



JEANNE ACHTERBERG:

The Healing Web of Human Relationships



Healing work is soul work in the most meaningful, deepest sense. Beyond even the mission and purpose of service for the sick and the needy, we are also serving ourselves. The bonds we form are holy. While all of life is spiritual pathway, if and when we engage in our relationships with others with awakened consciousness about our effect on one another, allowing, if necessary, even our separate selves to bond and shatter, we are engaging in an authentic spiritual practice. The path is already there, winding through the riverbeds of our lives. Bringing the path and our actions to consciousness, we shift our inner reality. This will in turn shift the quality of health practices.

Below is a meditation, a composition derived from many sources; from quantum physicists, from the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, from the Upanishads, from the Sufis, from electromagnetic field research, and from artists, poets, and mystics from every tradition.

Imagine, if you can, a universe where we are connected by an ineffable, invisible matrix. This matrix is a trellis upon which humanity weaves itself in to an immense and dynamic tapestry. Each life, each soul, the essence of each being, is a point of light in the cloth. A light will fade at times, glow brilliantly here and then, and move in concert with the brightening and dimming of each other light point in the cloth. Like the web of a tireless spider, the warps and woofs gracefully dance and shape and reshape into multidimensional space. The cloth shrinks and it expands. It is a moving quilt, always in process. It folds upon itself and opens like a night-blooming flower in the path of the full moon. It's a crystalline, shimmering fabric, woven of countless filaments.

Jeanne Achterberg, Ph.D. is a scientist who has received international recognition for her pioneering research in medicine and psychology. She is currently a professor of psychology at Saybrook Graduate School. She co-chaired the mind/body interventions panel for the Office of Alternative Medicine, and has authored over 100 papers and five books. *Imagery in Healing* (Shambhala, 2002) is a classic in the field, and *Woman as Healer* (Shambhala, 1991) is a ground-breaking survey from prehistoric times on. She is past president of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology, and Senior Editor for *Alternative Therapies* journal. Photo by Athi Mara Magadi.

The fabric of humanity is like a living skin. It repairs itself, degenerates, regenerates, develops scars, thins and thickens, and grows much more interesting with age. Think of the cloth as the consciousness of humankind grafting itself upon the source of its own divine origin. Connecting the glowing particles is a

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fluid and resonant force some might call energy. The matrix upon which it forms feels like love. Now, imagine a chorus of many voices, of sounds unique and resonant, shifting in tone and timbre. They cry out with pain and love and humility and passion and awe. Like tuning forks,

they resonate dissonantly at first. Then one finds a way to make union with a single other, and then another, and a new pattern, a synchrony, a song comes forth out of the cacophony. Harmony. Celestial sound. The sounds of humanity are an orchestra, each voice essential, each note having purpose. When two lights—or two sounds—bond, energy is released, great quantities of light and sound, and the nature of both is changed forever. We merge together and with the Source from which we came.

When we profoundly connect with another human being, we may not only polish our own souls and theirs, we may even release light and energy, according to these inspired words from the sages.

What about people who are in health crises? Why might the connections, the relationships, the bonds, themselves be healing? How might spiritual practice be a path to wholeness? Let me use an unlikely example, drawn from the filmmaker's art, and not from science or religion: the breathtaking scenes from the movie "Titanic." If you have seen it you know that, only in the most secondary instance, is it a story about a big ship sinking. First and foremost, it is a story about human love, healing, and soul work. The film expresses the deep human longing to be fully, totally loved—loved more dearly than life itself.

The scene that is most haunting is at the end. Jack and Rose, the young lovers, are holding onto one another in the frigid sea. Dead bodies in life jackets are bobbing around them. The screams of the hundreds who are drowning fill the black night. Neither Jack nor Rose is likely to survive. Jack tells her that she must promise to live: to live to have babies, to live to become an old woman. Fiction or not, I was reminded how often I've heard people who are very ill, or even dying, say that all they need is someone to hold on to them, to remind them that they are worthy and worth being loved, to give them hope. Not more medicine. Not more advice. Just someone to hold onto them. And maybe that's all we do anyway. We hold on to one another in the dark ocean of crisis. There are people drowning around us, but there are also people singing around us and making music. That's what life is about. James Baldwin, the poet, wrote:

*The moment we cease to hold each other,
The moment we lose faith with one another,*

*The sea engulfs us
And the light goes out.*

We can look to many levels of information, beyond art and story, to describe how profound relationships are healing. We can find both metaphysical and physical sources. That relationships are healing is no longer in question from a research perspective. A brief excursion into the world of science yields many examples.

Researcher E. W. Bovard suggests that relationships act as stress buffers, and are mediated through the amygdala, stimulating the release of HGH, and inhibiting the brain's posterior hypothalamic zone, thus decreasing release of the adrenocorticotropic hormones: cortisone, catecholamines, and associated sympathetic autonomic activity¹. To say that our relationships serve as buffers against stress is probably correct, if only partially so. To the extent that they do, we might look to the excellent work of Ronald Glaser and Janet Kiecolt-Glaser and their colleagues, who have shown that stressful situations can alter genetic expression and damage the DNA repair mechanism so that the damaged cells may repair improperly, and herald the onset of many diseases, including autoimmune and immune diseases such as cancer.^{2,3} These same investigators studied marital relationship and immune function in 473 women. They found that the stronger and more supportive their relationships were perceived by the women, the higher their immune cell activity.

Another researcher, J. P. Henry, has identified specific biological changes identified with social processes that may speed or impede healing. One of these changes is that, as a person moves from elation or security to dejection, there is a rise in adrenal corticosteroids⁴. As one moves from being a social success to an outcast, there is a fall in the plasma levels of gonadotrophins, which regulate both parenting and reproductive behavior. There is also significant evidence suggesting the emotional states associated with human relationships can either accelerate or inhibit tissue repair. Blood supply to a wound, critical to the healing process, is affected by our social circumstances and our emotions. Feeling loved, relaxed and happy reduces vasoconstricting catecholamines, and hope reduces growth-inhibiting corticosteroids.⁵

The astonishing thing about this line of research is that there is so much of it. Some studies are over 25 years old. Such work has been published in mainstream medical journals such as *Science*, *Lancet*, the *American Journal of Medicine* and the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, to mention a few. Ordinarily, scientists would drop everything else in order to study and facilitate any medical breakthroughs that have proven this robust,

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this enduring, this ubiquitous. This is not about medical treatment, not about psychotherapy. It is rather, about the most basic, primal, exalted events in our lives—our relationships. Every study reinforces the same point: We humans affect one another in exhilarating and terrible ways. We are made well through the bonds we form with others. Relationships are the essence of the healing process, especially when health is considered in its fullest sense of Hale (or wholeness) of the mind, body, and spirit. Common bonds. Uncommonly appreciated.

The Five Bonds of Healing Relationships

There are, no doubt, hundreds or thousands of types of bonds that one might identify as part and parcel of the network of support in healing relationships. Many types overlap. Some are as useless to one individual as they are life-saving for another.

Unfortunately, I have found that no matter how much I love someone (or they me), it is not possible to provide all levels of healing relationship oneself. It takes a community effort, one which is sadly unavailable to most people in our (or any) modern culture. It has five components; here are the qualities of the most important medicine in the possession of humankind.

1. The Transpersonal. These are the invisible connections some call prayer, energy, or more scientifically, “distant intentionality.”⁶ The evidence is that we influence one another’s psyche and physiology, but not always in ways that we can predict or understand. When we focus our attention, even at a distance, on others, we are mutually joined and the physiology of both parties is changed. Research shows, among other things, that our thoughts can influence another’s brain rhythms, blood cells, gross motor activity, and respiration.⁷ Studies of prayer, itself, show positive results in survival of leukemic children, fewer complications post-myocardial infarct, increased self-esteem, reduced depression and anxiety, and improved recovery following hernia surgery—among many other healing effects.⁸ I’m told that over 50 serious prayer studies are now underway around the US.

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2. The Power of Presence and Touch. People in crisis need to be touched. They ask to be touched—we need to feel a physical presence on that life raft! One woman said to me, “When you are very sick and very old like I am, people are afraid to touch you. But I am still a sensual being. I can still feel. I would like to make love again. Just because you’re sick doesn’t mean you’re dead.” The burgeoning literature on massage, healing and therapeutic touch is supportive of the special role touch can have

in health care practices. In a remarkable series of studies of people in comas by James Lynch, when a compassionate nurse or doctor stopped at the bedside and spoke to the patient or touched the person with a comforting hand, their electrocardiograms showed a slower rate.⁹

3. A Connection of Soul to Soul. What I mean by this is a relationship that is meaningful, beyond the physical self, and connects us beyond the egoic level of, “I am doctor, you are patient,” or even, “I am man and you are woman.” Beyond pathology. Beyond psychology. These relationships are medicine. They are the most difficult to describe, there certainly no research studies that I know of that measure them, but these soul-to-soul connections are probably the most important bonds of all. It is through them that we connect most intimately with another’s humanity. Christopher Reeve, who played Superman in movies, sets a standard for us all in terms of courage, hope and humanity. During an interview on 20/20 with Barbara Walters, he talked about a time—not long after the spinal cord injury that left him a quadriplegic—when he had not yet turned the corner to embrace life. This beautiful man forgot his essential nature. He saw nothing worthy about himself to which life could cling. Then one of his children walked into his room and reminded him, “You are still my Daddy.”

Many healing professionals, working in the most difficult circumstances, with badly broken people, know that this practice demands deep, soul-to-soul connections. I spent several years working at the Burn Unit at Parkland Hospital. Every now and again I would hear a “thunk” and see one of my students passed out cold on the floor—a reaction to the terrible injuries of some patient. The student and I might later speak of the need to see through to the essence of that patient, to honor and respect that soul, and to communicate with that essential presence. Otherwise, the state of the physical body would steal our attention like a robber in the night, and we might forget who we are and they are—really. Soul-to-soul communication: It’s hard. But we can do the best we can.

4. The Healing Web of Community. The importance of community and social support (variously defined) is the one level of relationship bonds in healing that has received the most interest, and has the longest history of solid, prospective research.¹⁰ In a famous study that followed the health of nearly 7,000 residents of Alameda County for 17 years, the quality and extent of the social network of participants (how many people they felt close to, or could ask for help from) had the highest correlation with health and longevity out of 11 variables studied. Those variables included health-compromising habits such as smoking and alcohol use. A

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deficient social network was associated with death from all diagnoses, including heart disease, cancer, suicide and accidental death.¹¹ A study in Tecumseh Michigan replicated these findings in 1982.¹²

The second major community study that demonstrates the health-giving power of human relationships is the astonishing epidemiological findings of the residents of Rosetto, Pennsylvania, a small Italian-American community. The residents had half the rate of death from heart attacks as the US as a whole, including the neighboring communities. As a group, they were sedentary, overweight, and smoked a lot. The researchers believed that their relatively good health came from mutual social support in a village where cultural ties were strong, there was mutual support in crisis, and people felt a profound sense of belonging. Over the years, as the community lost its cultural identification and became more mobile and materialistic, whatever edge they had on healthy hearts was lost.¹³

The accumulation of empirical evidence shows that social relationships are a consequential predictor of mortality in human and even in animals, according to a review of over 60 studies published by James House and his colleagues in the prestigious journal *Science*, in 1988.¹⁴ People who feel included in this “web of lights,” as I call it, are at less risk for tuberculosis, accidents, psychiatric disorders, babies with low birth weight, complications from pregnancy, high blood pressure, cholesterol, arthritis, and death from many conditions including cardiovascular disease.¹⁵ Higher levels of social support have also been associated with longer survival in acute leukemia, localized or regional breast cancer, mixed cancer disease sites, recovery from surgery, a reduced need for steroid therapy in asthmatics, reduced physiological symptomatology in those working in highly stressful environments, and

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on and on.¹⁶ Social relationships—or the lack thereof—constitute a major risk factor for health, rivaling the effects of cigarette smoking on a variety of health conditions.¹⁷ The relationship holds even after adjustment for biomedical risk factors. The relationship, even in controlled, prospective studies, appears to be robust and causal.

Support groups have been associated with classic findings in controlled studies of cancer and heart patients:

- The reduction of psychological distress, increased NK cell activity, increased NK cell phenotypes, and significantly increased life expectancy in melanoma patients.¹⁸
- Significantly increased life expectancy in women with metastatic breast cancer.¹⁹
- Decrease in number of recurrent myocardial infarcts.²⁰

- Reversing the effects of heart disease.²¹

However, a sobering note was provided during the Society of Behavioral Medicine Meetings in New Orleans in 1997 when Vicki Hodgeson presented her study showing that cancer support groups may harm some women who claim their relationships suffered and they were more nervous as a result of the groups. Support groups aren't for everyone and adequate leadership is critical.

5. The Healing Force of Love. What's love got to do with it? One of the most astonishing results came from an Israeli study of 10,000 married men who participated in a 5-year prospective study.²² Many factors were measured, including medical and psychosocial factors. The best predictor of whether the men would develop angina pectoris was the question, "Does your wife show you her love?" The felt love of a wife apparently balanced out the risk, even in the presence of high risk factors.

The results of a remarkable natural experiment in post World War II in Germany was carried out by a British Nutritionist, Elsie Widdowson, and published in the *Lancet* in 1951.²³ She observed that children in two orphanages had very different growth rates, even though they received the same rations. At one, named Vogelnest, where children's growth was accelerated, the matron was kindly and beloved by the children. At the other, Bienenhaus, where the children did poorly, the matron, Fraulein Schwarz, was a strict disciplinarian. There was a small group who were Fraulein Schwarz's favorites and they were growing somewhat better. The kindly matron at Vogelnest left, and Fraulein Schwarz was sent there. At that time rations were increased in both places. But the Vogelnest children began to fall behind their Bienenhaus contemporaries in spite of better food, while the Bienenhaus children began to grow. This is one of many studies showing that children who are warmly cared for simply grow better.

What do people expect from their health care professionals? Above all they want compassion, sympathy and understanding. They also want information and to feel better. But they want information and better feeling delivered with compassion, sympathy and understanding. And when this happens, studies show a consistently beneficial effect—speed of recovery, less pain medication, and fewer postoperative complications.²⁴

Many people, in the most dire of circumstances, keep themselves alive with love the memories of love. Viktor Frankl, the great German psychiatrist, was kept alive in the hideous and brutal conditions of a concentration camp by a vision of his wife. He writes, "Occasionally, I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was

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beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise... Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by the knowledge, to my contemplation

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research is overwhelming: human bonds are medicine. Imagine the rise in the stock prices of any pharmaceutical company that could mimic even a modicum of the success rate of love and prayer and touch and community. And then imagine how medicine, any medicine, might be practiced if the bonds were common, commonly acknowledged, and commonly respected. Teilhard de Chardin, the great mystic, scientist, and Jesuit priest, tied these ideas together in some magnificent words: "Love is the free and imaginative outpouring of the spirit over all unexplored paths. It links those who love in bonds that unite but do not confound, causing them to discover in their mutual contact an exaltation capable, incomparably more than any arrogance of solitude, of arousing in the heart of their being all that they possess of uniqueness and creative power."

Teilhard also said, "Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire."

of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying. Set like a seal upon the heart, love is as strong as death."²⁵

Spirituality is already embedded in the practice of healthcare. The essence of our spiritual work and the healing process is the bond we share in relationship with one another. The

