

# Kevin L. Ogle: Reflections on Prayer, Healing and Incarnational Community

## Reflections on Prayer, Healing and Incarnational Community

Lectio Texts: [Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9:28-36 \(37-43\); \[2 Cor. 4:7-12\]](#)

[Accompanies Tiffany's Prayer Book Intro.]

Transfiguration Sunday marks the close of the season of Epiphany. It signals the beginning of Lent this coming Ash Wednesday. Each year it does so with one of the gospel accounts of this extraordinary mountain top prayer experience that Jesus had with three disciples – Peter, James and John. Transfiguration has come to signify for me those times when a veil is lifted and we see in ordinary life the sacred presence that undergirds and gives life. Today, in Luke's account we are reminded that this is an experience for Jesus of hearing from Moses and the prophet Elijah about his Jerusalem destination; this is followed by a terrifying, enveloping cloud within which the voice of God is heard, a voice that affirms Jesus as God's Beloved child, with a message God wants to be heard.

Four years ago, just as Lent got underway, a much different experience of transfiguration overshadowed my life. Looking back, it has a lot to do with my presence in the ROL MG today. It was early in the year 2000. Sonya and Manning were still active in Seekers. I had taken leave of the Spirit and Sexuality mission group to make headway on writing my doctor of ministry project. Thursday night after Ash Wednesday, I went to bed early, feeling achy with some lower back and hip discomfort. Friday morning I felt better, and Carol Ann and the boys left for a weekend trip to visit her parents. My plan was to stay home, work on our tax preparation, and then spend time on my doctoral project. As I sat at my desk making Quicken entries on my notebook computer I noticed a tingling and numbness radiating down my arm to my fingers from what seemed like a crick in my neck and right shoulder. Soon that numbness and discomfort sharpened into real pain and I could no longer bend the tip of my index finger. That afternoon I sought out a chiropractor I had seen occasionally in recent years. Despite a gentle chiropractic adjustment after an x-ray and Ibuprofen, I had a very painful night, with little sleep. I went to the emergency room at Arlington Hospital the following morning, and so began a Lenten journey afflicted with nerve pain and sudden weakness in my right shoulder and arm, that for a few weeks also involved an occasional radiating pain into my right leg. I was held in prayer in this community during this time.

Even so, the veil of my ordinary, physically healthy life was lifted, and I was experiencing life in a very different, and much more challenging way. I could no longer use a keyboard to type with my right hand, and my handwriting – never anything to brag about – became just legible, even to me. I learned to take cryptic, essentials only clinical notes after the pastoral psychotherapy sessions I did have time and energy to schedule. My medical doctors, though sympathetic, were unable

to offer a plausible diagnosis, though the neurologist's office to which I found my way immediately began ordering tests to find one— including a series of MRI exams that could not disclose a clearly structural reason for my nerve impairment and pain. Medications were prescribed that helped to a degree with the pain – and thus, helped me sleep

My self-experience was that I was not particularly fun to be around during this period, and that I was put deeply in touch with a greater awareness of the gift that is bodily health – a freedom from physical pain and dysfunction, which I wanted back. I was also, at age 39, newly in touch with my mortality, and working with the fear that this might be the onset of MS, something that had afflicted my father's mother in mid-life. No longer taking my physical health for granted, I was aware of my need for healing. As the pain began to recede to background levels, whereas initially I just resented the experience, I began to consider the meanings this malady might carry even as I engaged in physical therapy and as I explored alternative treatment modalities by which to relieve the pain and generate healing for the damaged nerves in my dominant shoulder, arm and hand.

The medical mystery remained until I was admitted to the neurology dept. at Johns Hopkins for an appointment on Good Friday, 2000. There a neurologist officially named the mystery for me – idiopathic brachial plexitis. More importantly, he sent me home with a prescription that would effectively control the pain without side effects for the next year and a half, until I was able to go off medication. I had also been told that with continued physical therapy in a year or two I would probably gain most or all of my function back. One of the high priests of the medical establishment had blessed me with a positive prognosis, and I felt reassured, relieved and

less distracted by pain.

By summer, I was starting to get back into the swing of things. I took a week of vacation in early July to start the doctoral project moving again. Shortly after returning home from that I went jogging early Saturday evening with the family dog. Then something happened to me that I do not remember. Apparently, I fell and hit my head, mildly fractured a rib, and skinned a knee. I have no memory of getting home with the dog or being taken to Arlington Hospital's Emergency Room again, this time by Carol Ann. I had suffered a mild concussion, but the fractured rib was uncomfortable for a number of weeks. My colleagues were now joking with me about a cloud following me around. I began to joke – half believing myself – that maybe God did not want me working on my doctoral project.

On the meaning side of things, something of a new theme was becoming clear. The veil of self-sufficiency, which I had learned to hide behind both for seeming survival and through male socialization in this culture, would not stay in place. I needed the assistance of others; I needed my church and the support of my friends. I needed doctors and medical care. I longed for God's reassurance, even as I wondered if it was safe to trust God – a legacy from a childhood abandonment with which I still struggle emotionally.

Just as I had begun to distance from Seekers to pursue my doctoral project and in anticipation of the move by the church to Takoma Park, I was finding new depth and breadth within this church community. I was hearing other people's stories of chronic pain and learning from the wisdom of others who had found body healing and treatment paths that broadened my

horizons.

I tried massage. Then acupuncture in a series of helpful sessions with Ginny Mitchell. I was introduced to Feldenkrais, and Chi Gong. Then the historically Christian Japanese practice of Reiki, a laying on of hands that seemed powerfully real in my first experience of it, though that first experience came with a dose of suspect theology that put me off. In fact, I would have stopped Reiki there, as a result. Then in a Seekers coffee hour conversation about that, Carolyn Shields offered Reiki as a gift for what became a period of weekly treatments. My positive experience of Reiki with her was a factor in her decision to seek training as a Reiki master, to which Carol Ann and I were able to contribute.

I stepped back from my doctoral project obsession, and stepped back into community at Seekers. In SSMG, I was warmly received and held. In a SCL class on spiritual guidance practice offered by Marjory Bankson, I became aware – through a reflection on body memory and in a class conversation with Jeanne Marcus – of another piece of unfinished business with my father; it had to do with his death nearly a decade earlier.

The onset of my shoulder neuropathy came at about the same age that my Dad was when he completed his doctorate in education. Immediately after that, he had found a new job, and moved the family to Keokuk, Iowa from Columbia, Missouri. We had moved prior to my 4<sup>th</sup> grade year. By November of my 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, my father separated from my mother, divorced her after 7 months, and remarried his secretary the following January 1<sup>st</sup>. If my memory serves, they moved to Pennsylvania in the summer after

my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. Distance was the theme of the relationship my younger sister, brother, and I had with my father after that. He died in 1991 due to colon cancer that had spread to his liver. He was 58, and though he had been confirmed in the Episcopal Church in his final year of life, there had been no family memorial service, since his wife at the time of his death had declined to allow one.

I had done a fair amount of personal work on my father wound in the course of therapy and my training to become a pastoral counselor. As the decade anniversary of my father's death approached, I finally knew it was time for a ritual way to acknowledge the complicated grief and abandonment shame – a way to say goodbye to my father, and to begin to live more deeply into my own life at middle age. Jesse stepped forward to help me think about the service, and to provide musical leadership. My siblings and mother, though reluctant at first, all agreed to visit for the holidays in order to participate. At first, I was ambivalent about inviting Seekers, given the family story and pain involved. Then I got it. I realized that the presence of my faith community would be an important part of the healing I sought by finally offering a service of remembrance for my Dad. It was an event blessed by a sense of the sacred and witnessed by an impressive number of Seekers – especially for a January 1<sup>st</sup>, non-Sunday service. It was a time of healing in my family.

Looking back, it was also a breakthrough experience for me. In the service, I had claimed publicly both the positive and the difficult about my relationship with my father. Now I was able to return to and complete my doctoral project in nine months – which I found a process of claiming my truth about both the power and limits of my favorite couples counseling model. In fact, it seems as my arm regained strength so did my voice, and I have found myself claiming the authority of my own experience in new, usually small ways too numerous to name here.

About 10 days after I completed the final edits on my doctoral project, 9/11 happened; that event unleashed a new cycle of violence into the world that our country has severely escalated. This community has responded in a counter-cultural way to the escalating fear and violence. I believe that is because we are a church that takes prayer and Jesus seriously, that seeks to live out the Good News that the church – earthen, clay vessel that it is – is called through its members to let the reconciling, healing ministry of Jesus and the love of God flow into our lives and into the world.

Well into this past fall, River Of Light sounded their call – as found in today's worship bulletins (and on the Seekers website). Having passed on the initial formation of the group when Jeanne Marcus called it together this past summer, I found the call compelling. It was still not a convenient time in my life to take on a weekly mission group. When I got there, in early Advent, I found God present in the midst of our brokenness. I found six amazing people working to hold more space for God in their lives and in the life of this small Christian community. Soon after I arrived in the group, Tiffany offered the prayer book with its healing hands collage cover, and her journey to that. In her telling of that journey, as in the time of sharing among the mission group members at the ROL retreat last weekend, I was reminded of a short but profound quote from a book called the Night and Nothing, by Episcopal priest Gale Webbe. As a young adult, I first heard it quoted by Scott Peck. The quote is this: "The wounded heart, and only it, is curative of the wasteland around."

After their mountain top experience, and Jesus' turn to Jerusalem (on the way to crucifixion and resurrection hope), the Disciples are unable to cast out an evil spirit, despite

previous success in doing so. Jesus' presence is apparently required. After the boy with an unclean spirit is healed, Jesus says (9:44) "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." The disciples did not get it – they did not see the crucifixion coming.

In a post-crucifixion and resurrection world, we of the wounded hearts and tired hands can. We can use these hands for healing and mending the world (tikkun olam), or we can through our despair and disconnection from each other and ourselves, lose our way, and betray our true purpose in life. On the other hand, when we can sustain resurrection hope and love – through being known, encouraged and named as Beloved in the miracle that is the community of the Beloved – we can become earthen vessels of healing, our prayerful hands can be those through which the Spirit of God works. May it be so for each one of us. Amen.

[Tiffany to present the new ROL prayer request book.]