

HEALING VISIONS: THE BIG PICTURE

by Paul Abels

Healing is an awesome and mysterious concept. Awesome in terms of the power it commands and can unleash, and mystifying us as to how it works. We are used to thinking of healing as some type of therapeutic process aimed at "curing" the individual. Images of healers bring forth the priest, doctor, nurse, perhaps a mystic, a witch, a shaman. We do not generally think of politicians as healers, perhaps Lincoln might be an exception, and more recently a president was asked to "bring us together." Roosevelt's "fireside" chats were aimed at reassuring a nation and relieving stress. But these were the exceptions.

We are not likely to think of artists as healers either, yet one of the most interesting and successful approaches to healing is a work of art, albeit a memorial. The Smithsonian recently had an exhibit, "Personal Legacy - The Healing of a Nation" (1995). It is a pictorial essay on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, more specifically,

an exhibition of tokens of remembrance left at the memorial. The first of these was a medal, a "purple heart" left by a Vietnam Veteran in

the still wet cement at the base of the memorial. Since then over 30,000 items have been left there. Like some religious shrine the memorial has become a place for a

pilgrimage of remembrance and healing. While items are left year round, the largest number are left at Christmas, Memorial Day, July 4th and Veterans Day.

Before there were priests, there were healers, before there were doctors, there were healers, and probably before there were healers, there were people who recognized the need for mutual aid and healing in order to help the tribe survive. A growing body of evidence seems to suggest, that in early times, the human race could not have existed if people had not cared for each other, even to the extent of sharing the short rations that must have existed during our prehistoric heritage. Unlike the movies depicting prehistoric people leaving their sick and maimed to die or shift for themselves, growing bits of data suggest the opposite. People were cared for.

The articles in this issue deal with various aspects of individual healing, of the self and of other persons. While the vision is that society will benefit, the friendly conflict of individual vs. social change rears its head. In the Vietnam exhibit we see the concept of healing used in a much broader sense; healing the wounds of a nation. More recently we have seen nations try to mend wounds inflicted on groups of people and other nations, i.e. the Japanese admission of wrongs done to Korean women, our gov-

ernments' apologies and reparations to Japanese internees. It's as if closure, healing, can't take place until acts of admission and forgiveness take place. Healing, is most often an interactive process.

"Forgiving the unrepentant is drawing pictures on water."

Japanese Proverb

There are people who are able to go beyond the expectation of reciprocity and offer forgiveness no matter what. Note the efforts of Mandela, whose prison building for eighteen years was recently made into a shrine. On the first day of its opening, one of the tourists, gazing in at the cell noted *"It's touching.... To see this cell where Mandela lived all those years and still came out with so much grace, with no desire for revenge. How many of us could do that?"* (N.Y. Times. January 2, 1997. p.A4).

Some say that forgiveness promotes healing. A few years back the Argentinian government forgave the generals for their oppressive acts. This month, Guatemala gave amnesty to both sides in its long running rebellion. Recently, both Bishop Tutu and President Mandela of South Africa spoke of forgiveness for those who had promoted apartheid, brutally killed many South Africans and imprisoned Mandela for two decades. Pardons for many of those involved in butchery, torture, murder? Why? The reasons given for these forgiving acts by a country's leaders are that only through the act of forgiving can the act of healing begin.

Many religious doctrines include the need to forgive. At Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of

Atonement, people ask others to forgive them for any hurts they may have done the person during the year. A student in one of my classes once came in and asked for my forgiveness. I was embarrassed. I often think of that day, and ask myself if I shouldn't ask my classes for forgiveness. I haven't had the guts.

"Seeking forgiveness is to feel remorse for the neglect of the rights of God, the rights of human beings, the rights of the planet and all creation..."

Shaykh Nazim,
Sufi Religious Person

Some are able to forgive. Others, perhaps remembering the atrocities all too well don't want to forgive. Some do not seek healing but rather its opposite. The opposite meaning of healing isn't "not healing," it is "to damage, to destroy." Some want to destroy those who committed the evils. Revenge they say is "sweet" but does it heal? This may be at the core of conflict between Croats, Muslims and Serbs, Hutu and Tutsi. They may believe that healing can only be done by a "burning" out of the "evil," a method anchored in history, which saw numerous examples including the Inquisition, Joan of Arc, the bombing of Dresden, the ovens, rubber tires burned around people's necks, and the Salem witch trials. Hatred and the desire for revenge can last decades, but so can the desire to be forgiven and healed.

Found among the items left at the Vietnam Memorial:

"...a soldier left a photograph of a North Vietnamese man with a young girl, along with a note:

"Dear Sir: For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was eighteen years old that day that we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam Why you did not take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long.... Forgive me for taking your life."

What is to be healed here?

It is not the body that is in need of healing, it is the mind, the conscience, the soul, the source, the force, the spirit. This is an area where the "mind healers" can do their work. This is where we see the relationship between individual healing and national healing, a private trouble becoming a public problem. Mind problems have no magic bullets.

"One writes of scars healed, a loose parallel to the pathology of the skin, but there is no such thing in the life of the individual. There are open wounds, shrunk sometimes to the size of a pinprick, but wounds still. The marks of suffering are more comparable to the loss of a finger, or of the sight of an eye. We may not miss them, either for one minute in a year, but if we should there is nothing to be done about it." F. Scott Fitzgerald,
Tender is the Night.

This is the challenge to the healers, to us all, we can not replace or erase the scars, but we can offer a balm. And at the same time, we should work to heal those who do the scarring. Of course that's most of us. □

"There is a balm in Gilead that heals the troubled soul."

Negro (sic) Spiritual

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