

Carolyn D. Transformation Healing

Shields: through

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19 August, 2001

Transformation through Healing

As many of you know, I have been an active, healthy person all my life. In 1999, just after completing the first AIDS Ride Seekers was involved with, and with full confidence in the strength of my body, I committed myself to my yoga practice as my foremost spiritual discipline. Things were going fine, until I woke up one morning, unable to get out of bed due to a horrid muscle spasm in my neck. Little did I know that this spasm was just the beginning of a long and devastating year of debilitating pain in my neck, back, and legs, which effectively wiped me out of the active life I had formerly known. I was once a runner and backpacker; now just getting myself to work in the morning became a painful, frustrating ordeal. After months of unrelenting pain, I truly began to believe that I was dying, or worse, I believed that I was looking at spending the rest of my life in a wheelchair in chronic pain. After many disappointing doctors' appointments and visits to various healers, I began to lose hope that I would ever be well again, or even that God cared about me at all. I began to take very little pleasure from being alive. What good was I now, a person who had always taken her greatest joy from living fully in her body? By the summer of 2000, I was broken, both physically and spiritually.

If it was not for the support of my friends here, I honestly do not know what would have become of me. Eventually, after an intense time of prayer in one of the chapels at the National Cathedral on the one-year anniversary of the onset of my condition, I realized that I was being asked to unpack a lifetime of childhood and adolescent pain and rage I had very skillfully managed to repress. It's not that I had forgotten my past, it's more that I didn't see how deeply my past was effecting my adult life. Once I got in touch with the truth—that energetically, I was still very much a captive of my unprocessed past, and that the past, as painful as it was, had to be sorted out dealt with, the pain in my body went away. After all the money and energy I had spent on doctors, MRIs, physical therapy, etc., it was the waking up to my own painful past and the buried rage that accompanied it that ultimately healed me and allowed me to live again.

Probably most people in the world would agree that the body, mind and spirit are connected. Any of us who has ever been too stressed out to sleep, something I am great at and which is a classic body-mind-spirit connection in this culture, knows that this is true. However, how many of us might talk to friends or people in our faith community about troubling personal problems, but go to a doctor when physical symptoms appear? While I whole-heartedly believe that Western medicine can be helpful for many physical problems, I am concerned about the mind-body split. Why are our hospitals completely separate institutions from our churches? Why do we go to our friends with personal problems, but not physical ones?

Most churches today avoid dealing with or talking about our human bodies. While many of you here have been comfortable with the idea that God dwells inside, as well as outside, our bodies, it is still a relatively new concept for me. I grew up in a Protestant church where we saw God as outside of us. God was male, and I prayed to God somewhere about six to ten feet above my head, somewhere near the ceiling at the front of the

church. This is one of the reasons Alan's healing ritual a few weeks ago was such a gift to all of us. Mary Carol and Alan invited us, as a faith community, to participate in a healing ritual for Alan before his surgery. I see this act of our community's participation in this ritual as our commitment to being a church that recognizes the totality of the body-mind-spirit connection.

I have heard it said that the spiritual leader of modern medicine was not Hippocrates, but Jesus. Jesus' own sense of call as God's chosen one was intimately related to his healing ministry. When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus if he was the one their teacher expected, Jesus responded: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." The stories of Jesus' healings in the Bible demonstrate a holistic approach that includes the transformation of body, mind, spirit, economics, ethnic and gender relationships and social power structures. While many churches today continue to emphasize the body-mind split and the act of doing good deeds now as a way to get to heaven after death, Jesus' ministry centered on the experience of wholeness in *this* world of embodiment, as well as after death.

This is why yoga practitioners and body workers tell us that in order to find wholeness and develop a mature spiritual life, we must turn toward our bodies for wisdom and guidance, and not turn away from them. As was true in my situation, repressed emotions stay repressed as energy in our bodies, and life situations spark us to react out of our unprocessed issues because we have not yet dealt with and released that energy. This is why we sometimes find ourselves repeating the same annoying. Yoga, bodywork, psychotherapy, intention, journaling and prayer are all ways to help to release this energy.

Sometimes the response God requires from us to attain the

healing that we ourselves asked for can be more than we bargained for. Sometimes healing requires us to change our attitudes, friends, marriages or lifestyles. Real healing may mean upsetting the status quo in our families and in our own lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Healing, like the grace of God is free, but it is never cheap." As was true in my case, it seems as though creative transformation always accompany by some level of destruction and sacrifice. As we seek our own healing, we must open ourselves to God's examination of our motivations. Like the man lying by the side of the healing pool, Jesus may ask us whether we really do want to get well. How much are we willing to sacrifice in order to have a new life?

In today's gospel reading ([Luke 12:49-56](#)), Jesus states that he did not come to bring peace to the world, but division. He says he came to set fathers against sons, mothers against daughters, and mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law. (Interesting that this was not one of the Bible verses I was asked to memorize in Sunday school!) When I realized this was the reading for today, I was glad, because truthfully, and this has been especially true since my injury, I get annoyed when we look at Jesus and the teachings from the Bible as all sweetness and light and goodness. We read the 23rd psalm repeatedly for comfort, but what about passages like this one? Jesus may be full of divinity and sweetness and light and goodness, but isn't this the same Jesus that I had prayed to since the beginning of my injury and heard nothing from for a whole year? Isn't this the same Jesus that parents pray to as their children lie dying of cancer at Children's Hospital? I am not saying that Jesus creates illness and injury, but is not it also true that some people pray and pray and seek healing and still are not healed?

I do not have the answers to these questions, but they are very real issues for me. I have come to understand, and I still struggle with this a lot, that Jesus cannot and does not

always save us from pain and trouble. What Jesus can do in these situations is to accompany us, and help us to find our way through it. This realization has tremendously affected my understanding of God. I remember once asking my uncle, a Lutheran pastor, why we didn't have a statue of Jesus hanging on the cross at the front of our church, like they had at the Catholic church. He replied proudly, "Because we are people of the resurrection, not the crucifixion. We celebrate the empty cross, because we think more about Jesus' being raised and what that means to our lives than about his death." I took that in, and held it as my own theology for a long time, thinking that somehow, Lutherans were superior to Catholics because of this distinction. However, when I was living every day with chronic pain, I often thought of Jesus' wounded body hanging on the cross in Catholic churches. Maybe it was there for a reason. Maybe it is to remind us that we are embodied people every bit as much as we are spirit people. We are people of the resurrection, but we are people of the crucifixion, too. Just because Jesus died on the cross does not mean that we are spared from human suffering. Human suffering and sin are all around us. A crucifix reminds me that human suffering, whether physical or not, is a necessary means to the resurrection, or God's transformation of our lives. Although it is not pretty, Jesus modeled that for us, and we are expected to live out this truth. For us, the embodied human condition is the pathway to God. Is this, then, what salvation through Jesus Christ actually means?

Families, as well as institutional churches and communities, sometimes unconsciously thwart the healing and growth of their members. Newly found life-affirming health and attitudes are often threatening to the status quo within a dysfunctional family, church, political party or other institution. When members of families or institutional churches experience healings, they are no longer helplessly dependent on the group that formerly met all their needs. They are now equals to their superiors. This newfound health will almost surely

challenge institutionalized dysfunction. I know it did within my own family. After I got physically well, there were many dynamics in my family of origin I had to address, and much to my family's chagrin, they had to address, too. There was a lot of discomfort and pain. Not a happy time, but a necessary one if we are interested in living the fullest, God-given lives we possibly can.

The same is true culturally. As a nation, we must ask ourselves, "Do we really want liberty and justice for all? Do we really believe that every child has the right to a good education? Should poverty really be abolished? How badly do we want to address the racial inequalities that feed the well-being of the white majority?" As Jesus showed us, every person, regardless of life circumstance or race, is responsible for standing up for his or her own transformation, but how much are we willing to sacrifice for the well-being of those who need our help to get out from under our society's institutional burdens? As we all know, this kind of work definitely creates the kind of division in our society that Jesus addresses. I guess you could call this the shadow side of healing. Nevertheless, along with the division that is inevitable, the transformation that could occur from the breaking down of an unjust social structure could mean that the whole of society will be healed. How can we not take the risk?

Once the presence of the divine shows up in our lives and transformation happens, it takes a firm commitment on our part not to revert to old patterns. Once healed of my injury, I had, and continue to have, setbacks. My pain still comes and goes, although never to the degree that I had it before, and it always goes away again in a relatively short period. In partnership with God, we must become our own authority on our spiritual and physical lives. This is very scary for me, because I would like to depend solely on God to take care of me and keep my pain away. When my pain comes back, I often

think, with great annoyance, "God, haven't I done enough inner work yet?" As much as I do not like it, I have found that I have been given freedom and an interdependent relationship with God. Sometimes I do not even realize I have slipped back into old patterns until the pain shows up again. Then I remember that only I can take charge of my life, in partnership with God. Is this what Jesus meant when he told the woman accused of adultery who escaped stoning, "Go and sin no more."

It is the "sin no more" part, or the commitment to living in the transformed space, that is the challenge. It seems as though we must fight to maintain our newly transformed health and healing. This is true for societies as well as individuals. We must remain constantly vigilant toward the internal and external forces that keep us passive, dependent, sick and in pain. We must be committed to the healing of ourselves, of our faith community, and of the larger society. Neither our personal healings, nor society's healings, are made up of merely miraculous moments, but continued commitment to change.

Healing is always, to some degree, counter cultural, because healing means seeing our lives differently. We wake up to new talents and possibilities for our lives, and say no to limiting visions of ourselves, whether those visions come from parents, teachers, doctors or MRIs. In every moment of life, God sees us as who we can fully be in that particular moment. This is a phenomenal concept for us to let into our consciousness. We can then be inspired to reach for our own healing which may look like a change in physical symptoms, bringing family dysfunction to consciousness, challenging an unjust social structure, or educating people about caring for the earth.

As much as we would like to, we cannot always expect the healing process to be immediate. Learning something new takes time, and so do the transformations of bodies, minds, spirits,

communities and societies. Opening to divine healing requires patience, persistence and trust that God desires our wholeness. Before healing happens, we may first need to grow spiritually – either personally, collectively or both – in order to appreciate and use the healing not only for ourselves, but also for others. After healing happens, we are then asked to create and maintain new ways of being in our lives and communities. Ultimately, it is through our embodiment and human condition, partnered with God's love, that our pain and suffering can be transformed into healing for the world and ourselves.

Because it is God's intention that we heal one another, I would like to take a few moments to revive the anointing with oil tradition that Seekers used to have as a regular part of our communion services. We will pass out cups with anointing oil in them. When the cup is passed to you, dip your finger in the oil, and then turn to your neighbor and mark the sign of the cross in the palm of their hand, saying something like, "The healing power of Christ," or "May the healing power of Christ be with you."

Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, we know that it is only through your love that you heal us. Give us the courage to withstand the transformational fires of healing, so that we may become instruments of your peace and vessels of your love for the healing of the world. Amen.