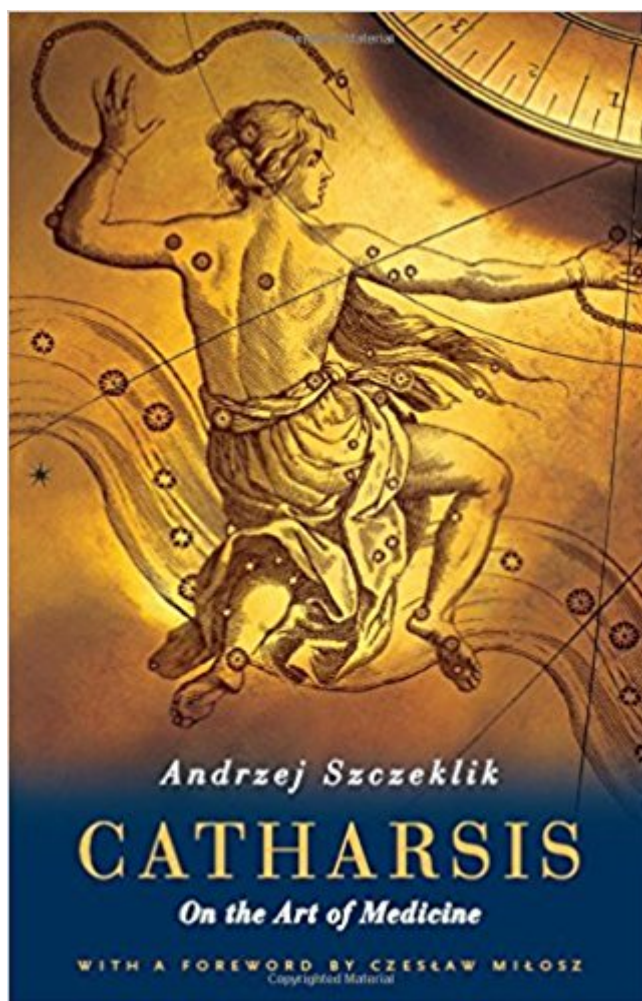


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Catharsis: On The Art Of Medicine



Synopsis

The ancient Greeks used the term catharsis for the cleansing of both the body by medicine and the soul by art. In this inspiring book, internationally renowned cardiologist Andrzej Szczeklik draws deeply on our humanistic heritage to describe the artistry and the mystery of being a doctor. Moving between examples ancient and contemporary, mythological and scientific, Catharsis explores how medicine and art share common roots and pose common challenges. The process of diagnosis, for instance, belongs to a world of magic and metaphor; the physician must embrace it like a poem or painting, with particular alertness and keen receptivity. Speculation on ways to slow aging through genetics, meanwhile, draws directly on the dream of immortality that artists and poets have nourished through the ages. And the concept of catharsis itself has made its way from the writings of Aristotle to today's growing interest in the benefits of music to health, especially in newborns. As Szczeklik explores such subjects as the mysteries of the heart rhythm, the secret history of pain relief, the enigmatic logic of epidemics, near-death or out-of-body experiences, and many more, he skillfully weaves together classical literature, the history of medicine, and moving anecdotes from his own clinical experiences. The result is a life-affirming book that will enrich the healing work of patients and doctors alike and make an invaluable contribution to our still-expanding vision of the art of medicine.

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Customer Reviews

Szczeklik, a professor at the School of Medicine at Jagiellonian University, Poland, applies an art

critic's sensibilities to the practice of medicine in this thin but intellectually dense volume. In his philosophical consideration of medicine and humanity, Szczeklik draws on Greek myth, history and the arts to explore the nature of medicine, describing the startling archetypes that appear across different cultures, times and circumstances: dreams, the search for immortality, or the symbolism of entwined serpents, from the caduceus to DNA's serpentine spiral. He also draws on personal experiences to illustrate the challenges and surprises doctors encounter. These anecdotes help describe the toll of suffering and the specter of death, both of which lie at the heart of medicine. He notes that it is only very recently that people have been sedated when they die and no longer "experience" death as, for example, Chopin did at a time when death was experienced in the "sufferer's consciousness." Something of a poet himself, Szczeklik says, "Scientists have a soft spot for metaphors and are often as sensitive to them as poets." Apt metaphors, he continues, have "contributed to the development of science just as much as rigorous conclusions based on objective data." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

• Szczeklik does a convincing job of showing us how, despite modern technology, medicine is still as much an art as it is a science. The general public will enjoy the journey through the mind of this renaissance thinker, and instructors will find plenty of topics for class discussions. A real gem, this book is highly recommended. • (Library Journal starred review) • Drawing on mathematical ideas, physics, music, mythology, clinical science and clinical practice, Szczeklik never forces the issues or compels. He treads lightly. He reminds and explains. He draws attention to details of physiology that can be explained and those that remain mysterious. He shifts gears effortlessly between the known and the mysterious. . . . He approaches the questions of pain, suffering and death that confront the doctor daily and that the world regards as "terrible, futile and destructive". Here he stresses the immense value of the experienced doctor in helping patients in the loneliness of pain. . . . The kathartai, forerunners of doctors in pre-Hippocratic Greece, were said to purify the soul by the soothing and calming combination of music, dance, poetry and song. Szczeklik is in tune with them. • (Niall O'Higgins Times Higher Education Supplement) "This is a book about the soul of medicine--and about the relationship of medicine to science. . . . It is medicine not as audited technical expertise but as an art as old as human suffering--and therefore as old as humanity itself. I know nothing about the author . . . but I suspect he was a Renaissance polymath in another life. And whoever translated him into English is clearly the Seamus Heaney of Eastern Europe, because every sentence resonates." (Kevin Barraclough British Medical Journal) "Szczeklik foregrounds medicine as a skill derived from magic in which art and science are inseparably woven into a

seamless fabric that dissolves traditional boundaries. The book provides contemporary physicians with access to humanistic sources that are the wellspring of their profession and provides humanists with biomedical sources to which they have unwittingly but materially contributed." (Joseph Perloff American Journal of Cardiology)"Balancing titans, heroes, medical history and individual accounts is tough to pull off, but the author manages a unique, even poetic synthesis. . . . A thoughtful expression of a life dedicated to medicine." (Dorian Deshauer Canadian Medical Association Journal)

Andrzej Szczeklik (July 29, 1938 – February 3, 2012) was a Polish physician, professor and chairman of the Department of Medicine, Jagiellonian University School of Medicine (Collegium Medicum) in Kraków. As Physician, Teacher, Healer, Professor, and Dean, he helped transform medicine education in central Europe. He kept the Jagiellonian University Medical School functioning through the period of martial law and helped it emerge as an internationally recognized center of medical excellence. Prof. Szczeklik was my teacher and mentor 1979-1982 in Poland during the clinical years of my medical studies. He has been a role model for my medical practice over the last 30 years. We are sorry for his passing, but glad for the legacy he left behind.

A review by Irene Smerecki found *Catharsis: On the Art of Medicine* to be a very interesting, informative, and readable book on a subject, medicine, which is sometimes difficult for the ordinary reader. It offers many nuances not often covered in medical or general information. I am purchasing this book for my daughter, an E. R. physician. From conversations with her, I have seen that diagnosis is a very intuitive, almost magical art. Andrzej Szczeklik's book adds the weight of historical evidence to her personal anecdotes, helping me to see her, and all physicians, in a new light.

In the forward to this book by the late, great poet Czesław Miłosz, he writes "There is a mysterious connection between the human organism and some spiritual energies, thanks to which science alone cannot answer many of our questions about ourselves. So perhaps [Dr. Szczeklik] is right to use the word *katharsis*, or purification, and go back to ancient Greek drama . . . This way of referring back to the ancient world makes us think of the age-old continuity of the medical profession, which quite possibly derives its high standing from its permanent place on the border between life and death." As one might expect of a poet, that pretty much says it all. One of America's most prominent doctors strongly recommended this book to me; the doctor's wife is a well-known humanities

scholar, so when he told me that this book is a deeply cultured reflection on the mysteries that a doctor confronts in his career I was eager to read the book. I've read it twice now, and I must say that the first time I was a little disappointed. Yes, it is an elegant, interesting, gracefully written meditation on the mysteries of life and death, the blankness of suffering and extinction and the human desire to envelop those experiences with meaning and morality. But it is not some kind of intellectually persuasive argument that takes one through a chain of unbroken logic. Thinking about the book and my reaction, I realised that the answer probably lies with Polanyi's concept of "tacit knowledge". Polanyi demonstrates that most of what we know we would struggle to communicate intellectually, from something as simple as a tennis swing to our judgments about the most difficult and stressful situations. The real value of this book, I have realised, is that Dr. Szezeklik, after a lifetime of healing and failing to heal, of saving lives and witnessing death, still believes in the spiritual and intellectual and emotional connections with illness and death, and he sincerely believes in the transcendent meaning of what we experience in life. This must have been what impressed the American doctor who told me about the book. CATHARSIS is not some kind of logical juggernaut--it is an elegant and cultured report back from the mysterious ground between life and death.

That's the most anti-Christian sentiment you'll find in this slim volume of medical history *exceedingly* lite, very Polish-accented and somewhat too parasitical on the work of Roberto Calasso. (I don't see any acknowledgements in my proof copy and do hope Antonia Lloyd-Jones wasn't retranslating him from the Polish!) I liked this gem from Ernest Rutherford: 'All science is either physics or stamp collecting' but famous Polish Pope John-Paul II gets way too many guest appearances for my liking. Euthanasia, Szczeklik tells us primly, is forbidden by Polish law. (Except that it's now EU law that cou.) The translation reads easily, though I suspect Celsus said 'It is not important what causes an illness' rather than 'it is not important what an illness causes', and 'Not an easy task to come up to' is not quite right either; 'not an easy thing to come up with' seems to me to convey the sense exactly. Any medical history will show how medicine derived from magic. ('Incantations are excellent for remedies and remedies are good for incantations': Edwin Smith Papyrus.) Szczeklik can't quite leave the magic behind.

I read this book in its Spanish translation, which was saluted by noted Spanish intellectuals such as F lix de Az a, Rafael Argull l, and Juan Malpartida. After reading the book, I find myself wondering what was it exactly that they found so stimulating. This book consistently fails to deliver a sustained reflection on catharsis, healing or the relationship between the mind and the body. Every

time it starts to get promising, it launches into an anecdote of the author's experiences as a physician, or a praise of John Paul II. The ideas that I found most compelling are those regarding Catharsis, Necessity, and Narcissus, for instance. They happen, however, to be quotations, almost always, from Roberto Calasso's magnificent essay on Greek myths, "Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia." At least Szczeklik's book led me to that treasure. It didn't do much else.

I must agree with a recent TLS review which wonders why the U of Chicago ever published this book. IT IS NOT WORTH PURCHASING.

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