

2004-5-23 Health and Religion
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here,
*after a week of purple skies, lightning,
& tangerine evenings,*
to worship, to give thanks that we live at all,
and to strengthen our commitment
to live just and honest lives in this world,
*while remaining open to the stirrings
of compassion*

We begin our time with a prayer for health:

**May we live fully, love deeply, learn daily and speak truly that
together we might leave the sacred legacy of a better world**

Sequence

A week of days: sudden changes in the heavens,
lightning and thunder, lavender clouds piled into mountain ranges
on the horizon, pearly sunrises, sunsets the color of canteloupes.

A week of days: sudden changes on the earth.
New life and new losses, new jobs and lost jobs, family changes,
disappointments and re-commitments, returning health, and
declining health, sad rumors of distant wars.

A week of days: slow elegant changes in that alleluia place where
heaven meets earth and earth meets heaven, you know, in the
music, in the loving, in the friendships, in the weeping, in the

laughing, in the understanding, in the spirit, in the singing, and in the sweet, sweet silence:

silence

A week of days: so many phone-calls, meetings, letters, visits, conversations, people crossing our paths, people leaving town. Old friends, new friends, the real center of our lives, the true music underlying all other music, sometimes harmonizing, sometimes discordant, our relationships. A week of days, a week of persons inhabiting our hearts...these in particular we name in the quiet of our breathing, or in the whisper of the common space.

naming

A week of days...and now, let thunder give way to music, let lightning give way to the flashes of melody alighting in the branches of our souls like unexpected birds...

Readings

The First Reading *is a story found only in the Gospel of Mark, written by an anonymous author later named Mark, sometime not long after the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70.*

And he comes to the town of Beth-Saida. The townsfolk bring him a man who cannot see. They beg Jesus to touch the fellow. So Jesus takes him by the hand and leads him outside the village walls. He spit into his eyes, and placed his hands upon him, then asked, "Can you see anything now?" And the man said, "I think I can see trees walking around...or are those people?" So Jesus places his hands upon his eyes, and then asks him to look at things

carefully. Finally, the man can see things pretty clearly, so Jesus says to him, “Go home, now. No, actually, better to not go back to the town or talk to anyone who lives there.”

The Second Reading *is a magnificent little jewel of a poem by the great Jane Hirshfield, called Late Prayer, published in 1997.*

Tenderness does not choose its own uses.
It goes out to everything equally,
circling rabbit and hawk.
Look: in the iron bucket...
a single nail, a single ruby.
All the heavens and hells.
They rattle in the heart and make one sound.

Sermon

When I look over the history of religion's relationship to health and healing, I do not see a straight line. Nothing has yet convinced me that time runs in a progressive straight line from the Pyramids of Egypt to the pyramid above our heads, and that we know everything, and the ancients knew nothing. Or worse, that we moderns are all wise, while they were all a bunch of superstitious dupes.

For example, while it's partially true that many of the ancients believed that demons caused sickness, it's just as true that most of the urban educated *didn't* believe in demons, only in various doctors, and that uneducated herbalists in the countryside, then as now, rejected the evil-spirit theory of disease. On the other hand, while many among us in the modern United States place our faith in secular medicine or its modern alternatives ...modern medicine which speaks of germs, viruses, bacteria, and subtle genetic predisposition, and holistic healing, and never demons or devils... many among us also apparently still subscribe to the demonic theory of illness. Almost as many as in ancient times. If you can stand it, turn on your television for five minutes and watch any one of fifty television preachers. They each, and every one, tell their millions of followers that it is not germs or bacteria or viruses which cause illness, but demons, and evil spirits flying through the air. Depressed? Don't take Welbutrin, or see a therapist. Cast out a demon! Cancer of the liver? Forget chemotherapy, shake your fist at the devil and throw the bum out. These flashy religionists are the tip of the iceberg in our nation; I'd wager that at least fifty million people in our nation, many of them college educated, believe that illness is more the result of demonic influence, than viruses. And around the world, in lands both religious and secular, the same thing holds true. Are you sick? Here's what folks round the world, including here in the United States, say. "You brought it on yourself. You offended God. Or an angry goddess. Or the gods. Or the Universe. You upset the balance of things by eating the wrong foods, following the wrong diet, worrying too much, or

stuffing your anger. You ate meat. You didn't eat enough meat. You didn't follow my advice. You sinned and, thus, you deserve your just punishment." This is conservative religion talking this way. But I have heard atheists, agnostics and freethinkers of all kinds during my ministry ask questions that suggest they are not far from this sort of reasoning. "Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this?"

When I hear these theological ruminations, I am always hauled back to the most basic spiritual question that human beings seem to wrestle with, no matter what their religion or lack of it. Namely, "Who or what is in control of my life and its wholeness? Is anyone? Is anything? Do I really have to live my life without any guarantees at all? Is life REALLY that unfair and uncontrollable... forever?"

When my deeply loved secretary at my former church, Phyllis Perry, died at the tender age of 70, of some hard-to-diagnose ailment in her lungs, I heard many Unitarian Universalists saying, "But she took such good care of herself! She exercised every day, she ate healthy foods, she kept a marvelous disposition, she had so many friends, she had such a wonderful husband and children. How could this have happened to her?" This is the language of people who act as if healthy living necessarily guarantees health. She did indeed live a healthy life, but she died anyway. Why? Because of some difficult-to-diagnose threat in her lungs. And why did she get that illness? The question simply does not make any sense... unless the idea that someone, somewhere, *is in absolute control of all things* really appeals to you. But this idea does not appeal to me one bit. Not even if that person is myself.

When I was in seminary, I read all these books about the mind/body connection. You can laugh yourself well, said one man. You can meditate yourself into health, said another. Others posited the idea, rooted in the Platonic philosophy of Mary Baker Eddy of

Christian Science fame, that illness is simply the result of incorrect thinking. And some folks went even further than Mrs. Eddy. They told me that, by becoming sick, I'm actually living out a spiritual reality, showing that *I* am in control. I *want* to be sick, on the inside, for some reason. I am acting out some inner dilemma or some ancient psychological wound in my physical body. The mind and body are so connected, they said, that one affects the other. And if the mind becomes whole, then the body will become whole too. You can even make yourself better, said one author, by imagining yourself better, seeing in your inner eye the white corpuscles in your blood stream attacking the invading bacteria or viruses, gobbling them down like the voracious creature in a Pac Man game.

Now, I have no problem thinking that our human emotions and mental processes are connected deeply to the body, and I have always had a pretty vivid imagination, so this idea made some sense to me at the time.

I experimented with this idea the moment I started to come down with a cold. I had the sore throat, the body ache, the initial snuffle. So I went to bed early that night and tried to imagine my cold away. I lay there for an hour before I fell asleep, thinking about "cold germs" coursing through my veins. I imagined my immune system lieutenants leading the charge and wiping out the invading army. I relaxed my mind, began to think pure, luminous thoughts, setting aside all my worries and fretting. Then I fell asleep for ten and a half hours.

In the morning, I woke up refreshed. I had not a trace of soreness in my throat, or fever in my head. No sniffles, no cough, nothing. I was healed, I said to myself. By using my own mind. Cool, I thought.

That night, over a supper with a fellow student and her 25-year-old daughter, I naturally talked about my experiment. I was elated. I

felt I had discovered something amazing about religion and its spiritual connections to health. As I talked, the daughter grew tense. So did the mother. But the daughter really began to out-and-out condemn my idea, telling me that all it did was put the blame for the illness on the sick person. All I was saying, she said, is that those who were sick had just not tried hard enough, or had insufficient imagination. They were guilty of their own downfall. Like other religionists, she told me, I was just peddling guilt.

That is not what I am saying, I protested. But the evening felt ruined, as if I had unleashed a toxin in the air. Not much later, they excused themselves to leave for home. The daughter reached under the table and took out a cane. I had not noticed it before. She leaned on the cane and looked me in the eye. “I have MS,” she said. “It took almost four years to diagnose it. I was told I was crazy, that I was imagining things. I was told I clearly needed psychological help, and that my problems were all psycho-somatic. Finally, one doctor diagnosed me with MS. And he told me that I was not imagining anything, that it was real. Don’t you think I would like to walk without a cane? But I cannot, *and you know it*, lie in my bed and imagine myself walking, and thus restore the myelin sheath on my nerves. No one has that kind of control. No one. Look, I am sure that there are psychosomatic illnesses, but this isn’t one of them. And frankly, I was relieved when I got the diagnosis. I know that I am not imagining things, and I know that I am not deranged.” With that, she left.

I have to admit, it was an unpleasant learning experience. I felt terrible for days. But now, after a long process, I value it very highly.

So, let me tell you what I think. I think that cultures around the world wrestle with the fragility of human health and lack of control by positing all sorts of control theories. Sickness... it’s all spiritual

and our illness is an illusion; or it's all material and we are no more than fleshy machines; or it's all environmental; it's all whatever.

I'd like to suggest instead that most illness has a variety of causes, and that health, too, has a variety of causes. I'd like to suggest that to come up with some universal theory of it's "all one thing" or another for everyone, is simply a mistake, and ultimately, just plain unobservant.

Some people are ill and do get better suddenly. In some cultures, this is called a miracle, and in others, a spontaneous remission. This happened to me once with a back pain that was so severe I was crying. A woman healed me...without prayer... just by running her fingers over my back as if it was a braille pad. How did it happen? I don't know. Neither did she. It did happen though. Often, yes, I admit it, it's only psycho-somatic illnesses which gets better with unusual speed. But sudden cures exist as well for non-psycho-somatic illness. Some cures, in fact, are simply baffling. In ancient times, in the West, people who were ill often went to the temple of Asklepios, the god of healing. They would sleep there at night, dream, and often, in the morning, they would find themselves healed of any number of infirmities.

The walls of the temples of the god Asklepios, (one of whose images you find on the cover of your order of celebration) were lined with crutches and eye-patches, left there by those who needed them no more. Were some of these illnesses "just" psychosomatic? Probably. Were some of these abandoned crutches the result of some spontaneous remission? Undoubtedly, this is also true. You'll find the same crutches and abandoned hearing aids at Lourdes in France, or at Ste. Anne De Beaupre in Quebec. Do I actually think that St. Anne, or her daughter, St. Mary the Virgin, or their ancient counterpart Asklepios, actually reached down from paradise, touched their legs, and knit femur fragments in a flash? No. Not at all. Do I think that some folks found cures

there? Yes. Do I think that some television preachers who claim to heal are charlatans and fakes...oh yes, we know they are. The skeptical magician, The Amazing Randi, has proved this over and over, and caught them in their lying tricks. Do I think that all sudden cures are fakes? No, I do not. Do I think faith healers help some people with psychological illness or psychosomatic illness? Yes, I do. Do I think that non-religious people have been cured spontaneously without prayers or the dramatic laying on of hands? Oh yes, I have seen the documentation, and believe me, I am very skeptical about such things. Some cures happen quickly, and we don't know how yet. Probably one day we will. But maybe we won't.

I think many modern doctors are aware of what I am saying. Healing has to do with the whole person, not a broken machine part. If religious images and prayers are part of that person's life in health, it surely will contribute to health if such things are a part of life during sickness. Do I have to be religious or spiritual to find healing? No, not in any traditional sense.

The gospel story I read this morning tells me a lot about religion and healing. First, I want you to know that the word "miracle" occurs no place in the entire New Testament, at least in the Greek. So this is not the story of a miracle. This is the story of what the Greek calls "dynamis," which simply means A Powerful Act.

Two. Notice what happens. A man who cannot see very well (the Greek word for blind means everything from completely blind to near-sightedness) is brought, by the townsfolk, to the famous healer Jesus. He does not come of his own. So the first thing Jesus has to do is to isolate this fellow from his environment. He takes him by the hand outside of town. This reminds me that there is always a social element in any health issue. Perhaps these people were blaming him for his blindness, telling him he had sinned and

somehow deserved it. There can be no healing in such a situation. You have to remove people from blame and guilt.

Third, Jesus spits on the man's eyes. In ancient times this was an ordinary medical treatment for eye problems. In all the medical books. So the next aspect of healing is to pay attention to good medical practice and to use every physical means at your disposal.

Fourth, Jesus lays his hands on the man. We do not know exactly what the Greek word means. It could mean anything from shaking his hands to hugging him. But he touches the man. He expresses real human care for this man, whom everyone else had been avoiding as an untouchable because he was sick, and thus, probably a sinner. Undoubtedly, personal interaction makes for health. Our children's story this morning made the same point in another way, but I assure you, it's the same point.

Fifth, the cure doesn't work right away. The man is still confusing trees and people. His vision is still blurry. So Jesus has to repeat the process. It takes time to heal. Sudden healings happen, as I asserted earlier, but they are rare, rare, rare. And we don't understand why they happen. But regular healing happens at its own pace and that is often slow.

Sixth, Jesus, in this story, realizes, after telling the man to go home, that if he actually does go home, he will probably grow sightless again, since his whole identity as a person in the village was "blind man." Sometimes, healing means changing one's life drastically, and finding a new home, a new identity. Health involves more than a simple cure...it involves a whole change of life. This, even though there are no guarantees. This, even though accidents happen. This, even though we don't have all the answers.

I am not a medical doctor. Yet I think part of my calling as a human being is to take part in the spiritual side of healing. Our poet, Jane Hirshfield, names such a calling our capacity for “tenderness.” Not just tenderness toward the sick, but also toward the healthy. “It goes out to all things equally,” she says, “both rabbit and hawk, both nail and ruby.” Such language is religious universalism, and I think it is very wise...it’s our own tradition in fact. The healthy are not better than the sick, but the sick are not lacking either; the healthy are not free, nor the sick demon infested. Religion and health have an uneasy relationship at times...and snake oil and outright foolishness can be found in both the religious movement and in the medical field. But so can tenderness...and its that tenderness, in the end, so spiritual, so fundamentally religious, which supports the social, medical, and environmental aspects of healing.

Healing happened in the temple of Asklepios; it happened in ancient times with religious teachers like the Jewish Jesus or Yoni the Circle Drawer or the Greek Apollonius of Tyana, and it also happened with the famous Greek secular doctor, Hippokrates. And no matter what the content of your faith or spiritual life, it happens even today in rooms like this. Tenderness may not cure, but it will bring healing. And healing, I say, not guilt or blame or universal theory, is the basis of everything wise and good in this world.

Offertory

Ceremony of Installation