

To Heal Is To Make Whole

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In our meditation story, Rachael Naomi Remen describes a hidden wholeness that belongs to every person and every event in the living world.

Each one of us contains this precious shard of divinity.

We are here to manifest it in ourselves and in others: to nourish it, to strengthen it, to make it visible.

There is a Hebrew word for this work: *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, restoring the world to wholeness.

When we experience illness in mind or body, the reality of this wholeness can be obscured.

We are cut off from normal pleasures, and from the people we care about.

We are cut off from our work, however satisfying or unsatisfying it may be.

If we're in a hospital, we may even seem to be cut off from the natural world, stuck in a place where it always feels like three in the morning.

The suffering of illness is more than just the experience of pain or the loss of capabilities.

It's the very suffering that the Buddha talked about.

We suffer not only from pain, but our resistance to pain.

We suffer from fear of the unknown and the prospective loss of things we value.

We are threatened by a loss of control, especially those of us whose identities have been shaped by the ability to take charge and make things happen.

The meaning of illness goes beyond disease – beyond the physical or psychological problems narrowly defined.

It has implications for the way we live, the way we understand ourselves, the way other people understand us, and even how they treat us.

A chronic illness may come to influence every aspect of our lives and become part of our identities.

In other words, illness has a spiritual dimension.

It goes to the core of how we make sense of experience, and understand our place in the world.

In sickness, there is brokenness.

But to heal is not the same thing as fixing a broken machine:

To heal is to make whole.

Certainly, there are mechanisms of mind and body to be understood.

Sometimes a radical intervention is needed, like surgery or chemotherapy.

But to heal a person means more than fixing them.

It means to remove obstacles that block the natural capacity to survive and grow, and manifest that unique spark of divinity.

This is an ongoing process and it does not always depend on a cure.

We can heal, and continue to grow, up to the moment of our last breath.

As a seminary student, I worked as a chaplain intern in a medical center in Vermont, in a pediatrics unit.

The children in such places are very sick: they may be coping with epilepsy, or being treated for cystic fibrosis, even getting experimental cancer treatments.

And they often display the same qualities of insight and dignity that I would admire in any adult patient.

I met a little girl of four or five who was wearing an oxygen mask.

She wanted to play a game of “Go Fish”.

It must have been decades since I’d played that game, and I looked in vain for instructions on the box of cards.

But then we just started playing.

As it turned out, we were playing a game that the little girl had invented, that she called “Go Fish”.

I followed her instructions, and we had several good games.

(Of course, she won all of them).

I was the grown-up in this encounter; I was the chaplain.
But this little girl was my teacher.
She showed me a new game that she called Go Fish.
She also showed me what health is, even in the midst of debilitating illness.

Sometimes, we find our strength in an apparent weakness.
In the process of growing up, we may have surrendered our wholeness as the price
of meeting people's expectations.
But the parts of ourselves that we have hidden away may turn out to be the very
resources that can effect our healing.

As Rachel Naomi Remen describes, in a time of crisis

We stumble on our wholeness and our real power.¹ We may be caught
unaware by its strength in the midst of the most profound weakness.²

Remen tells the story of a woman who was painfully shy, but who found the
courage to support her husband during the final weeks of his terminal illness.
On the surface, this woman seemed to lack courage.
But in fact, her courage had been growing inside her all her life, even as she coped
with her shyness, day in and day out.

The woman says:

I was so shy it took courage for me to say hello to someone, it took courage
to go to the supermarket and to the cleaners, it felt like a risk every time I
answered the telephone.

It took a lot of courage just to live ... And when the time came that Jim
needed me so badly, when I could no longer help him and be shy, why, I
guess I was ready".³

¹ Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1996; p.105.

² *Ibid.*, p.3.

³ *Ibid.*, p.108.

With sickness there is a call for surrender, but the act of surrendering can empower you.

There is a freedom that comes from *not* being in control, but being willing to move with the currents of life.⁴

When we accept the reality of our situation, we may gain access to deeper strength. Sometimes a cure may be possible. But healing goes beyond cure.

It calls us to discern our true capabilities, and to prepare for the next step on life's journey.

As a chaplain intern, I spent time with a woman with brain cancer, and her family. I saw what they went through as she got her brain biopsy, and the scary results, and as she decided to undergo radiation therapy.

The first few days, the woman simply lay with her face turned to the wall.

But gradually she reconnected with life.

She reconnected with her family, and the prospect of going home.

She looked forward to seeing her garden and the wildlife that often came into her yard.

She reconnected with her spiritual life as we talked together, prayed together, and sometimes laughed together.

This woman knew very well that her treatment did not come with any guarantee.

But she was mobilized to try it with a whole heart, and do what was necessary to live, and face the next step on life's journey, whatever that might be.

One of the greatest gifts of healing that we can bring to another person is to listen.

People need to tell their stories, and to have their stories heard.

If you visit Lewis Mehl-Madrona, a medical doctor and Native American healer, he will ask you three questions: *Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?*

⁴ Ibid., p.199.

You tell your own story to the healer, and collaborate in its unfolding.

You share sacred stories, and the stories of survivors who have confronted and transformed their situations.

You learn to frame your story, and the story of your illness, within a larger story of growth and healing.

When we listen with compassion, we help a person to bring their fears and hopes into sharper focus and to affirm their power.

We put them in touch with emotions: the point of connection with the deeper wisdom of the body.

Emotions influence the hormones that regulate the body's functioning.

They influence the immune system, which maintains the boundary between self and non-self, protecting what is "me" and rejecting what's "not-me" at the cellular level.

To touch a person at the emotional level is to help them access the body's healing power.

We touch them at the point of their brokenness, and help them become whole.

The way society treats illness and healing says a lot about how it values people.

The community adds a dimension to the healing process – for better or worse.

People have a tendency to label one another: success, failure, diabetic, epileptic, sick, invalid.

Such labels can perpetuate illness.

But at its best, the community can reinforce the patient's sense of wholeness.

We hold each person in our thoughts and prayers.

Collectively this congregation knows a lot, about illness and healing.

The people we care about are in good hands.

Healing is holy work.

The stories of Jesus healing the sick convey this basic truth about healing, whether or not they happened as described.

Jesus was engaged not only in healing individuals, but in healing a broken world, the work of *Tikkun Olam*.

His healing actions were a slap in the face of the existing social order.

He went about healing those people who society cared least about: the poor woman, the blind man, the untouchable leper.

In affirming their basic humanity, Jesus awakened the powers of growth and wholeness in the people he touched, and in the people who saw.

He drew attention to their deeper integrity, explaining:

It was not I who healed you. Your faith has made you well.

To touch and affirm someone at the point of their brokenness – to demonstrate, in words and actions:

You are not your sickness.

You are not your limitations.

You are somebody.

You are beloved:

That is the crux of healing, today, as surely as it ever was.