

Mind over matter

Celtic mythology led psychologist to unique therapy

By Sarah Freeman
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The Faran Center began with a dream, quite literally. Dr. Francis Clifton was sleeping when a vision he had nearly caused him to fall out of bed. While slumbering, he was imagining himself on Mount Sinai, climbing to the top. A voice spoke to him and told him that his rightful role was as a ferryman.

The psychologist was profoundly affected by the dream. He suspected that his avid interest in Celtic and Greek mythology might provide a clue as to the meaning of the message. Clifton knew that the ferryman was somehow a reference to the Greek myth of the River Styx, across which a man ferries people to die.

He researched the etymology of the word "ferryman" and discovered that it derived from the old English word *Faran*, which means "to move." He reasoned that his role was to help people move from shock and depression to a happier place. At the time, the 54-year-old had a practice on Park Avenue. "It was secure and paid for my children to go to school," he said. However, the force of the dream was such that he left his regular job and set up the Center with the meaningful name.

The Faran Center, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, is a place dedicated to helping cancer and depression patients. Clifton recognized that while traditional medicine provides the physical care, there was a need to address the devastating effects that a cancer diagnosis can bring.

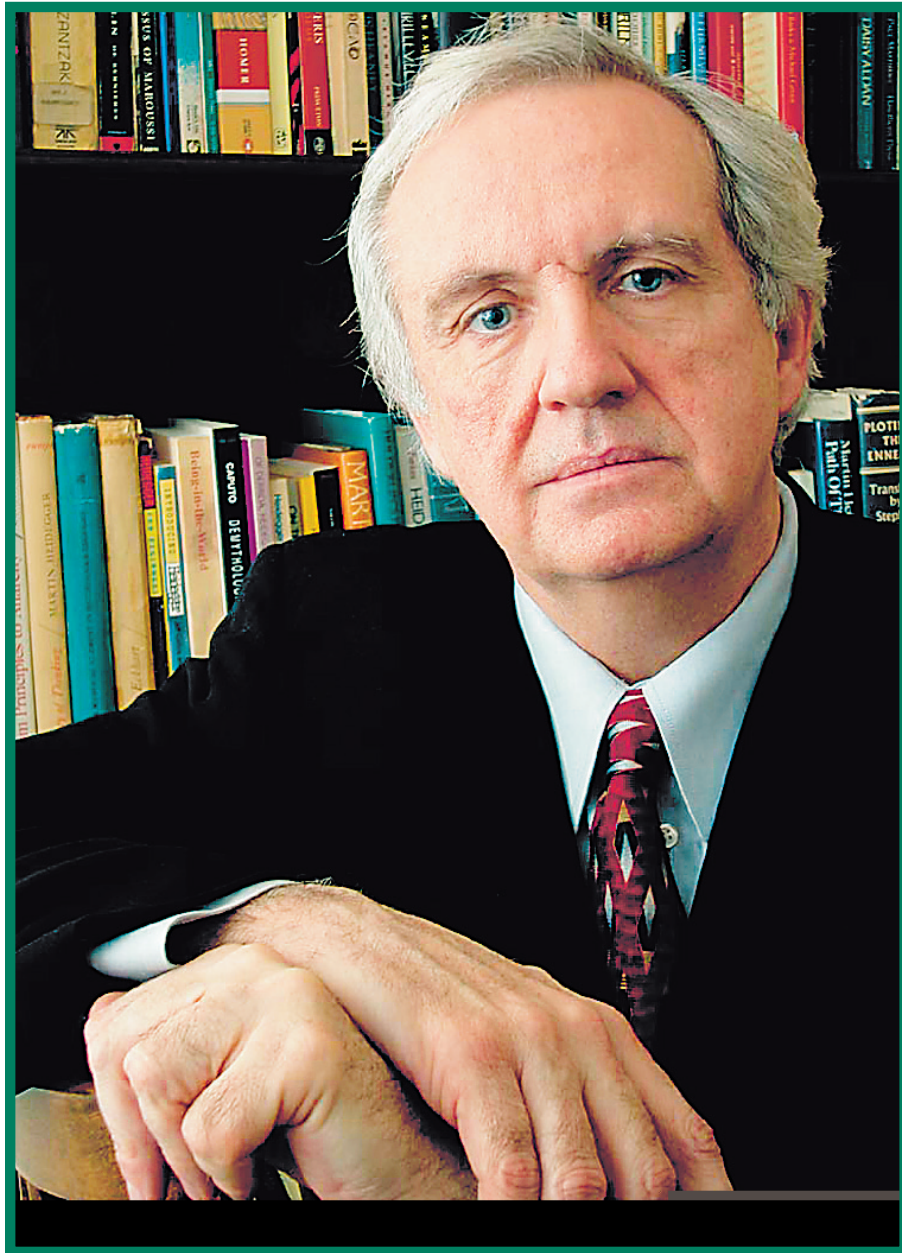
"I have controversial ideas," Clifton said. "Traditional support groups exist for these patients, but I think that they tend to reinforce someone's identity with cancer. I don't want people to deny, it but I also don't think it should become someone's label. If you start to think, 'this is who I am,' and keep reinforcing the cancer element, your whole world becomes that."

His ideal is that the cancer leaves the patients as soon as possible and views the mentality and attitude toward the illness as a vital part of that process. In therapy, Clifton places the emphasis on self-discovery and growth. "They find something they have always wanted to do, e.g. learn to play the piano, go back to school, spend time gardening," he said.

Clifton's interest in Celtic mythology is evident in the Faran Center. Inspired by Newgrange, an ancient burial in the Boyne Valley of Ireland, the entrance to the hub of the Center has a special significance. The corridor is quite somber and dark, with a bright light and soothing pictures at the end.

Clifton acknowledges the nod to the ancient site.

"We have to be willing to go into darkness," he said. "Only then, will we find the light. I first went to Ireland to visit Tyrone, where my grandmother is from. I knew about Newgrange from my



JAMES HIGGINS

Dr. Francis Clifton, founder of the Faran Center in Manhattan, encourages cancer patients to explore a path toward self-discovery.

study of Celtic mythology."

Clifton did not start out with the aim of treating cancer patients. He said that he began noticing that cancer patients were the most serious about life, due to the specter of losing it. His theory was that if people explored their fears and found out more about themselves, whether they died soon after or lived for years, their life would be forever changed.

He mentioned a study that seems to support his hypothesis. The study was carried out by David McClelland of Massachusetts General Hospital on a group of Harvard students. To begin with, he measured the level of hemoglobin A in their system. It is an indicator of the functioning of the body's immune system. A high count would be a sign of a strong immune system.

The doctor screened a film for the group. It was a dark story with images of death and destruction. On testing the hemoglobin levels, he found they were down. The second film he screened was a happy one, with positive images. The levels went up. The third film was about Mother Theresa helping the dying in Calcutta. Despite the disturbing images of

death, the film also focused on the loving care the people were given. Not surprisingly, the levels had gone up. The theory is that if we think negatively, those negative thoughts will manifest themselves in a physical way.

Clifton describes the case of a former patient of his. "A French woman had just been diagnosed with stomach cancer," he said. "She talked to me and told me that two members of her immediate family had died of the same illness. I immediately thought that she had to disassociate herself from them."

He encouraged her to let go. He asked her to imagine walking down a road with these family members. When they get to a bridge, she had to turn to them and kiss them goodbye. Then she crossed the bridge, where her fiancé was waiting for her. "She was very much in love and had a lot to live for," he said. "That was six years ago and I heard that she had a baby this year."

Clifton emphasizes that the Faran Center is not based on New Age teaching, which he thinks is quite unstructured. His treatment is based on exercises that help people relax, help them become intro-

spective, at least for the duration of the session. To this end, he has compiled a CD called, "Hope Practices," which includes imagination practices and exercises.

He has also been approached with an offer to collaborate on a book. "It would be for children," Clifton said. "There would be pictures and I would describe the exercises underneath." Clifton does have young clients and makes adjustments to the treatment accordingly. He has written a book but, he said, "publishers don't want to publish a book about cancer treatment."

He thinks that introspection can be very healthy. "As long as you don't go into a forest and withdraw, it can be very good to explore your feelings," he said. His experience is that there are more women in therapy than men. "When women start therapy, they are already a year ahead of men," he said. "They are not freaked out by discussing their feelings."

The cost of treatment varies at the Center, but, Clifton said, "I would never turn someone away." He has plowed a lot of his own money into the venture and hopes that the Center will grow and continue to attract patients. He was a self-confessed beginner at business when he started out three years but said he's learned quickly.

Clifton attributes the rise in therapy of all kinds to a decline of the influence of religion in people's lives. "The religious institutions used to carry these messages, but not anymore," he said. "There is a spiritual element to the treatment, though." Clifton describes visiting his 99-year-old grandmother on her deathbed. He whispered some of the relaxation exercises into her ear. "She woke up and said to me, 'Fran, I didn't know you were a priest.'" he said.

As to the health of his own state of mind, Clifton said, "I don't know if I have found my center yet but I am getting there." He describes life in terms of halves. The first half is growing up, gaining independence from our parents, finding a career and developing relationships. The second half is where the aim, if you're lucky, is to serve your soul. "It is painful but extremely rewarding," he said.

He looks after his physical well-being with three games of basketball a week. The recipient of a basketball scholarship to college, he loves the game. "I play at the Y, the group is made up of doctors, lawyers and actors, the people who can get out in the middle of the day," he said. Clifton's hopes for the future of Faran include exploring other cultures, using music and poetry as part of therapy.

"People could come here to meet and to become the person that God or the divine One wants them to become," he said. "Medicine is great but I want people to do something too, be more active, less passive. I give them the tools to use. Nature and technology working hand in hand."