

WHAT HEALING MEANS

A sermon preached by the Reverend John Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church of Newport, R.I.

Healing is the great miracle upon which all of life depends. I'm not talking about the blind dramatically being restored to sight or the desperately ill being restored to health. I am speaking of the ordinary, slow, quiet and absolutely critical process by which we are often healed physically and emotionally.

Look at your hand. How many times has that hand been cut, bruised, scraped, frozen, burned and, in some instances, fractured. And yet only the most recent damage is visible. The rest of it healed long ago. The surgery that removed a cancer from my mouth several years ago was necessary, but it was also an enormous insult to my body. And yet my body largely healed itself from the experience of having a part of it removed.

As our bodies have been bruised frequently and yet survive, our psyche and souls have suffered their wounds over the years. There have been necessary losses, ordinary losses, unavoidable losses and perhaps tragic losses. Although the healing of our bodies is well documented scientifically, I believe the long process of healing our psyche and soul is still a mystery and a miracle, which should command our attention and respect.

Healing always takes longer than we think it should. Because impatience is woven throughout the fabric of our culture, we are impatient with gradual recoveries. I know I am. I sometimes tell myself that I do not have time for healing. I have places to go and speeches to give and things to do, and this process of recovery is all just too inconvenient. The rhythms of healing and recovery are not the predominant rhythms of our world today. They are the rhythms of a larger older wisdom, but driven as we are it is often hard to bow to that wisdom.

We see that impatience with the slow wisdom of healing all around us. We see it particularly when grieving is involved, because grieving is something we want to go away as quickly as possible. When a terrible tragedy happens to someone we might know we find someone who can answer the question, "Well how are they doing?" To this the only possible answer can be "As well as can be expected."

When a terrible tragedy happens in your town or in mine, within twenty-four hours a reporter will plant his feet at the scene of the disaster and intone to cameras, "Now the healing begins." Or, standing with his back to a funeral cortege, he will assure us that because the victims have been buried the families will now achieve some kind of peace.

The truth is making complete peace with that loss will not come for a long time and no amount of wanting it or announcing it will hasten it. Not that long ago, those who lost a child, a parent or a partner were given the better part of a year in which to grieve. Now they are expected to reach "closure" in two or three months.

Consider this saddest of all events. On Saturday night, late, a car full of teenagers goes out of control, hits a tree and two or three are killed. On Sunday morning, their friends rush to the accident scene where they build an altar of flowers with notes and other tributes to their friends. They tell the prying television cameras that they can't believe this happened. They cling to each other and cry. This is all very sad, but also very, very healthy. It will take awhile before these children and their community ceases to feel the pain of this loss so acutely. It should take a while.

But immediately after such a tragedy, we are told that "Professional Grief Counselors" will be at the high school on Monday morning. I don't have a problem with bringing in people who are, perhaps, more used to crying kids than their teachers might be. But bringing professionals in from outside a school or a community makes grieving look like a disease rather than a vital part of healing. I realize that grief counselors arrive, because school officials want to be seen as "doing something" about what happened, but there is nothing magic that will help. It's wrong to pretend there is.

Our daughter lost a close friend in just such an accident during her high school years. We know that loss affected every aspect of her life and that over the better part of twelve months she began slowly, quietly putting the shattered pieces back together, until we believe she did emerge stronger. However, no words we – her father a minister and her mother a school psychologist -- could say would hasten the healing process. All we could do was stand quietly by and assure her that although her love for this friend would not die, the pain of her loss would slowly ease away.

Healing takes time, but given that time it is an indispensable miracle that makes the rest of life possible. Without healing – and the grieving that comes with it – life would be intolerable. Families could not survive without healing. Relationships could not exist without the healing that sometimes repairs them. Communities would not work without healing, because without healing everyone's life would be so inexpressibly sad that each of us could bear absolutely no more than our own personal sorrow. Healing is the miracle upon which our entire existence is founded. Here is how I think it works.

All healing begins with denial. Here is my first Unitarian Universalist heresy for this morning. You have been told more often that not that denial is a bad thing a weak thing. Verily I now say unto you, denial is often a good thing. Most of us are in denial much of the time, because we just cannot acknowledge all of the possible ways in which we could be threatened or hurt.

I could devote a two-hour sermon to all of the normal things we might worry about. I could spend an hour of that sermon on diseases alone and then go on to accidents and crimes without even mentioning the world situation. But all of these dangers – though possible – are not constantly on our minds. People who do imagine all of the bad things that could happen to them become ill. Denial helps us to take on worries or sadness or fear in our own time, in our own way, at a pace that makes them manageable.

Our denial may seem odd to other people. To others we appear to be

performing rituals of busyness without a clue as to what actually has happened, is happening or will happen to us. The recent widow becomes almost happily invested in planning the memorial service. The child whose Mom has just died actually insists on getting up and going to school the next day. Does she understand what just happened? Oh yes, at some level she does understand.

Those who stand by us through such times, and would like to be helpful, often want us to be angry or sad or depressed so they'll know what to do. They may be impatient for us to get on with what is sometimes called our "grief work" as if navigating a serious personal loss is like an intellectual challenge similar to writing an A level term paper or a graduate level thesis. And to others our denial may seem like an unattractive reluctance to move on to the next stage of character building – though that denial may be the healthiest thing we can do for a time.

In a world that is full of threats and worries, our psyche has the wisdom to insist that we take it one step at a time. There are times when denial can impede understanding and healing, but more often than not I believe denial has its own wisdom and should be respected.

My second point is that because healing takes time, we must learn to treat ourselves kindly while it happens. For months after a serious loss our decks will be awash with powerful and sometimes very confusing feelings like great anger or sadness or guilt or regret or bitterness. It may even seem as if an alien has taken over our thoughts. We fall below our own emotional standards. We feel embarrassed. We get tired of feeling embarrassed. We want the whole thing to end.

It takes time. Healing is not an intellectual exercise that requires us to master six chapters of material or attend two workshops. A large part of the process is simply not ours to control – not intellectually and not emotionally. Lack of control is something that is very hard for folks like us to accept: it is perhaps the greatest crisis of all for us overachievers. But there it is. There is some "grief work" that we can do, but a large part of the process awaits a readiness that is not within our control. Only the graces of life will determine when it happens. The best we can do is be kind to ourselves and allow the process to happen and be open to what we learn from it.

My third point is for those who must watch this healing process from a distance. It sometimes looks like something it isn't. People who are healing can become cranky and difficult or listless and depressed. Since we think they are (or should be) beyond their grief what their healing looks like is a refusal to participate in the normal obligations of a working life. In fact, healing after the loss of a friend or a job or a situation in life or a beloved minister can create this reaction.

Here is my fourth point. There comes a time in every grief cycle when a part of us wants to move on, but there is another part of us that does not want to move on. I have known a few people who were always ready and eager for every journey. But, I have known only a few like that. Most of us struggle to maintain some kind of

equilibrium between going forward – maybe – and the much larger temptation to stay right here.

It seems odd that we might want to stay even in a place that seems sad or angry or uncomfortable. A man recovering from divorce holds on to his righteous anger rather than giving it up to move on. A woman mourning her husband seems reluctant to let go of the role he plays in her thoughts – as if to let him go would be an unconscionable betrayal of his memory. Discarding one identity for another is very difficult even when the old identity has become painful.

Anyone who has ever prepared for a long trip knows there comes a moment when the place where you are seems infinitely more precious than it ever did compared with the uncertainties of traveling. But your bags are packed. You made a commitment to be elsewhere, and so you leave home. Sometimes we pursue our emotional journeys with great reluctance. Even when a large part of us wants to get on with things there is part of us that knows we are leaving a warm room – albeit a room that cannot be ours for much longer – for a place we have not yet seen. We need to recognize our ambivalence in order to get through it.

Finally, when we do move on, healing means putting our lives together in a new way. It will not be the same old life. It never can be, because some important part of that life has been lost, and that changes everything. When our child goes away to a long stretch of overnight summer camp, he loses home. He has to put his life back together in a new way. He needs to find that core within himself that can go on without always thinking about what he has lost. And when he returns we notice he has changed. He lost the security of always having us available, but found something in himself that is stronger than his loss.

When we put our lives back together, we lean hard on what we learn we most deeply value. Individuals may lean on their love of the mountains or the sea, on the pleasures of music, poetry or literature; the experience of friendship or community or simply the joys of being out and about with other people. They may lean on the experience of worship or rediscover the blessings of silence. They may want to visit and revisit the places in their lives where they have sought and found sanctuary. And some lean on God.

There is yet another aspect to healing. If mourning for some includes remembering and regretting the injustice of what has happened to us, then a large part of recovery may be learning that no answer is possible to the questions of whether what happened was just or unjust and why.

Maybe there is no justice that can satisfy us. Nevertheless in the life we are about to reenter there is more beauty, more strength and more sustaining power for us than can ever be taken away. Recovery is a profoundly religious experience but not always in formal way. It requires that we connect with what we most deeply enjoy and most deeply trust.

Slow recoveries can be more painful for friends to watch than it can be to experience oneself. People often ask ministers what they can do for a friend in grief, and the classic response is “Just be there.” Well, here is my second Unitarian Universalist heresy for the day. Just being there may not be enough. If you do not believe that your friend or loved one can find the strength to get through this crisis, your being there with doubts about your friend may even do more harm than good. Doubts are like germs – they’re contagious.

So our task, our spiritual discipline, as we are friends, children, parents, partners and lovers to people who will grieve is to find somewhere in our own spirit the faith – the willingness to believe – that the miracle of healing can happen again to those we care about. We don’t have to say it. Often even profoundly sincere words of reassurance are taken as hollow by the people who are in the midst of deep sadness. We don’t have to say it, but our friends will know if we do believe it.

Healing is the miracle on which life depends. It is also the mystery that makes all life possible. Where do we find the strength to put our shattered worlds back together in new ways and then go on living – reborn essentially – rebuilding new versions of our lives? Answering that question brings each of us much closer to the sources of our own religious life and to the stable source of our own spirituality.