

THE HEALING DIMENSION OF OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

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There is a lot of talk about the idea of healing and wholeness—why, for instance, some people get over emotional wounds while others never seem to. Also, there are the frequent claims that a negative attitude can depress our immune systems, causing us to become ill. Still, there are plenty of negative people around who live to old age.

Tuning in to a talk show, I recall hearing parents hotly debating whether it is God alone who heals, or whether God could also heal through doctors, and what the proper faith stance might be. Few questioned the premise of divine healing, but I'll be honest with you—I am a skeptic when it comes to these claims.

I grew up in the Southwest, the Bible Belt, where late night radio broadcasts from Del Rio, Texas, offered magic potions and divine cures—glow in the dark Jesus eyes and healing oils. If you sent in the prescribed amount, Brother Bill would make you a prayer partner and God would grant your wish. I was never tempted to respond.

We hardy Unitarians of the Southwest would laugh about such rip-offs, but it angered me, too, deep down. It was hard to understand why people would send in hard-earned money for “miracle cures.” Older now, I have lived in the shadow—my own and others’—and I know what it is like to feel discouraged, on the edge, afraid.

Since the beginning of time, it seems, people have wondered why there is suffering and how we can be healed. The relationship between religion and healing is ancient—shamanism, good and evil spirits, rituals, medicine wheels—the list is long. The ancient Persians revered fire as sacred, and the ancient Hebrews, noting the mysterious life-giving power of blood, placed it on their altars, acknowledging its vital and holy significance, as did the ancient Aztecs.

Hinduism, the most ancient of world religions, regards the water of the Ganges as holy, capable of cleansing and renewing their spirits. With the advent of medical science, however, much that had been regarded as mysterious and therefore holy, became subject to natural explanation. A rainbow, therefore, is no longer seen as a divine omen but a refraction of the sun's rays through a wet sky.

Other "miracles" have been de-mystified, so that in the words of modern writers, the world has become de-sacralized. One Unitarian Universalist I know has said that religion has become so sickly these days, it is hardly worth being an atheist anymore. Ministers now preach to a video generation who shop churches as consumers of Sunday services. One writer described the "Coca Cola concept" of religion: "There should be effervescent, sparkling sermons attractively bottled in pseudo-psychological terminology, with a minimum of spiritual hiccups and no unpleasant after-taste."

It is no wonder that "don't worry, be happy" spirituals fails to satisfy us in the deeper moments. But we still live in a world where many believe fervently enough to send in millions of dollars and to invest their hope in "divine protection" and "healing." The slick successors of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker use their downfall as proof that there's a devil out to get you, which only reinforces the circular nature of fundamentalist religion.

We Unitarian Universalists have avoided the personal dimensions of spirituality. We consider "spirituality" too ethereal for our truth-seeking. Have we thrown the baby out with the bath water? Kurt Vonnegut once confessed, while dedicating a divinity school library, "I probably ought to say something holy about now, but I am a Unitarian, and we know almost nothing about holy things."

The spiritual part of us? Well, we're just too busy; we often say we are too tired at the end of yet another busy day to do more than just "veg out." If we exercise, it's physical, not spiritual, exercise. Still many of us have a vague longing for something more, and a growing sense that it is more than the body or mind which needs healing. Our spiritual selves become fragmented and need attention, too.

When we speak of Unitarian Universalist spirituality, we must distinguish between the idea of “curing” and that of “healing,” for these are not synonymous. Curing refers to the elimination of disease, and is the province of the medical profession. Modern medicine has lengthened the life span of those with access to treatment

Healing, on the other hand, has to do with human relationships—our relationship with ourselves, with others, indeed with life itself. This is not an either/or proposition, but in life it is possible to be cured but not healed, or healed but not cured. We would hope to be both cured and healed, though it remains possible to be neither cured nor healed.

A Unitarian woman left these words for us:

I am writing from enormous pain and sickness, fever and fatigue. It does come to us sometimes, however, to feel a change, a re-arrangement of the geography of the spirit... when we find that our longing is no longer for activity, or beginnings... but for an evening’s rest, and peace... to sleep through several hours... This is at least what I have now... and as we gather together, the bad times are past for me, and there is love, and no more pain.

She was healed, though not cured. This is important to consider, since the mortality rate is still 100 percent. We offer no miracle cures. We can only offer ourselves. It is not always easy, of course, as the minister David Rankin described in this story:

The mother waited for her child at the bus stop. The bus arrived on time, depositing the passengers on the other side of the highway. The eight-year-old broke from the group, and began running across the four lanes. The car crushed him like a toy doll. In the living room that day: You say “try to rest... and eat something... You say allow the pain to break through... you tell her to walk in the cool air... you tell her the other children need to talk to her and grieve with her. But you—your face is wet, too... and your heart is gripped by grief... and your mind is lost. Your soul plunges into desolation of a valley asking: “Why do such things happen?” Yes, there will be another day.

But today—there is nothing to do but share the pain. There is nothing to do but cry!

Healing? Wholeness? What of all the times in life that are broken or fragmented? Families get angry at each other, or someone close hurts us, and we have to decide if we are strong enough—whole enough—to continue the relationship. Or, if there is no health there, or if the inner spirit of the relationship is gone, to end it.

Friends, lovers, partners, spouses—relationships don't always end because we are too weak, but because we are tempted to over-use our strengths. The intensity of our needs can fray and break bonds that chafe against such strength. Our strengths can break us, as much as our weaknesses.

Considering the amount and variety of losses that we human beings go through in life, and all the things we don't control, what does this say about the role of the church? What can our church offer to people who are always in process, always becoming, connecting, growing—and sometimes shrinking? How can the church provide a place—not to cure, but to heal.

For people such as we, finding no easy answers, the church is a place for discovery. In our time together, in these services and in the quality of our relationships with one another, in our joys and sorrow and rites of passage, our message is this: you do not need to be perfect to be here. You aren't the only one who has experienced trouble or tragedy. One of the things that makes us an authentically healing community is that we know how to support one another in bad times, and we know how to share the sacrament of both laughter and tears. We know how to weep and let go.

Theologian Paul Tillich said:

An other-worldly question of heaven is not what we are seeking... we are seeking authentic life, in its most basic and essentially healing character... the re-establishment of what is disrupted, broken, separated... and letting go of what has become deadened, choked off, closed.

There are many who base their faith in other-worldly beliefs. There is much that we simply have no explanation for, so faith does play a part in the body's response to illness or trauma. Those who ascribe both curing and healing to divine providence, usually ascribe tragedy or trouble to divine retribution.

We affirm people's freedom of belief, even as we seriously question the outcomes such beliefs can produce: children denied adequate medical care, lonely or desperate people bilked of their savings. Life is not fair, and illness is not "deserved." We who gather in this religious community struggle with the joys and sorrows real life entails. The gift of life is more than any one of us can possess. In a world of both fragments and a larger whole, I am glad for this community, which invites healing and wholeness, even in those moments when we realize there may be no "cure." Let us open our hearts, even in the midst of all that would defeat us. All the evidence says this is the better way.