

Waking the Tiger: An Embodied Theology of Healing

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First Parish in Brookline

Blessing: For the Parents of One Who Has Committed a Crime *John O'Donohue*

No one else can see beauty
In his darkened life now.
His image has closed
Like a shadow.

When people look at him,
He has become the mirror
Of the damage he has done.

But he is yours;
And you have different eyes
That hold his yesterdays
In pictures no one else remembers;

Waiting for him to be born,
Not knowing who he would be,
The moments of his childhood,
First steps, first words,
Smiles and cries,
And all the big thresholds
Of his journey since....

He is yours in a way
No words could ever tell;
And you can see through
The stranger this deed has made him
And still find the countenance of your son.

Despite all of the disappointment and shame,
May you find your belonging with him
A kind place, where your spirit will find rest.
May new words come alive between you
To build small bridges of understanding.

May that serenity lead you beyond guilt and blame
To find that bright field of the heart
Where he can come to find your love.

Until it heals whatever darkness drove him
And he can see what it is he has done
And seek forgiveness and bring healing;
May this dark door open a path
That brightens constantly with new promise.

Reading: “On Healing”

Peter Levine

I invite you to visit the Serengeti Plain that dwells in the ancient shadows of our psyches. Take a moment to visualize a crouching cheetah, its eyes focused, its muscles twitching in anticipation, as it prepares to attack a swift, darting impala. I want you to track your own responses as you watch the sleek cheetah overtake its prey in a seventy-mile-an-hour surge of speed. The impala falls to the ground an instant before the cheetah sinks its claws into the haunches of its prey. It is almost as if the animal has surrendered itself to the predator and to certain death.

However, the fallen impala is not dead. Although it appears limp and motionless, its nervous system is still highly charged from the swift chase. Though it is barely breathing or moving, the animal’s heart and brain are still racing. The same chemicals ... that helped fuel its attempted escape continue to flood its brain and body. There is a possibility that the impala will not be devoured immediately. The mother cheetah may drag its (apparently dead) prey behind a bush, then go seek out its hungry cubs, safely hidden at a distance. While the cheetah is gone, the temporarily “frozen” impala may awaken from its state of shock, then shake and tremble in order to discharge the vast amount of energy it mobilized to escape death.

How do wild animals successfully return to their normal state? The answer lies in a particular type of spontaneous shaking, trembling, and breathing. ... I remember that when I shared my observations about animal behavior with Andrew Bwanali, chief park biologist of the Mzuzu Environmental Center in Malawi, Central Africa, he nodded excitedly, then burst out: “Yes . . . yes . . . yes! That is true. Before we release captured animals back into the wild, we make absolutely sure that they have done just what you have described.” He looked down at the ground, then added softly, “If they have not trembled and breathed that way before they are released, they will not survive. They will die.”

Reading: Cast All Your Votes For Dancing *Hafiz*

I know the voice of depression
Still calls to you.

I know those habits that can ruin your life
Still send their invitations.

But you are with the Friend now
And look so much stronger.

You can stay that way
And even bloom!

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From your prayers and work and music
And from your companions' beautiful laughter.

Keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From the sacred hands and glance of your Beloved
And, my dear,
From the most insignificant movements
Of your own holy body.

Learn to recognize the counterfeit coins
That may buy you just a moment of pleasure,
But then drag you for days
Like a broken man
Behind a farting camel.

You are with the Friend now.
Learn what actions of yours delight (the Friend),
What actions of yours bring freedom
And Love.

Whenever you say God's name, dear pilgrim,
My ears wish my head was missing
So they could finally kiss each other
And applaud all your nourishing wisdom!

O keep squeezing drops of the Sun
From your prayers and work and music
And from your companions' beautiful laughter

And from the most insignificant movements
Of your own holy body.

Now, sweet one,
Be wise.
Cast all your votes for Dancing!

Sermon: *Waking the Tiger: An Embodied Theology of Healing*

There was a time when I could not have stood before you in a moment just like this without shaking, dry mouth, loss of breath, and serious light-headedness.

No amount of practice would make me more comfortable. Although I frequently lectured at Tufts, Boston University, Wheelock, Children's Hospital—it was always the same—I ruminated for days, sleepless and distraught, wandering in the halls of my mind like Lady Macbeth.

However, once I began a talk, all that energy transformed into the *passion* for my mission. Despite my rocky start, people were able to hear and respond to the core of my life's calling: tending fragile families in and with community, while challenging the institutional models of service delivery that require "experts" rather than neighbors to "fix" people with advice.

I would not be standing here today without having freed myself from the jail created by a fear of any intense bodily sensations. Those sensations are still here with me—but I welcome them now, because those sensations are evidence of my vitality and engagement as a fully functioning mammal. Feeling the intensity, rather than numbing out in protection, has allowed me access to the energy of full presence that connects me with others.

My work, in the way philosopher Morris Berman might put it, has been a perpetual returning to earth by literally "coming to my senses."

I believe that "coming to our senses" is a path toward the freedom we seek for all people, including ourselves. I believe that coming to our senses means experiencing the enormous amount of energy that is stored in the body. I believe that coming to our senses requires letting go of old stories about ourselves and the emotional drama that reinforces every steel bar in our self-generated jail.

This is the dream of healing I hold for everyone I meet. And so I offer us a time for an experiential understanding of the felt sense (Eugene Gendlin) that is the heart of healing.

I begin with a set of question to ask of yourself: Are you comfortable? How do you know? What specific sensations in your body convince you of that conclusion? Where are the sensations located? Do the sensations move or flow? Have a tempo? a color? a "feel"?

Take a moment to become aware of the details of you own sense of comfort even as as you make yourself more comfortable.

Take time to notice any flow of sensations as they become more intense with your attention.

Know that your experience of comfort or discomfort comes from those arising and disappearing sensations—not from the pew cushion, my voice, the subject, the community. Your sensations and the lens of attention they claim create your experience of the world.

Sensations that constitute our felt sense of being alive in this moment can become the balm of healing the traumas that have imprisoned us with unreleased energy.

Let me share a story I heard from Peter Levine, a therapist and educator who partners with people as they use sensations to release the energy of trauma held in the body:

“Trauma was a complete mystery to me when I first began working with it. My first major breakthrough in understanding came quite unexpectedly in 1969 when I was asked to see a woman, Nancy, who was suffering from intense panic attacks. The attacks were so severe that she was unable to leave her house alone. She was referred to me by a psychiatrist who knew of my interest in body/mind approaches to healing (a fledgling and obscure field at that time). He thought that some kind of relaxation training might be helpful.

“Relaxation was not the answer. In our first session, as I naively, and with the best of intentions, attempted to help her relax, she went into a full-blown anxiety attack. She appeared paralyzed and unable to breathe. Her heart was pounding wildly, and then seemed to almost stop.

“I became quite frightened. Had I paved the yellow brick road to hell? We entered together into her nightmarish attack. Surrendering to my own intense fear, yet somehow managing to remain present, I had a fleeting vision of a tiger jumping toward us. Swept along with the experience, I exclaimed loudly, “You are being attacked by a large tiger. See the tiger as it comes at you. Run toward that tree; climb it and escape!”

“To my surprise, her legs started trembling in running movements. She let out a bloodcurdling scream. ... She began to tremble, shake, and sob in full-bodied convulsive waves. Nancy continued to shake for almost an hour.

“She recalled a terrifying memory from her childhood. When she was three years old she had been strapped to a table for a tonsillectomy. The anesthesia was ether. Unable to move, feeling suffocated, she had terrifying hallucinations.

“This early experience had a deep impact on her. She... had become physiologically stuck in the immobility response. Along with this resignation came the pervasive loss of

her real and vital self as well as loss of a secure and spontaneous personality. The anxiety attack she experienced that day was her last.

“(T)he discharge of energy she experienced when she flowed out of her passive, frozen immobility response into an active, successful escape. The image of the tiger awoke her instinctual, responsive self.” (Peter Levine, “Waking the Tiger”)

I suspect that many of us are feeling a bit of anxiety right now, just from hearing the details of the trauma. Perhaps you don’t even notice the sensations of discomfort within but you find yourself getting distracted, or looking at your watch, thinking about how quickly you can escape out one of these doors, or even, deciding to tell this minister just what you think of this sermon as you shake my hand on your way to coffee.

Take a moment to consciously set aside that way of escape and stay with the story’s impact on your own bodily sensations. Abide in the sense of being trapped in a horror story. Notice how your own body has responded empathically by mirroring the sensations of trauma that comes from being absolutely immobile, unable to escape, while being intruded upon.

And know you do not have to stay stuck in that infinite loop of energy stored in your flesh. You can allow your body mind to escape, by actively imagining a vigorous or even aggressive escape. You can actively release yourself from passive suffering, allowing release by consciously engaging in an aggressive resolution.

My own solution, having done the experiment with myself, is to become like “The Hulk.” I can feel myself expanding, muscles exploding the restraints, while I turn green and turn on the doctor and nurse. It’s not pretty. I won’t share the details. ...

Humor aside, knowing that this notion of embodied healing is complex and perhaps counterintuitive, I am wondering what you are making of this idea of healing trauma through engagement with body’s felt sense.

How does it make sense theologically and spiritually?

I offer the shape of my own emerging answers:

The art of healing has been at the heart of religious tradition. Religious humans, experiencing this amazing grace, have assumed that healing comes from an external and transcendent source.

The practice of returning to my senses in the presence of caring others supports my humanist notions that the power of healing arises from a space between us, neither outside nor above.

In the same way, with my current theological understanding of evolution as a way of revelation, I experience coming to my senses as a way connecting me to my “saints”—my evolutionary ancestors who survived because of instincts and natural reactions I am re-learning in order to adapt to a new reality of the 21st century.

I can experience how my resistance to reacting to those sensations leads to a cut-off and numbing. I feel confident calling that numbing “sin.”

In other words, when I am fully aware of the details of my suffering, not as emotion or story, but as sensations, I can surrender. I can surrender, not in defeat, but in full trust of the essential love at the heart of being and becoming that is the life force. The letting go is like learning to float face-up instead of face-down.

Being aware rather than numb and absent in the water of my unconscious allows me to experience a full-hearted and relaxed gratitude for being alive and knowing it.

Gratitude opens the heart and the mind to compassion. Surrender of story and the reclamation of sensation opens me to mystery and humility.

Gratitude, surrender, mystery and humility are at the heart of spiritual practice.

I know what community really means through the experience of the communion of gratitude, surrender, mystery and humility. I have a profound trust that we can do that with each other.

Here’s what I know for sure:

We cannot prevent trauma. But we can learn to release the energy of trauma.

We, right here in Brookline, can become an even more real and resourced community when we practice offering the gift of full-bodied, attentive presence to each other.

We can and will become more resilient, right here and right now, and experience the emerging and increasing human creativity as mysterious and awesome human communion.

I know in my bones that we can pass the gift of resilience on to our children— shoulder-to-shoulder and hand-to-hand.

I can see, hear and feel a future in which we have recovered such a big-hearted trust in life that we will be able to authentically welcome any stranger with a full-bodied, unambiguous hospitality.

We will have ultimate trust in this community in a way that we will invite our neighbors and friends to come in and share this abundance. They will know us by our presence.

In the words of the Sufi mystic, Rumi, in his song, "Zero Circle," I know in my heart that when we come to our senses, return to earth, and actively heal and recover our vitality, we will become a "mighty kindness."

Freedom is coming, this I know!

In a world without end, Amen.