

Post Traumatic Growth
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Opening Words

“All this Joy. All this sorrow. All this promise. All this pain. Such is life. Such is being. Such is spirit. Such is love.”

“The human being is a surprisingly resilient organism. Your spirit, as surely as your body, will try to heal. So you should not fear tragedy and suffering. Like love, they make you more a part of the human family. From them can come your greatest creativity. They are the fire that burns you pure.” I read this quote by Kent Nerburn in the midst of debilitating pelvic pain and I thought, “Maybe there is more than just loss here; maybe there is also a chance to grow.”

Early in my illness, I came across another quote this one by the cardiologist, Dean Ornish, which would eventually summarize my experience: “Curing is when the physical disease gets measurably better. Healing is a process of becoming whole. Even the words heal, whole, and holy come from the same root. . . In the process of healing, you reach a place of wholeness and deep inner peace from which you can deal with illness with much less fear and suffering and much greater clarity and compassion. While curing is wonderful when it occurs, healing is often more meaningful because it takes you to a place of greater freedom from suffering.”

I experienced both healing and curing and now I’m pain free without medications and the areas of my body that have been pulled up tight for a lifetime are now relaxed most of the time. But I’ve come to appreciate that healing is more than just a way to attain a perfect or pain free body. Healing can happen even when physical issues don’t resolve and even when someone is dying.

If you haven’t experienced much pain or trauma in your life, you may be wondering if the message today is for you. So let me clarify. Pain is pain. When you are hurting physically or emotionally, regardless of the level, it is very real for you. Healing is not about looking around and comparing; it is simply letting the hurt human inside of us speak, so we can release what we are carrying and we can become more free.

In this service, we will consider our responses to the large and small traumas in our lives and consider ways we can use these challenges to heal on all levels.

Guided Meditation

When we are hurting- physically or emotionally it creates stress in our bodies. We often move into a state of fight or flight where the sympathetic nervous system is active. When we are in this state, we can help ourselves by doing activities that activate the parasympathetic nervous system-, which counter-balances the stress response and helps to calm the body and mind. It is postulated that in this calmer state, the body's self-repair mechanisms flip on, and in my experience this is where much of healing happens.

When we are stressed we often breathe fast and shallow with the upper chest, and when we are calm we often breathe deeper and slower with the diaphragm. For me, one of the best ways to move into this calmer state is to focus on the sensations of my body and to change my breathing pattern. Let's practice this together.

Please soften your gaze or close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Move in your chair into a comfortable upright position with both feet on the ground. In this position, feel the soles of your feet on the ground, the support from the chair on your seat and back.

Feel your calves and then allow them to soften. Tune in again and accept whatever tension remains. In all areas, when we accept what remains it helps us relax even more.

Move to the muscles in the front and back of your thighs. Picture the area getting soft like butter melting in the sun. You can't do this wrong, don't worry if you can't tune in right away- just put out the message to relax and let it be.

Move to where you are seated on the chair, and soften into the chair. Feel the tension throughout your back. Then let these areas soften like butter melting in the sun.

Feel the back of your neck, soften this area, let your shoulders drop.

Feel the muscles of your face, let them soften, relax your jaw.

There nothing you need to express right now.

Take your hands and put them on your upper stomach right below your rib cage. When you are breathing with your diaphragm, the belly moves outward with each breath.

Feel this area move out with each breath.

You don't have to work at this, breathing is automatic.

Let your body breathe you.

Sermon: “Post Traumatic Growth

To continue our exploration of healing and post traumatic growth, I’d like to share some of my personal experiences with you in this sermon.

Eight years ago, I was treating private clients as a physical therapist, teaching at a university and taking care of my husband and two teenagers. It was the day before our long awaited bus tour of Europe, when I started to hurt.

It felt like I had an extremely full bladder and someone was sitting on my stomach. My pelvic floor muscles went into knots and my nervous system felt ramped up like it was set in overdrive. I learned that nothing rivals bladder pain and at low levels it instigated a primal type of panic. I was diagnosed with interstitial cystitis and pelvic floor dysfunction. When physicians were recently asked to rate the top ten most painful conditions, this diagnosis came up as number three.

When the pain began, I was western-medicine focused, and I never really thought about the mind-body connection or spirituality.

But over the years of healing, I had many direct and tangible experiences of the body, mind, spirit connection that I couldn’t explain away. My perspective expanded bit by bit with each experience, leading me down many new healing paths, and eventually changing my internal and external life in amazing and positive ways.

Two years ago, I was preparing a sermon about my healing for the UU church in Long Beach and I came upon the term “Post Traumatic Growth”. It seemed to match what I had experienced, so I looked it up online.

I found out that the term was coined by a group of psychologists from the University of North Carolina who study the phenomenon. The post traumatic growth concept was pioneered by Calhoun and Tedeshi in 2006, and it is defined as a positive psychological change that occurs as the result of one’s struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, and traumatic event.

The researchers state that there are five general areas of Posttraumatic growth:

A greater sense of one’s own strength.

A greater appreciation for life

A sense that new opportunities have emerged from the struggle

A deepening of one’s spiritual life, which sometimes significantly changes one’s belief system.

And a closer relationship with other people, with an increased sense of connection to others who suffer.

I experienced all of these, but I’d like to share some experiences from these last two areas: How this trauma changed my belief system, and increased my sense of connection with others.

In September of 2007, the pelvic pain had been bearing down on me for two months. During that time, I’d traveled throughout Europe, battled a severe bout of the flu, and buried my father. Then, suddenly, for the first time since the pain began, the activity stopped and I was all-alone. My husband was gone on a two-week business trip in Germany, and I didn’t have any support network beyond him.

The pain rose higher and higher, and it wouldn't let me sleep. I would lie in bed with my pulse pounding in my ears, and when I'd finally doze off, the pain would rouse me from a dead sleep with an intensity that terrified me. I was handling everything I needed to do for my kids by myself, but the pain was taking a toll.

At this point in my life, I never wrote beyond my professional duties. But for some reason in the depths of pain, I began to write. Here's my journal entry from this time:

"If this is my life, how can I possibly get through it? How many more years until the kids are raised, and how can I make it? If no one loved me, I could check out, but people are counting on me. I'm trying to be positive, trying to find meaning, trying to be grateful. I'm tired. The illness is hidden, even to myself. In the mirror, my face looks exhausted, lined, tear-stained, and pained. I feel like I'm trapped in my own personal hell. Can I give the pain to you for just a minute, so you can feel the cross I bear?"

One night, after dropping off my daughter at a friend's house, I stopped at a red light and gazed numbly at a landscape cast only in shades of gray. Sitting there in the car watching the cars go by and the people scurrying about, I felt like I was looking at a world I no longer inhabited. It all seemed superficial and unreal.

That same night, I was resting in bed and I looked up and saw the book, *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle up sitting on the shelf above my bed. My brother had given me the book two years before, and I tried reading it then. I didn't get past the introduction, in which the author describes how he came to the realization that he was more than his body and mind. At the time, I'd concluded that the writer, who had suffered severe depression prior to this experience, had diminished activity in the frontal lobes of his brain and activated other parts of his brain in response to this stress. In my view, his new perceptions were neatly categorized but completely suspect, so I'd shut the book. But despite this earlier skepticism, at the end of that dark day during the second month of the pain, I found myself reading *The Power of Now*.

The first chapter discusses the idea that we are more than the activity of our minds. The author invites the reader to tune in to his or her inner dialogue and to recognize that underneath all that chatter there is more.

I was well aware of this inner dialogue; mine was incessant and often negative.

That night, as I concentrated on moving beneath all that internal noise, I suddenly felt fullness in my heart and an electric wave flow from my heart all the way to my fingers and toes. The next night I said, "If there is any help out there; now would be the time. This electrical wave happened five times, and on the fifth time I laughed and cried at the same time and said out loud, "OK, OK. I get that I am loved."

In the past, I would have written off these experiences as a neural pathway in overdrive because of the pain. But it was different this time. I just knew that even if my body were consumed with pain and illness and even if my mind suffered from major depression, there was a deeper part of me that would never die. In that moment, I also knew that when I felt I had nowhere else to turn, there was always more within....

A week later, I was sitting in the whirlpool at the gym, where, as usual, the topic of conversation was everyone's aches and pains.

Myra told me about how she was bedridden with fibromyalgia for two years, and how she rallied over the past year to get her life back.

As we walked into the locker room, Myra told me she relied on her connection with God to give her strength.

The idea of God didn't really resonate with me, but I told her about what I'd experienced on that dark night and she said, "That was the grace of God"

That night, I just had to smile as I read these words in *The Power of Now*:

"Awakening is a shift in consciousness in which thinking and awareness separate . . . The initiation of the awakening process is an act of grace."

A few months later, I read something written by Deepak Chopra that resonated with me. He described how the experience of reality is determined, in part, by one's capability to perceive and process sensory information. Throughout history, the view of reality has changed whenever humans have enhanced their sensory capabilities with technology.

For example, before the invention of microscopes and Geiger counters, cells and radiation were unknown to us but they were always there.

After my experiences on that desperate night, I was more open to the possibility that there is much more in this world than I can pick up with my five senses.

I wondered if the stress of that night opened up a latent capability in my brain to process just a bit more of what is already out there.

On a walk in the neighborhood around that time, I mentioned to husband, "The stars are really out tonight." Suddenly, I realized the silliness of that common statement. The stars are always there, even in the light of day, but now that conditions had changed, I could perceive them. What had happened to me on that painful night was a little like stargazing. Maybe because when it is really, really dark, we can see more."

I can now appreciate that this shift in awareness was crucial for me, and this is when my healing journey began.

Now I'd like to share a few stories that show how post-traumatic growth can change how we connect with other people.

During my pelvic pain, I started to appreciate that, before my illness, my circle of compassion did not include people with depression or chronic pain.

Right before my pain first began, woman approached me in the gym's locker room told me about her battle with depression, I'd taken a step backward and made a mental note to avoid intense conversation with her in the future.

When I was a new therapist in the 1980s, a woman on a plane tried to talk with me about fibromyalgia. Although I'd tried to look interested, I had not really listened and thought she probably suffered from some psychological disorder that had created the condition.

When other therapists would talk about treating patients with chronic pain or pelvic floor problems, I'd think or even say out loud that I didn't know how they could do it. I'd felt that those patients and their problems were somehow separate and a little beneath me.

After the pain, I thought it was curious, and perhaps not coincidental, that my illness had firmly planted me among the group of people I used to shun.

Now I realize that I wasn't able to accept people with these conditions because I was so shut off from these aspects of myself. These people were like a mirror- reflecting back to me what I didn't want to look at.

As a physical therapist, helping others deal with pain and horrific disability had been my job- but living with pelvic pain gave me a whole new perspective. Now I feel a stronger bond of shared humanity especially with those who are hurting.

Four years into my pain, I was sitting in the whirlpool again when a twenty-year-old guy sat to my right, and I noticed he had a tattoo that looked like death itself on his arm.

"I feel just like your tattoo today," I said.

"I feel like it every day," he responded.

Then, he glanced cautiously at me, and I saw his dark brown eyes brimming with pain.

We talked for forty-five minutes about our experiences with physical and emotional pain.

As I stepped out of the spa, I said, "I hope that wasn't too much information."

He said I'd given him a lot to think about and thanked me.

After thanking him, too, I said, "It is really weird, but the last four times I've been in this whirlpool, I've met someone who shares at this deep level."

"That's no coincidence," he replied. "You opened up and you asked about my pain. We all have pain, but no one ever talks about it."

He was right.

Before I developed chronic pelvic pain, I thought I was the only one who was hurting because many people suffer in silence or don't have an awareness of what they are carrying. Now, I realize that I am not alone and that suffering, just like joy, is an integral part of the human condition.

The researchers found that people who experience posttraumatic growth look at what they are carrying emotionally and they take time to process it. This was true for me. I had to work at the body level and address the bladder inflammation, muscle spasms, and nervous system ramp up- but that wasn't enough.

In order to get better I also had to look at the emotional factors that might be causing me stress, which contributed to a ramp up my nervous system and the continuation of my pain.

It took me two years to admit that maybe there was an emotional component to my illness. But eventually with lots of help, I looked within. Over the years I realized that I had shut down the emotional, intuitive, and sexual sides of me and I worked to gradually open back up.

This might be a bit hard to hear, but about five years into my illness, I had the gift of knowing how it all began when memories of being raped by the priest who was the hero of my childhood surfaced.

My siblings validated these new memories, and they matched the memories I kept. Much of my life now made sense. I understood why my pain landed in the pelvic area and why it began right as my father died.

Now that both of my parents were gone, it seemed like I was finally ready to look at what I was carrying.

For me, the pain was not just a sign my body was breaking down; it was also a signal that it was time to look, to process and heal.

Now I'm not one who responded to suffering with the stoicism of some pious saint. I got mad, discouraged, and sad. I sat in my living room crying in the dark. But then, support would flow from within and from without, lifting me up and pushing me on down the healing path.

I was working through this trauma when Dr. Stephen Furrer was the interim minister at the UU Church of Long Beach.

One Sunday while I sat in discomfort in church, Rev. Furrer said, "You can be beaten down, only to get up and be beaten down again. But when you are down there, only you can stop your heart from lifting."

And I thought: That was meant for me! This pain always pries my heart open a little more. I had to walk through the dark to discover the underlying shame, fear and blame that resided there, but this was just the tough part of the journey. Healing was actively replacing these constricting emotions with loving self-acceptance.

I learned that within the challenge of difficult times there are also opportunities.

We can practice being grounded and present

We can release what we don't want to carry

We can limit how much we constrict in fear

And we can allow more love to flow through us and around us.

In my experience, it is this love that flows through us and around us that that can change posttraumatic stress into posttraumatic growth.

Closing Words: After Amazing Grace

As Unitarian Universalists our focus is often on Social Justice and healing society. We often see how the pain of those who are broken seeps out and affects those around them. In this way, our human frailties get passed from generation to generation and throughout society.

It gets less press, but consider that the same exact thing happens when someone decides to heal. When a person gradually releases what he or she doesn't want to carry and becomes more open and loving, it can shift the experience of the people around them. Like a pebble creating ripples on the water, this personal change flows outward and shifts the social dynamics.

In this way, what is happening at a small level within us is eventually reflected at larger and larger levels between us.

It can be difficult to look within and to heal, but rest assured, as you work to heal yourself, you are also working to heal the world.

“May your light shine before you. May your love grow within you. May your spirit soar above you. And may you walk in peace.”