

## **Threads of Healing<sup>1</sup>**

Rev. Myke Johnson

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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*This month we are exploring what it means to be a community of healing. Healing means the restoration of wholeness, both within our own being, and within our community, the community of all beings. Our Lesson for All Ages was adapted from The Invisible String by Patrice Karst.<sup>2</sup> Our reading today was the poem, “The Way It Is,” by William Stafford, which speaks of the “thread you follow.”<sup>3</sup>*

### *Sermon*

What does it mean that we are a community of healing? What are the threads we follow for healing in our life together? When we think about healing, the first things that usually come to mind are healing professionals and their skills: doctors and medicines. Or perhaps we think of alternative practices like acupuncture and herbal remedies. When we are ill or injured, we turn to these helpers to restore us to wholeness.

Sometimes it is easy to forget that the primary source of healing is the body itself. It is built into the natural order that human beings and all living beings have within their biological makeup a self-healing function. If I get a cut on my arm from reaching past thorns to pick some lovely raspberries, my skin automatically responds, and begins knitting the cells back together. If our bodies did not have the power to heal themselves, the interventions of internists and surgeons wouldn't help at all. A surgeon can make an incision, but the body itself closes the wound.

A similar function holds true for the human psyche. There is an emotional restorative function that helps us to survive and recover from emotional or spiritual wounds such as trauma or loss. When I worked as a psychotherapist many years ago, I saw my role, not to heal my clients, but to help them to access their own inner healing processes. Sometimes that happened through insight, sometimes that happened through tears. Often what was most important was compassionate listening to the story they needed to tell of their suffering.

It wasn't really me who was the source of the healing. Each of us already carries that possibility in our deepest hearts. Otherwise, my work would not have helped at all. We each have a link to the power of healing in our bodies and in our psyches. But we forget. We grow frightened and discouraged and even despairing. We forget that we are naturally able to heal, to restore our interior wholeness. This is why we need each other. We need each other to help us remember, to be a lifeline to guide us into and out of the maze of suffering.

Physician author, Rachel Naomi Remen, writes:

We all can influence the life force. The tools and strategies of healing are so innate, so much a part of a common human birthright, that we believers in technology pay very little attention to them. But they have lost none of their power.

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2 Patrice Karst, *The Invisible String* (Devorss & Co: 2000)

3 From *The Way It Is* (1998)

People have been healing each other since the beginning. Long before there were surgeons, psychologists, oncologists, and internists, we were there for each other. The healing of our present woundedness may lie in recognizing and reclaiming the capacity we all have to heal each other, the enormous power in the simplest of human relationships: the strength of a touch, the blessing of forgiveness, the grace of someone else taking you just as you are and finding in you an unsuspected goodness.

Everyone alive has suffered. It is the wisdom gained from our wounds and from our own experience of suffering that makes us able to heal. Becoming [an] expert has turned out to be less important than remembering and trusting the wholeness in myself and everyone else.<sup>4</sup>

What is most important is remembering and trusting the wholeness in ourselves and in everyone else. This is how a congregation can be a community of healing. We help each other to remember and trust that wholeness.

Psychotherapist and neuroscience expert Linda Graham writes about how “bonding and belonging nourish resilience.” Our sense of connection enhances “our ability to regulate our internal states during crisis and stress.” She goes on to say, “The process of being seen, understood, and accepted by an attuned, empathic other engenders a sense of genuine self-acceptance, a feeling that we are profoundly OK. We feel safe enough, strong enough, sure enough to venture courageously into the world and develop the competencies we need to deal with life's challenges.”<sup>5</sup>

I want to talk about the thread you are holding in your hands. In the Greek myth of the labyrinth and the minotaur, we learn that Minos, king of the island of Crete, had imprisoned in a labyrinthine maze a minotaur who was half man and half bull. There is more to that story, but we won't delve into that today. King Minos had recently conquered the city state of Athens, and he demanded that every year, seven young men and women from Athens be sent to him, so that he might sacrifice them to the minotaur. No one who entered the maze could find their way out, and so they would be eaten by the minotaur.

Theseus, a prince of Athens, volunteered to be among those sent to Crete, so that he might kill the minotaur and bring an end to all the violence. He brought a weapon, but he didn't really have a plan. However, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, took a liking to Theseus, and offered to help him if he would marry her and take her away from Crete. She gave him a ball of red thread, which he could unroll as he entered the maze, and then follow it to find his way back. With her help, Theseus successfully killed the minotaur and together they escaped.<sup>6</sup>

What does the red thread tell us about healing? Most of us during our lives face situations and events which send us into a troubled space, wounding us, even breaking our hearts or bodies. Those events are like going into the maze, where we face the monster that might destroy us. But the red thread represents the possibility of finding our way back from trouble or trauma into wholeness. The red thread is the lifeline. The red thread represents the possibility of healing.

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4 Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996) p. 217.

5 From *Bouncing Back*, referred to in an article in *Utne Reader* (Fall 2016): “To and from the Soul's Hall” by Francis Weller, (from *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*) p. 65-66.

6 [http://www.creativitypost.com/arts/myth\\_and\\_creativity\\_ariadnes\\_thread\\_and\\_a\\_path\\_through\\_the\\_labyrinth](http://www.creativitypost.com/arts/myth_and_creativity_ariadnes_thread_and_a_path_through_the_labyrinth)

Each of us, like Ariadne, has the capacity to help each other as we face trouble, offering each other a red thread of compassion, that we might remember our way out of the maze and into our own intrinsic wholeness. Rachel Naomi Remen says: “Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, this may ring true for emotional or spiritual healing, but surprisingly, it also affects our physical health. Researchers have discovered that close emotional bonds contribute to longevity. One study was done in the town of Roseto, Pennsylvania, by researchers using death records from 1935 to 1980. They were trying to figure out why the rate of heart disease in this town was much lower than in the neighboring communities. They studied many typical factors, like smoking and exercise and access to medical care, but nothing seemed to account for the difference. The low rate of heart disease held true for the years 1935 into the 1960s.

However, in the 1960's, “long established patterns within the small community began to change. Rather than living in multigenerational homes where sharing life and meals, rituals and traditions was the norm, people opted for single-family dwellings on the outskirts of town, and the young men and women left [for] the bigger cities. As the bonds of connection frayed, so did the protective effects for the heart. Disease rates rose....” Researchers concluded that the only thing that protected these people from heart disease was belonging.

Our connections with other people affect us emotionally and physically. Linda Graham writes about how the hormone oxytocin, often called the “love hormone,” is released when we are touched and held or when we engage with someone who cares. Genuine caring heals body and soul.

An article in *Psychology Today* reports similar findings.<sup>8</sup>

One telling study showed that lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure. On the the flip side, strong social connection leads to a 50% increased chance of longevity. Social connection strengthens our immune system, helps us recover from disease faster, and may even lengthen our life. People who feel more connected to others have lower rates of anxiety and depression. Moreover, studies show they also have higher self-esteem, are more empathic to others, more trusting and cooperative and, as a consequence, others are more open to trusting and cooperating with them. Social connectedness therefore generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional and physical well-being.

There have also been studies suggesting that church attendance might enhance longevity.<sup>9</sup>

What does it mean to be a community of healing? I think it ties us back to the first line of our mission statement. We are growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love. When we speak of love in this context, we don't mean romantic love, or even friendship love, though some people find friends and other close social connections through their church involvement. But what we mean is acceptance and compassion—a positive regard for each other that honors the dignity of each person, that bears witness to the wholeness in each person, that creates opportunities for “being seen, understood and accepted.”

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7 Ibid., p. 219.

8 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/feeling-it/201208/connect-thrive>

9 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/16/health/religion-lifespan-health/>

Now I want to say something about the difference between healing and curing. We know that there are diseases and injuries that can't be cured. People get sick, people die, whether or not there is love in their lives, whether or not they are holding the red thread of compassion, hoping to find their way out of the maze.

So what is the difference? Michael Lerner describes it this way: "Curing is what a physician seeks to offer you. Healing, however, comes from within us. It's what \*we\* bring to the table. Healing can be described as a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual process of coming home. Even if we're losing ground physically, there's extra-ordinary emotional, mental and spiritual healing that can go on."<sup>10</sup>

He explains by starting with an example of what he doesn't mean. He writes:

One of the most toxic new-age ideas is that we should "keep a positive attitude." What a crazy, crazy idea that is. It is much healthier, much more healing, to allow yourself to feel whatever is coming up in you, and allow yourself to work with that anxiety, depression, grief. Because, underneath that, if you allow those feelings to come up and express themselves, then you can find the truly positive way of living in relationship to those feelings. That's such an important thing.<sup>11</sup>

Following on that, healing is about restoring the relationship that we have with our feelings, our body, the people around us, even our illness perhaps. Healing is a restoration of wholeness, and being whole means being connected to all these parts of ourself, being authentically present to what is. When we are authentically present to what is, we can face illness and even death with a whole heart.

William Stafford writes, "There's a thread you follow.

...Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread."<sup>12</sup>

Rachel Naomi Remen tell us,

We usually look outside of ourselves for heroes and teachers. It has not occurred to most people that they may already be the role model they seek. The wholeness they are looking for may be trapped within themselves by beliefs, attitudes, and self-doubt. But our wholeness exists in us now. Trapped though it may be, it can be called upon for guidance, direction, and most fundamentally, comfort. It can be remembered. Eventually we may come to live by it.<sup>13</sup>

This week, we are entering the Jewish season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in which the Jewish community collectively enters a process of healing and returning to wholeness. Part of the process of healing in community is the process of repentance and forgiveness. On the one hand, this might seem like the opposite of remembering our inner wholeness. But wholeness is not the same as perfection. Human beings are not perfect. We hurt ourselves and each other.

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10 <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=1066>

11 Ibid.

12 William Stafford, *The Thread You Follow*, (Graywolf Press: 1999)

13 Remen, op.cit., p. 106.

Repentance and forgiveness are processes that remind us that our imperfections do not banish us from the circle of life. Repentance and forgiveness help us to restore our relationships that have been broken or frayed.

What I am drawing from these rituals for the turning of the year is the acknowledgement that healing is a communal process. We cannot find our inner wholeness without being drawn to wholeness with the whole circle of life that surrounds us. And similarly, the wholeness of the circle of life can be another red thread that helps us to recover and remember our own inner wholeness.

I invite you as you leave here today, to take with you the red thread you have been holding in your hands. Tie it around your wrist or carry it in your pocket as a reminder of your own inner beauty and wholeness, and your link to this community of healing.

### *Meditation*

*Hymn*      How Could Anyone    by Libby Roderick<sup>14</sup>  
How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful? ....

### *Closing Words*

May we be a Community of Healing:  
A place for listening to each other's joys and sorrows  
A place for helping and for asking for help.  
A circle of kindness where we accept each other as we are  
A circle of caring that we extend into the world  
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,  
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

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14 #1053 in *Singing the Journey* (Unitarian Universalist Association: 2005)