

HEALER/HEALEE, MY JOURNEY

A story of my healing journey from seeing myself as one with a disability to a whole person with ability. I review lessons I have learned and mutual healing interactions with persons who present psychotic disabilities.

By Arthur Soissons- Segal

Arthur Soissons-Segal, Ph.D. is Coordinator of Psycho-Social Rehabilitation, Hollywood Mental Health Center, Hollywood CA.



I started my healing journey in 1945 at the age of 14 while recovering from surgery for a cerebellar tumor. It was the start of a personal battle to find peace of mind, confidence, and connection. For years following the surgery, I struggled with poor coordination, inability to compete athletically and awkward social skills. I was lonely, isolated and insecure, longing for friendship and self-confidence.

In 1952 I was a student at the New York School of Social Work of Columbia University in group work where we were taught to help people find ways to improve their quality of life. I now realize that my choice to work in the field of disability was an attempt to heal myself.

A BUDDING AWARENESS

My second year field work placement was at Blythedale, a residential rehabilitation center for children with physical disabilities. Hy Weiner, a beautiful and sensitive man, was

my supervisor. Hy had a disability —petit mal epilepsy. His gentleness, self-assurance and sense of power struck me; he did not present himself as disabled. I wondered if only I saw his epilepsy as a disability.

This was an early dawning of awareness, enhanced by the children at the Blythedale. Although confined to bed, they played soft ball hobbling around the bases on crutches. The children experienced their abilities not their disabilities, and their self confidence was enhanced by staff praise

I began to appreciate the strength of the human spirit. The recovering children wanted to heal. They put into practice a story I had yet to learn: passage out of disability is achieved when one finds meaning. I did not apply this lesson to myself. This refrain played in my mind for the subsequent 40 years as I worked with individuals defined by society as disabled.¹

I then learned about healing from Stanley Krippner at Saybrook Institute, and the writings of Frankl (1978), Moustakas; (1972), Cousins; (1979), and Siegel; (1986) that emphasized the psychological and spiritual components of healing I became aware of how laughter, self-belief, and determination influenced healing. I read autobiographies that described productivity and mean-

¹ At The Jewish Guild for the Blind, United Cerebral Palsy, The Institute for the Crippled and Disabled (now the Howard Rusk Institute), Aid to Retarded Citizens, and Community Mental Health.

ingfulness despite disabilities. (Beisser, 1988, Brown, 1954, Hamshire, 1982, and Nolan, 1987). I found support in knowing that individuals experience efficacy despite their limitations. I learned people find meaning in themselves when open to wholeness. I began to see how the disabled persons seek to participate in "normal" activities of work and relationships. I marveled when many of my clients denied that their disabilities prevented them from achieving independent living goals. They told me that their motivation to recover was a major contributor to their ability to feel good about themselves. I helped others reveal and experience their abilities. I helped social work students develop sensitivity to people with disabilities.

Understanding My Own Blocks To Healing

Although clients and colleagues praised me, I could not respond to their accolades nor acknowledge my strengths. I looked in the mirror and saw only blemishes and frailty. Acceptance of my limitations was so difficult to achieve. Society seeks perfection in us, and frailty is disparaged. To escape society's stigma, I denied my limitations which were so obvious to others.

I recall a farewell party honoring my work in organizing a developmental disability council into an effective advocacy group. The room filled with friends and fellow staff praised me and wished me well. After some especially flattering statement, embarrassed. I said, "Oh anyone could have done that," to

which the speaker said, "Shut up and take credit for what you've done." My friend recognized my inability to accept praise. I was unaware then that this was a symptom of a disability that had a name, and that others with this disability had successful professional and personal lives. They could experience the pleasures of their success.

That knowledge was to come five years later. At the moment of the farewell party, the comment was received, laughed about, and forgotten.

A Turning Point - Belonging And Normalizing

Several years later my work brought me into contact with colleagues who had learning disabilities (LD). A sometimes subtle disability with a neurological origin that results in frustration and doubt about one's own abilities.

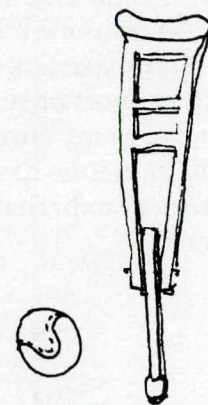
I worked with the LD agency, "The Puzzle People," for about a year when the executive director, a woman with LD, approached me and commented, "Art, you are one of us, you know." Her comments were calm and friendly.

I was relieved, my clumsiness and poor language skills had a name. My difficulty concentrating and tendency to move from one subject to another was comprehensible. I looked around. I knew these were me, or I was them. We had learning disabilities, dyslexia, attention defect disorder. More importantly we had each other. My symptoms had a name, and I had a support system.

Until that "Puzzle People"

party I blamed my poor coordination, reading problems, lack of concentration and other difficulties on my childhood brain tumor. The effect of that reasoning was as a rehabilitated brain tumor victim, I was alone without peers or role models. On the other hand, having LD brought peers, role models, and support. My humanness was validated, it was okay to be different. We could achieve our goals despite limitations.

Healing has been a continuing process of self-discovery. I had observed clients and colleagues risk self-disclosure. Finally I absorbed their self-descriptions and realized the match with my own. My readings, research and work experiences came together into a new healing pattern of self-awareness and acceptance.



HEALING

I see healing as letting go of pain to achieve health. It is a mending of the one's spirit, pulling together body and soul, and accepting wholeness of self so as to experience meaningfulness.

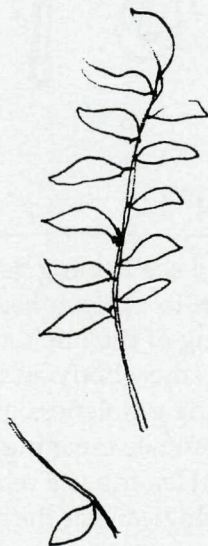
Healing is a rebirth of the psychological self that somehow

became lost in my developmental process. I began to develop comfort with my limitations, I "normalized" them. I felt part of a mainstream group of people with similar disabilities and "that was okay."

Experiencing (Rather Than Only Knowing) One's Abilities.

There is a vast distance between an intellectual understanding of one's abilities and the experience of one's abilities. Intellectually, I acknowledged my achievements but did not own them.

An experience is an emotional internal event in that it is a feeling which one neurologically compares to prior feelings provoked by similar events. Thus, an experience is an emotion which absorbs itself in one's history. I believe that experience has the power to support or refute prior experiences, as my current experiences with success have refuted my historical experiences with limitation.



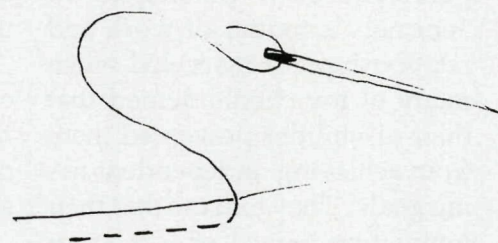
New Healing In My Work

Normalization is a key component in my work with psychiatrically disabled adults. Currently, I coordinate a psychosocial rehabilitation service at the Hollywood Mental Health Center in Los Angeles. I help individuals to refer to themselves as people rather than as clients. We build upon strengths and plant seeds to produce more positive self-images. As they participate many of them blossom and their social talk becomes lively. Many return to skills long in disuse. Some return to school, others venture out to employment. We help them to experience their abilities, neutralize their disabilities and feel connected to others. I believe that this sense of belonging is as healing for them as it has been for me. I respond to their experience of disability with calmness and a sense of, "So what's so terrible, we all have moments of that experience." Healing is an interactive experience. As I help them heal their wounds, I too heal.

THE HEALER'S ROLE

The healer's role, as I see it, is to present a self which invites the other person to reveal a desire to be healed. Just as I learned that disability, as well as ability, is a creation of the mind, we suggest to our clients that they have the power to create the self they want to be. Throughout the healing process we seek out the positive attributes that we and they possess. We acknowledge the pain of their limitations but we dwell on their abilities. People share their suc-

cesses. Together we celebrate happy occasions and discuss solutions to our problems. We benefit from the experiences of working together and helping each other. All of this builds a support system and a feeling of belongingness.



The healing process takes its own time. It cannot be hastened. It may be slow and take detours. Recovery is a life long process. Embarkation on this journey requires a vision that wellness is attainable.

Like most wilderness trails, a healing path twists steeply up zigzags, traverses narrow crevices, tumbles down inclines, and moves toward discovery. My clients and I pause to rest and experience the joy and excitement of the discovery.

For those who travel without guides, the healing points frequently go unnoticed until the big "WOW:" the moment when the fog lifts and the trail brightens; the moment when the traveler commits to the work. For me, the "WOW" experience was the LD party.

The trail continues to the present rest stop, this paper. □

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The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the clefs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind laces through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock--more than a maple--a universe.

Annie Dillard (1994). In David Schiller, *The little Zen companion*. New York: Workman Publishing Company.

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