

WHOLENESS AND HEALING

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

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The story that Susan Clark told this morning reminds me how valuable storytelling can be as a means of imparting wisdom from one generation to another. I fear that storytelling is an endangered art, and we should all be grateful that people like Susan are doing their best to preserve. Nevertheless, I am saddened when I enter a room of people who know one another as family or friends, and most of them are hunched over their laptops or staring at their hand-held digital devices rather than interacting with one another. Call me old-fashioned, but I fear that something precious is disappearing from our daily lives: the face-to-face sharing of memorable personal experiences through storytelling.

Consider this example: A three-year-old girl is taken to visit her dying godfather for the very first time in her life. In recounting this experience, she says, "I remember the details of this meeting very clearly, especially my godfather's bed. It was very high, higher up than I could see, and made of dark, curved wood. My mother had lifted me up. Lying there among the pillows with his eyes closed was a very old man.

[Insert here excerpt from Remen, p. 150]

The teller of this true story is Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, the author of the bestselling book titled *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, is both a physician and master storyteller. "Remen was born into a family of service, of highly skilled doctors and nurses, the children of her grandfather, an orthodox rabbi. As a child, she felt torn between her grandfather who blessed life and her scientific uncles, aunts and cousins who served life. But at the end of the day, it has turned out that these two seemingly divergent life paths may lead to the same destination. As you read her books, you will at first feel like a member of her family but as these stories go on, you discover that the family you are invited to belong to is the human race itself."

[www.rachelremen.com/about]

Much of her professional career has been devoted to working with cancer patients and their families and with the medical staff who are dedicated to healing them. Dr. Remen understands the experience of pain from the inside out. At the age of fifteen, she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a chronic, progressive, and often painful disease of the intestinal tract that has required numerous surgeries throughout her life. As both a patient and a doctor, she has developed a unique wisdom about the process of healing. "Wounding and healing are not opposites," she says. "They're part of the same thing. It is our wounds that enable us to be compassionate to the wounds of others. It is our limitations that make us kind to the limitations of other people. It is our loneliness that helps us to find other people or to even know the're alone with their illness. I think I have served people perfectly with parts of myself I used to be ashamed of." [www.goodreads.com/author/quotes]

Remen distinguishes between healing and other processes that may look similar if you are watching from the outside. The distinctions she draws are subtle and in many ways run counter to conventional wisdom. Healing is **not** the same as **curing**, which attempts to eliminate or alleviate the symptoms of a physical or mental disorder. The most common forms of curing are **helping** and **fixing**. She says, "Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength. If I am attentive to what's going on inside of me when I'm helping, I find that I'm always helping someone who's not as strong as I am, who is needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity and wholeness. . .

"Healing is also different from **fixing**. When I fix a person I perceive them as broken, and their brokenness requires me to act. When I fix I do not see the wholeness in the other person or trust the integrity of the life in them. . . . In 40 years of chronic illness I have been helped by many people and fixed by a great many others who did not recognize my wholeness. All that fixing and helping left me wounded in some important and fundamental ways." [Remen, "In the Service of Life," *Noetic Sciences Review*, Spring 1996] Dr. Remen may be overstating the differences between healing, fixing, and helping. I don't think she is suggesting that there are not any situations where fixing or helping is the right thing to do. Instead, she is suggesting

that in our personal interactions with people in need, we should look for the wholeness and strength they embody and not just their weakness or brokenness.

The single most important quality in a healing relationship is a willingness to **listen**. Dr. Remen writes, “Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it’s given from the heart. When people are talking, there’s no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they are saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it.” [*Kitchen Table Wisdom*, p. 143]

There has been a lot written about the relationship between healing and **prayer**. Does prayer promote healing? The results from scientific studies of what is known as intercessory prayer—praying on behalf of another person’s welfare—are mixed. The basic design of these studies is to compare medical outcomes for patients who have been prayed for by someone else with those who have not. Some studies have concluded that patients who received prayer fared better than those who had not, while other studies found that prayer had either no effect or even a **negative** effect. In one famous study of cardiac bypass patients, “Patients who received prayer and did not know it, and those who received no prayer fared about the same. The patients who did worst—who had the most complications—were those **who received prayer and knew it.**” [Barbara Bradley Haggerty, *Fingerprints of God*, p. 58]

As you might imagine, critics of religion had a field day with these results, while advocates of the effectiveness of prayer searched for an alternative explanation for the negative results. In this study, there was no prior personal connection between the targeted beneficiaries of the prayer and those who were praying on their behalf, who were actually reading from a script. Prayer as a form of healing is deeply personal, grounded in the intimate caring relationship between the “pray-er” and the “pray-ee”. **The ultimate meaning of prayer and of healing in general may not be found in the results they lead to, but in the relationship they express.**

To me, healing arises out of **relationships**: the relationship between a patient and her own body; the relationship between the patient and her support system, and ultimately the perceived relationship between the person and the force of life itself. Rachel Naomi Remen believes that healing revolves around **service**. “Service rests on the basic premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose. . . . We draw from all of our experiences. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, even our darkness can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others, and wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me.” [Remen, “In the Service of Life”] “When we serve, we see the unborn wholeness in others; we collaborate with it and strengthen it.” “One of [her] patients once defined a healer as someone who can see the movement toward wholeness in you more clearly than you can at any given moment.” [*Kitchen Table Wisdom*, p. 252]
 [www.goodreads.com/author/quotes]

As he faced his own impending death, the late UU minister Forrest Church offered what he called “thoughtful wishing,” and with his words I will close:

The courage to bear up under pain
 The grace to take our successes lightly
 The liberation that comes with forgiveness
 The energy to address tasks that await our doing
 The meaning to be found in giving ourselves to others
 The patience to surmount things that are dragging us down
 The joy to be gained in even the smallest endeavor
 The wonder that lies between the sacred moments of our birth and death

[Forrest Church, *Love and Death*, pp. 112-13]