

NORMAN MAILER:
FROM ORGONE ACCUMULATOR
TO CANCER PROTECTION
FOR SCHIZOPHRENICS

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THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT NORMAN MAILER BELIEVED in the toxic effects of anger unexpressed. Why else would he, a talented handyman and carpenter, build his own orgone accumulator? In the six-foot tall phone booth-sized box, lined and padded with foam rubber, he wailed and banged out his personal version of scream therapy in order to de-stress from life in the fast lane (Bosworth 401). It is entirely possible that this activity protected his health in two important ways: first, it reduced his stress, and second, he *believed* that it reduced his stress. It may have even helped to clarify his thoughts regarding the origin of cancer and its infrequency in schizophrenics.

J. Michael Lennon recently made a startling discovery. It was a single page of twenty-five lines, handwritten by Mailer, probably in the early 1960s, which hypothesized that impotent emotion causes cancer. As examples of impotent emotion, Mailer described an ugly woman who waited in vain for a beautiful lover, a poor man who wished disaster upon his rich relatives, and a person who carried within his heart a desire to murder, an obsession he would never translate into action. Mailer stated that when inner tension becomes acute, cells exist at the edge of rebellion and the violence they cannot express is suffered within. He claimed that stress caused by unexpressed anger results in cancer (Mailer, "Note"). Decades before it was scientifically studied and confirmed, he wrote of the existence of switches that activate the disease.

In fact, cancer is a recurring theme in Mailer's fiction. He believed that malignancy begins with a single defective cell which attacks a healthy body from inside. Dougy Madden, in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, knew immediately when his cancer began. After being shot, he chased his assailant for six blocks; when he found himself in front of St. Vincent's Hospital, he stopped. Instead of continuing the chase, Dougy went inside and grabbed an orderly by the collar.

"[J]ust at the moment when I got tough with that punk in the white jacket was when I felt the first switch get thrown in the cancer" (*Tough* 158). In that instant, according to Dougy's self-revelation, he "lost his balls" and became the victim of impotent emotion.

A *Mademoiselle* magazine interview by Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch in February of 1961 is featured in "Conversations with Norman Mailer," edited by J. Michael Lennon. It quotes Mailer saying, "It's *not* living in certain courageous moments that gives one cancer." He continues,

The tragedy of it all is that if you choose to be brave at a certain moment and you fail, that's even more likely to give you cancer than not doing anything at all. And since everyone has lost faith and a sense of certain values nobody acts any more. And more and more courageous moments are being lost all over the world, particularly in this country. And for that reason cancer is spreading. One of the causes of cancer must be the absence of action. ("Interview" 42-43)

Later in the *Mademoiselle* interview, Mailer suggests that Americans no longer believe in their innate ability to rise to the demands of the moment. He associates their lack of confidence to a generation's lack of courage and ties both to the increasing prevalence of cancer. Courage is an instinctive reaction that occurs in a moment fraught with danger and risk when there is no time for preparation and the outcome is uncertain. If an ax-wielding madman chases you across a bridge and you throw yourself over the side in time to land on the deck of a passing barge, your courage has saved you. But the opportunity to jump existed in a flash of wild exhilaration and would have disappeared if you had hesitated for an instant to consider the impulse.

Mailer believed that spontaneous action requires courage, a feeling

synonymous with guts and bravery and audacity. He also believed that the failure to act, or the failure of a courageous attempt to act, causes cancer.

In 1974 Dr. Robert Ader, an experimental psychologist, gave lab rats sugar water and a nausea inducing drug called Cytoxin. As soon as the rats were conditioned to associate sweet water with a stomachache, the Cytoxin was eliminated. Thereafter, the rats became sick when they drank plain sugar water. Dr. Ader watched and waited to determine how long it would take the rodents to forget that sweet water made them nauseous. In the second month, the rats surprised him by dying.

Noting that one of the side effects of Cytoxin is suppression of the immune system, Dr. Ader observed that although the dead rats were not receiving the drug, they thought that they were. That thought shut down their immune systems and left them vulnerable to the ordinary germs which killed them. Obviously a critical connection existed between the rats' minds and their immune systems (Ader 6–8). Practical wisdom has always known that there is a connection between the will and the cure. It took an additional six years to prove what the stoic Lucius Seneca said near the time of Christ, "It is part of the cure to wish to be cured" (Hoyt 688).

In 1981 it was Neurobiologist Dr. David Felten, (currently a Research and Medical Director at the Beaumont Hospital Research Institute and a former recipient of the MacArthur Foundation genius award), a leading researcher in mind-body medicine, who finally discovered the hardwired connection between the immune system and the central nervous system controlled by the brain. Although ideas of cellular structure and function had existed for some time, they could not be proven because it was impossible to observe submicroscopic compositions like viruses. Advances in technology, including the invention of the electron microscope, greatly expanded the verifiable. The Felten research team led the way in a new field named Psychoneuroimmunology, or PNI. Researchers used fluorescent stain to trace nerves from the brain to bone marrow, lymph nodes, and the spleen. They discovered a network of nerves leading to blood vessels as well as cells of the immune system. At last the connection was visible and scientific research had proven that the mind could control the body's susceptibility to disease.

In 1989 Dr. Michael Bishop and Dr. Harold Varmus won the Nobel Prize in Physiology for their cancer discoveries. They established that mutated or damaged cells protect the body from their own dysfunction in three ways: they repair themselves, they halt the process of reproduction in order to buy

time to remedy the defects, or if that fails, they can commit cell suicide (called “apoptosis”). If this doesn’t work, the result is uncontrolled proliferation of damaged cells, or cancer.

In a *Harvard Magazine* article which included excerpts from his book that would be published later that year, Dr. Bishop quotes Norman Mailer, a fellow alumnus. He refers to Mailer’s “cancer trigger” theory with a quote from *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*: “None of the doctors have a feel for the subject. . . . The way I see the matter, it’s a circuit of illness with two switches. . . . Two terrible things have to happen before the crud can get its start. The first cocks the trigger. The other fires it. I’ve been walking around with the trigger cocked for forty-five years” (158). Bishop further explains, “The speaker here was a smoker who died of lung cancer four pages later in Mailer’s novel . . . Mailer’s conservative estimate of two ‘triggers’ has since been revised upward for most cancers, but otherwise, the imagery is on target.” Dr. Bishop, completes the reference with “Norman Mailer gets it,” meaning that Norman Mailer understands how cancer works (Bishop 53).

Anne Harrington, the chair of the History of Science Department at Harvard, writes in her book, *The Cure Within*, that Mailer authorized his defense lawyers to develop the argument that if he had repressed his rage, instead of stabbing his wife Adele, he would have gone on to develop cancer (Harrington 90–91). She does not suggest that he thought fear of cancer allowed one to act out one’s rage, nor do his characters propose such violence. However, Mailer had no doubt that failure to act in a moment of great emotion causes the disease.

An estimated two million Americans have schizophrenia, a biological condition that affects a person’s ability to think clearly, distinguish reality from fantasy, manage emotions, make decisions, and relate to others. The World Health Organization has identified schizophrenia as one of the ten most debilitating diseases affecting humans. The fact that those who suffer from schizophrenia are a population of very heavy smokers (up to 88%) would lead one to expect that they had a high incidence of cancer (Hughes et al. 995). However, the opposite is true. Norman Mailer believed that their mental illness protected them.

Researchers at National Institutes of Mental Health emphasize that many of the genes associated with schizophrenia are the same as those that are associated with cancer, but the disorders use them in opposite ways. While cancer results from changes in the genes that cause the cells to go into

overdrive and multiply rapidly, the same genes cause cells in schizophrenia to slow to a crawl.

Dr. Amanda Law of the University of Oxford, who heads a team at National Institutes of Mental Health, explored specific pathways that cells use to make basic decisions about their development and their fate. She says,

“This is about basic decision making by cells—whether to multiply, move, or change their basic architecture. . . . Cancer and schizophrenia may be strange bedfellows that have similarities at the molecular level. The differences lie in how cells respond to external stimuli: in cancer the molecular system functions to speed up the cell and in schizophrenia the system is altered in such a way that causes the cell to slow down.” (qtd. in “Genetics”)

Dr. Daniel Weinberger of NIMH says, “It’s very curious that a brain disorder associated with very complicated human behavior has at a genetic and cellular level a striking overlap with cancer, a very non-behavior related disorder. Understanding these pathways might provide us with some new strategies for thinking about cancer” (qtd. in Reis). Dr. Weinberger adds that future research involving this information will explore ways to reverse these processes—speeding the system up in schizophrenia and slowing it down in cancer—with implications that may help in the treatment of both diseases. The most advanced research today is attempting to target cancer cells and turn down their genetic instructions to multiply, invade, occupy, and overcome all resistance by using the cell’s own dimmer switch (Dotinga). Turning down the intensity of uncontrolled growth is a big step towards turning it off. The human cell, with the infinite complexity of its ultramicroscopic components, has been revealing its secrets to scientists who now envision cancer vaccines made of cells from a victim’s own cancer (Reis).

But what about Mailer’s belief that schizophrenia affords protection from cancer? Does any substantiation exist? Evidence in a study of the tumor suppressor gene APC (adenomatous polyposis coli), which protects people from cancer growth, indicates a significant association between APC and schizophrenia. This gene is thought to confirm susceptibility to schizophrenia and reduce vulnerability to cancer (Cui et al. 675).

However, one fact must not be overlooked. Cancer is a disease of old age, and the mentally ill die earlier than the general population. In the article

“Dying too Young; Cardiovascular Neglect of the Mentally Ill,” we learn that earlier studies of the mentally ill estimated their life spans to average 20% fewer years than the rest of the population. Recent figures vary from state to state, but are alarmingly higher. In Ohio schizophrenics average a loss of thirty-two years of life. As a rule, they take poor care of themselves, have an unhealthy lifestyle, and suffer from metabolic syndrome (idle, overweight, poor nutrition) (Nasrallah). It is possible that many of them do not live long enough to suffer from cancer.

Mailer’s newly discovered handwritten hypothesis, which connects “impotent emotion” and cancer, draws attention to the feeling we are most likely to label “stress.” The bane of modern humankind, stress causes a myriad of toxic effects. “When the weight of impossible desire is suffered within, the tension becomes acute and the cells live at the edge of rebellion.” According to Mailer, they may “secede from the body or face their death.” It is an impossible situation. “Man is made of mind and body” and Mailer concludes, when the situation “becomes intolerable, either the mind or the body must divide itself from the whole” (Mailer, “Note”).

It is interesting that a Dissociative State (a term used in mental illness) can be a temporary condition that follows a period of high stress. It may involve a sudden disappearance which includes travel or wandering and sometimes the establishment of a new identity. The missing period is called a Fugue. The Fugue is followed by a return to normal, often with no memories of the interim. This sounds very much like an “intolerable” situation, perhaps due to an impossible desire, which drives the mind to separate itself from the body. The Dissociative State can become permanent, of course, or cyclical, like schizophrenia, bipolar, and other mental illnesses. When cells on the edge of rebellion don’t secede from the body, but instead they commit cell suicide, they become cancerous. In either case Norman Mailer’s “impotent emotion” refers to a powerful force or experience which drives one to the edge of disaster and beyond. He understood the concept organically and was correct to relate human behavior to cellular activity.

From 1989 to 2003 researchers mapped more than the 20,000 genes each person carries in the hope of comparing defective and healthy ones in order to reveal the secrets of diseases like cancer. The human genome is the DNA blueprint for the body. The equivalent of hundreds of volumes of instructions exists on each genome to direct how cells are assembled and work together (Beil). There is as much mystery in the cell as there is in outer space.

Norman Mailer was actively interested in all of it and we know this by the passion of his opinions.

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