

Take Charge of Your Own Healing

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*Healing may not be so much about getting better,
as about letting go of everything that isn't you —
all of the expectations, all of the beliefs —
and becoming who you are.*

Rachel Naomi Remen

Opening Words²

Julie Ham

Magi... Witch... Priestess... Prophet... Gypsy.... Shaman

For thousands of years, our earliest human ancestors turned to such learned neighbors for guidance and help with life's greatest mysteries, including birth, illness and death. Healing was an occult art, part of the training and practice of the religious leaders in the community.

Gradually human knowledge grew and our species developed more scientific minds, turning them to the study and treatment of symptoms and cures.

Today, we're grateful that doctors perform medical



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miracles everyday. But as those scary lists of potential side affects often show us; the human body is more than a just living machine with a few parts to tweak or repair.

Even as we bring high-tech solutions to medical practice and explore the human genome; we find as many new medical questions as we find solutions. And doctors are finding some value in our old home remedies and practices.

Studies have proven that religious practices such as prayer can be beneficial to patients. And I just read in last Sunday's newspaper that the Mayo Clinic has published a book about herbal remedies.

We may likely never be able to cure every ailment or ease every pain. But we can choose to soothe and nurture our spirits, and those of our loved ones with a comforting balm of peace and hope as we face the challenges of our lives.

Let us continue our healing journey, as we worship together this morning.

Reading

John 5: 1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes.

In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

Sermon³

Duane Fickeisen

The story of the lame man at the pool of Bethzatha (or as it is often translated, Bethesda) is pretty straightforward. But like so many stories in Scripture, it is layered with meaning. A bit of back story may be helpful in considering what lessons it might have for us.

Archeological evidence has shown that indeed there was a pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem and that there were five columns or colonnades around it which formed niches or alcoves. The ruins have been excavated and are pretty much as one might expect from the Gospel description.

Legend has it that from time to time the waters in the pool would become agitated or "troubled." Possibly the pool was fed by an aqueduct and air that had been entrained into the water supply would bubble up from the pool. It's not hard to imagine that.

The troubling of the waters was attributed to the actions of an angel and many believed that when the waters were stirred up they had healing power, but only for the first person who got into the pool. Believers in this healing power no doubt in-

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cluded followers of the cult of Asclepius.

The name Bethesda means “house of mercy” in Aramaic or “house of kindness” in Hebrew. Interestingly Bethesda, Maryland, which was named after the Presbyterian’s 1820 Bethesda Meeting House, became the home of the National Naval Medical Center and the National Institutes of Health in 1940 and 1948, respectively.

According to the account in the Gospel of John, there was a lame man who had been waiting in one of the porticos for a long time to be the first one into the pool when the waters were troubled. He’d been ill for 38 years. But he had no one to help him and thus was beaten out time and again by others who were quicker to get into the pool. Others who were waiting to take advantage of the healing waters likely had helpers with them who would, we imagine, jostle their way to the pool with the one who needed to be healed, perhaps shoving others out of the way and blocking their efforts to reach the pool first.

While we don’t know how often the waters were troubled, I imagine it was infrequently and that there was a lot of waiting and watching involved. At the first sign of agitation there must have been a frenzy of activity as those who sought healing fought their way forward to the pool.

The story implies health care rationing on the basis of the most fit having access at the expense of the most critically ill. Sound at all familiar? And it implies that the opportunity for wellness was very limited.

The Gospel scholars who comprise the Jesus Seminar have evaluated all of the sayings and stories attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels and concluded that this story is most likely the invention of the author of John and that it probably didn’t actually happen, even though the place is real. The quotes were probably cribbed from other known sources.

It is very significant that this story took place on the sabbath. In the next few verses John describes criticism of Jesus for working in violation of the laws which forbid labor during the sabbath day of rest. The response from Jesus indicates that the laws are not meant to be followed without reasonable exceptions — and that in this case it was appropriate to offer aid to the lame man.

Thus the reason the story was included was to set up and lend support to the critique of absolute interpretations of the law that did not admit flexibility in the face of suffering.

Another interpretation is that the story is meant as a demonstration to followers of the cult of Asclepius, who believed in magical healing powers. It shows them that they are missing the real power of faith in the one God. In this interpretation, the story supports monotheism by showing the errors of cult beliefs.

I see another angle in the story, however. Once I got past trying to make literal sense of it, beyond rejecting what seemed to be an impossible healing, and understood it in the realm of myth, it began to have meaning for me.

It is a story about taking personal responsibility for wellness. It is a warning not to become mired in inaction while awaiting someone else's intervention, but to take personal responsibility and get up and get going. It is an injunction against letting despair keep you from acting when there is no one present to help you.

I will acknowledge that when I'm sick I really long for someone to be present, wipe my brow, offer me hot tea or chicken soup, tuck me in with warm blankets, acknowledge my illness and show empathy for me by making appropriate wuzza wuzza sounds. Chocolate would be nice, too.

I remember vividly being sick when I was single after being divorced. I was lying in bed with a fever and suddenly realized that no one was going to come to my aid. I was all I had. I sprang up, headed for a hot shower, fixed some comfort food, and declared myself well. And I was almost instantly cured of my self-pity. The fever quickly abated and I was soon back at work.

It was an amazing realization of the power of my desire for loving attention over my physical body.

I realize this is dangerous territory. I do not want to imply at all that every illness can be avoided or that anyone has made herself or himself ill by not holding right beliefs or simply to get attention. That may be a factor sometimes, but blaming the victim is almost never helpful.

I'm not a big fan of the metaphysics that asserts that with the right belief you can have a huge salary, a lovely home, the best imaginable husband or wife, a great body, and the best job. I just don't think it works that way, and while the power of positive suggestion is clearly an important factor, it isn't the only one that affects wellbeing.

And it implies that if you don't have any of those things or if you are ill, it's your fault for not having a stronger (or different) faith. That's nonsense and it puts the blame on the victim, which almost always makes it even more difficult to participate in moving toward wellness.

I don't subscribe to the idea that everything happens for some divine purpose. It is just inconceivable to me that a loving God (which is the only one worth believing in) would cause suffering in order to bring us closer to him or to test our faith. It is not part of God's plan to bring about suffering, and in my theology, God is not omnipotent or immutable, but is in relationship with us, suffering alongside us, and urging us to

respond to illness out of compassion for ourselves as well as for others. Bad things happen. Sometimes we can figure out a reason, but often we can't. The questions we ought to ask are not "Why?" or "Why me?" but "What now?"

When I urge you to take personal responsibility, I don't mean to go it alone. As children of the Enlightenment we are in constant danger of relying too much on our individual selves and of failing to embrace our utter dependence and the essential nature of our relationships. Taking responsibility for our wellness does not mean withdrawing into isolation or relying entirely on our own resources, but rather it means being proactive in initiating and nurturing our engagement with others, with resources for healing, and with the wider world.

To seek isolation and utter self-sufficiency is the antithesis of wellness.

Taking responsibility means finding and making the best use of resources that may prove helpful. That may well include traditional western allopathic medicine, holistic or intuitive practices, acupuncture or other alternative modalities. Or it may mean deciding to stop treatments that are unlikely to help or that carry big risks. It may mean seeking counseling, spiritual guidance, or a support group. It may mean practicing yoga, tai chi, or chi gong or developing other practices of body awareness and training. It may mean seeking help to change your diet and sleep patterns or support to end the numbing effects of an addiction.

I also want to distinguish between a cure and wellness. A cure implies the end of disease, restoration of physical health, and a fully functional body with no symptoms. Wellness implies something quite different to me. It's about psychological and spiritual health, about a reconciliation between the body and soul, and a fully present self despite the symptoms.

And I recognize that at some point any of us is likely to become incapable of making sound decisions or taking action. Taking personal responsibility means finding and designating someone you trust to make those decisions on your behalf when you are no longer able to do so, and having conversations with them to be sure they understand your wishes for care if you become unable to express them yourself.

I attended graduate school with Marion Hutton at Antioch University Seattle about 25 years ago. Marion had sung with Glenn Miller's band. Hers was the name on the marquee, and she made many of the big-band era songs popular. "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" for example. She and her sister, actress Betty Hutton, had been pushed into the limelight as child stars by their mother, and this no doubt had impacted their entire lives in ways most of us would find appalling, and that serve as examples of the dangers of pushing your children into performance.

Marion was an acknowledged alcoholic and drug addict in recovery and she had established and ran a residential treatment center for women. She enrolled in the organization development graduate program at Antioch to hone her management skills. Our class was a tight-knit group of about 25 of us, mostly much younger than Marion. Mid-way through the course she was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, and she died within a few weeks of the diagnosis. There was no cure. And yet she was a prime example of wellness — meeting her illness with equanimity, acknowledging that she was not likely to live much longer and that there was no treatment that offered even a small opportunity for a cure. She died with grace and wellness.

This fall Judy's and my friend Mary Harrington died of ALS. Again there was no cure in the offing, but Mary and her

husband moved to a lovely home in Maine that looked out over a marsh. Even after she lost the ability to walk and was unable to leave her bed, she had Marty set up her bed where she could look out at the marsh, the wildlife, the sunsets and sunrises, and the ever-changing weather. Their daughter, an accomplished opera singer, gave a house concert last July for her mother and friends. Mary surrounded herself with people she loved and who cared for her.

When others commented that she had found a great place to die, she protested and corrected them saying that she had found a great place to live. She didn't deny that her illness was terminal, but she lived life fully, living deliberately as Henry David Thoreau writes, wishing "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life ... and to be able to give a true account of it."

That's what I mean by wellness. Living fully, in the best imaginable spiritual health, fully attuned to one's soul. And that's how I interpret Mary Oliver's words in the poem you heard.⁴ She writes:

"The way to "get over" life is to die.
Short of that, you move with it,
let the pain be pain,
not in the hope that it will vanish,
but in the faith that it will fit in,
find its place in the shape of things. ...

"Because anything natural has an inherent shape
and will flow towards it.
And a life is as natural as a leaf.

⁴ Mary Oliver. "Cure"

“That’s what we are looking for:
not the end of a thing, but the shape of it.

“Wisdom is seeing the shape of your life
without obliterating a single instant of it.”

Seventy Unitarian Universalist ministers attended Mary’s memorial service to celebrate her life, to mourn her passing, and to recommit ourselves to the path toward wellness she showed us through the years of coping with and responding to her advancing illness. She showed us that wellness “is seeing the shape of your life without obliterating a single instant of it.”

Not just seeing the shape of your whole life, but accepting it, embracing it, and making the most of it. And that’s what I mean by wellness.

That’s worth “picking up our [metaphorical] mats and walking around.” No need to wait for the waters to be troubled or for someone else to lift us into them.

Taking responsibility means being realistic about our conditions and our illnesses, accepting them, learning about alternative treatments, and making the choices that are right for us from among the alternatives.

It means asking “Why?” less often and “What now?” more frequently. It means giving up blame and forgiving ourselves and each other. It means acknowledging that which abides and that which passes.

Taking responsibility for our own wellness means embracing beauty and love. It means recognizing the mystery of our life’s journey and accepting that we can’t know what lies ahead. It means seeking to mend the harms we’ve caused, expressing sorrow and regret, and asking for and offering for-

givenness.

Because that's where we'll find salvation — the thing that saves us from suffering, that offers a balm for our wounds, that reminds us that we were born with wings.

Amen.

Image: "Christ at the Pool of Bethesda," detail. From the pedestal of a statue of Thomas Guy in the courtyard of Guy's Hospital, London. 1734, bronze. by Peter Sheemakers.