



More Hildegard – Take Your Medicine

Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century Rhineland visionary, includes a remedy for jaundice in her extensive writings on medical topics. She advises the sufferer to wear a stunned bat (yes, of the mammalian kind) around his neck until the bat expires. To our modern sensibilities this recommendation seems useless at best but it was a treatment that was in keeping with the medieval understanding of human physiology and illness. That understanding had originated with Hippocrates (460-377BC) and Aristotle (384-324BC) and had been transmitted to the West via the writings of Galen (129-216AD) whose approach dominated the theory and practice of medicine throughout the Middle Ages.

Following Galen, Hildegard regarded the human body as a microcosm of the vast macrocosm of the known universe which was believed to be made up of four elements: Earth, Fire, Water and Air. All things – animate and inanimate – were composed of various combinations of these elements and of their *contraries*: *cold*, *hot*, *moist*, and *dry*. Particular combinations of any two of the contraries produced in each and every person one of four main *Complexions* or *Temperaments* and an accompanying predominant bodily fluid (*humor*). Illness was understood as a disturbance in these humors and treatment sought to restore humeral balance. An overabundance of blood in the system, for example, was often treated by the application of leeches. Herbs, with their own particular humeral qualities, were a popular treatment as was careful attention to the patient's diet.

Hildegard seems to have been an expert in the understanding and application of humeral theory. Among her many writings is a book of (medieval) "natural science", *Causae et Curae*, in which she gives authoritative advice on treatment for all manner of ailments. Cooked apples, for example, were considered to be very beneficial for the sick and a salve made from apple leaves was good for the eyes. The tansy herb was favoured as a treatment for catarrh while a brew of comfrey, marigold, wild sage and yarrow was recommended for easing pain associated with bruising following trauma.

The remarkable facility with which Hildegard straddled the practical and the spiritual aspects of life is a lesson to us today. For her, there was no distinction between the two; both were intrinsic aspects of God's creation and God's creation was good. In *Scivias*, the theological treatise based on her visions, Hildegard presents details of what is now often called the "cosmic egg". She describes seeing the universe as a "vast instrument, round and shadowy, in the shape of an egg" and she explains this image as signifying that "the visible and temporal are a manifestation of the invisible and eternal". More thoroughly, she writes that "God, who made all things by His will, created them so that His Name would be known and glorified, showing in them not just the things that are visible and temporal, but also the things that are invisible and eternal" (Sc.I.iii). Such a view has powerful implications for how we treat creation today: in caring for our world we are glorifying God; and honouring not only the temporal and material but the spiritual and eternal. Our current "cosmic egg" is fragile and we should handle it with care.

Dr Carmel Bendon Davis
carmel.davis@dbb.edu.au