

## Healing the Planet/Healing Ourselves

We are living in a time of great jeopardy. Medical science triumphs but new mysterious and intractable physical illnesses appear. Living standards and conditions improve, but those who seem the strongest and most fortunate succumb suddenly and without warning to life-threatening or debilitating diseases. The cells rebel, defense systems break down, ennui and exhaustion set in most unexpectedly, surprising many at the very peak of health and activity. Malnutrition, over consumption, over work, erosion of private time, overproduction, exploitation of resources, foreign invasion, failure of defense systems, despair, delusion, toxicity, pollution, affect us intra-psychically as well as politically. Willy-nilly, the borders we try to hard to sustain become permeable and distinctions disappear. Individuals begin to suffer the conditions of the nation states. Nation states develop their own equivalents of physical diseases. We take the afflictions of the planet into our bodies as the planet suffers our conditions.

The diseases we suffer are also metaphors. That is, diseases are presenting themselves in personal as well as political and social metaphors. While it has always been clear that physical illness can be the consequence of world conditions, it has not been so clear that physical illness is an *analogue* of planetary conditions. This being the case, preventing or healing physical disease becomes a political act. And, preventing or healing political, social and environmental conditions ameliorates physical illness.

Imagine then that disease is a language, an alarm, a desperate code, written on the body to alert us to the grim situation of our psyche, the polis and the planet.

I also would like to heal something on this planet, a bit of earth, a lost soul, even myself.

Fifteen years ago, I had breast cancer and took a typewriter to the hospital because I had learned through writing that the silence in me contributed significantly to the onset of this disease. I was determined to be silent no longer, to look for the hidden silences which unbeknownst to me had become lethal.

Months before I discovered I had cancer, I was writing a novel about cancer and women, *The Book of Hags*. There I postulated that cancer was silence turned against itself:

*The women who had died of cancer, had all tried madness first and their madness had been plastered up, sealed, glassed in, submerged. Then they lived a few years and cancer erupted which could not be submerged, ignored, boxed in, cut out, irradiated or controlled in any way. It was a fierce raging growth and it took their lives.*

While writing, I had had a dream about a woman torturer, working for the *DINA*, the Chilean secret police. [Dina is, of course, a variant spelling of my name.] When I discovered I had breast cancer in 1977, one month after I finished that novel, I began to examine that dream anew. It had something to do with the disease, but what? Something was torturing me, but what? Who? Why? To keep me silent and acquiescent? Why was the image a woman? Was I, myself, the torturer, the silencer, the one who did not want her victim to know, speak or live?

During the last twelve years of health, while always aware that our destructive relationship to the environment is immediately translated into a rash of physical illness, I still continue my relentless search for the places in my psyche which make me even more vulnerable to the onslaught of disease, to the places of unconscious collusion with the destructive forces, to the places where the potentially lethal torturers and silences within myself reside. No matter what answers I find, I continue to pose the questions: What is lethal within me? What is festering? What is repressed? What must be spoken?

Each year something astounding, even horrific, which has been suppressed, emerges. Then I try to ease it—my form of psychic surgery; I prefer it to the operating room.

When I first considered the incident of a dream, or the metaphor of disease as an essential and serious map for the healing process, I stepped into the reality of the imagination. This became

a significant part of the healing process. To value the images, to speak out, to find what is lethal within, to come out of silence, to honor the creative and the imagination as real worlds—these have been my life and healing work.

Perhaps the surgeon cured me. I think he did. But I had to heal myself. Cure is a state, health is a process. Cure is finite, healing is ongoing. A cure is singular, healing is a practice. Healing requires that we change our lives. In the ways we find to live differently, we eliminate or neutralize some of the conditions which contribute to the creation or maintenance of the disease. And, not ironically, as we change our lives for our health's sake, we often begin to live lives which are far more compatible with the health and survival of the planet.

When I began working with cancer patients, I wanted to see if we could find ancillary ways to approach cancer in individuals. Now that I see inextricable relationships between the illnesses in our bodies and the illnesses affecting the planet, I realize that healing the individual patient is insufficient. In order to heal our bodies, we have to undertake the healing of the body politic. And as we suffer from the same illnesses, the same remedies apply to both. The very processes of preventing or healing personal illness extend themselves to healing the world. And vice-versa.

What was most surprising to me when I had cancer was coming upon an alien voice in me speaking against my own life. Some years later, I find it is not uncommon for others to be similarly confronted. Inner despair, rage against oneself, self hate, are the frequent hand maidens of physical illness. Many of my clients with Epstein-Barr, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, or other immune system diseases, have experienced debilitating depression and the sudden or gradual erosion of the will to live as a biochemical consequence of the disease. This emotional consequence is sometimes experienced as the worst of the symptoms.

When I look about me at the dire planetary conditions, I find that many people no longer care whether life itself goes on. We are suffering from global fatigue and despair, from cultural self-loathing, from national suicides, all of which lead to serious increases in attacks against life itself. The parallels are unnerving. As we hold the world's pain in our own physical bodies so we are living out our physical illnesses in the body politic. We have created an awful fellowship in despair.

The core of the issue may be that the will to live, individually and globally, is being replaced by the will to die: Thanatos triumphing over eros. We can postulate the causes: alien viruses, alterations in the DNA, aberrations in the immune system responses, as well as the brutality, futility, meaninglessness, alienation, exploitation and poverty of modern life on a global scale; these are legion. These conditions are intensified by the subtle love affair Western Civilization has always had with death: Death the redeemer; Death the phantom lover; the dark God.

In 1945, the Atom Bomb was exploded in response to the Nazis' murderous frenzy. J. Robert Oppenheimer, himself a Jew, watching the first Bomb test at Trinity, quoted Vishnu in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "Behold, I am become Death, destroyer of worlds."

The cures we have found for our circumstances perpetuate the illness.

Expectations of the Apocalypse begin to seem fitting: threats of war, repeated incidents of genocide, torture, chemical warfare, nuclear disaster, radiation poisoning. Illness everywhere. Environmental diseases and environmental devastation. A variety of plagues and scourges.

And now this dilemma: The plague comes home. Cancer, AIDS, CFS, emotional and physical exhaustion become commonplace, affecting, among many others, many of those who have committed themselves to confronting the dread koans of this century: genocide, nuclear destruction, environmental devastation. We do not seem to know yet how to confront these without ourselves being severely jeopardized. While the suffering in the world is extreme and must be alleviated, we are not finding the strength and knowledge to confront it. The capacities of our psyches and bodies are not increasing proportionally with the escalation of emotional, moral, political, spiritual, and ecological crises.

We must ask ourselves: how can we do the work we need to do while maintaining a state of health at the same time? In learning how to maintain our personal health, can we discover how to maintain the health of the planet?

Recently, I was invited to speak at a conference on Women's Spirituality. Three out of five of the speakers canceled their participation because of extreme fatigue or illness. I, myself, had had serious doubts about attending—also for reasons of exhaustion. A growing number of people who have undertaken healing work are,

themselves, being thrown into serious physical crises. Living in these times, we all suffer serious assaults, wounds and weaknesses. Each passing day precipitates further health crises and extreme conditions. Many of the more common illnesses are chronic and undermining so that it is often impossible to take care of oneself. The seriousness of this is compounded by the fact that many people now live alone.

"Perhaps," I said speaking to a friend, "your work is not only your research on the causes of war. Perhaps your work is larger than that. Perhaps our work is also to find how we can protect ourselves against the diseases which war against us, to find out how to do this work without being overwhelmed by illness." I suggested this, even though I was aware of adding another imperative to an already overwhelmed situation.

My friend was suffering from a breakdown of her immune system. The analogy with our political situation was unavoidable. Her immune system wasn't working. Militarily, our immune systems—defense systems—also do not work. These days, we are far more injured by them than protected. Clearly, it is in our personal as well as collective interest to address these synchronicities.

Individually, and nationally, we are discovering that we cannot isolate ourselves from outside forces, from 'the other.' We cannot keep ourselves from being invaded. Even if we keep large armies at bay, we cannot fully protect ourselves against the invasions of terrorists, against economic or cultural take-overs or infiltrations. Increasingly we live in a fractal universe that is complex and fluid. One thing flows into another. Sharp differentiations disappear. The concept of an inviolable boundary becomes as anachronistic as the Maginot Line. Yet, precious resources are consumed in the attempt to build up our defenses as our stockpiles of weapons threaten to turn on us before we use them. We cannot launch an attack to destroy the enemy without seriously injuring ourselves. Every time we think of launching an attack, we are ourselves jeopardized by that action. Every enemy we make endangers us. The myriad forms of 'friendly fire,' self attack, besiege us on all fronts: Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, T cell imbalance, auto immune diseases. Death hovers at the edges of our imagination.

When I first started working and consulting with people with cancer and other serious diseases—and afterwards when I discovered that I also had breast cancer—I found that it was possible to

translate an understanding of the illness into personal metaphors. While for each person, the metaphor may be different, the impact or relevance of metaphor itself remained consistent. For one person, throat cancer represented her untenable silence. For another, thyroid cancer represented an inability or unwillingness to regulate energy, and for a third, stomach cancer translated into greed.

Cancer, in general, behaves much like a modern world power or nation state. An essentially weak, immature, uncooperative dysfunctional cell invades and occupies nearby or remote territories, dislocating the inhabitants, destroying the area, parasitically devouring the resources, providing no exchange whatsoever until the entire territory is devastated and the inhabitants die of starvation, suffocation or toxicity.

"This is imperialism," I said. Then I began to look for political approaches, for the causes, signs and manifestations of imperialism within myself which I might alter and, accordingly, heal. Admittedly, I could no more find an easy solution or instant cure with this approach than governments have been able to establish instant world peace or international economic equality, but the analogy provided new ways of approaching the illness. Ultimately I did find ways in which one part of myself improperly dominated others, in which inner resources were used up without regard, in which alienated economic and cultural plagues overwhelmed the more sustaining native traditions, in which my energy was depleted without regard for the body and spirit which sustained it. This approach caused me to change the way I was living and thinking and empowered me to participate in my own healing and use the imagination in pursuit of health.

When I began thinking about AIDS after working with several clients with that illness, I began to see it, metaphorically, as the demise of the defense system which had been undermined, even taken over from within, leaving the body unable to defend itself, a victim to any scourge. If a new defense system cannot be instituted, or as is frequently happening with the increase in autoimmune diseases, if the defense system itself turns against the host, it is necessary that we learn to live with the foreign body. Perhaps a change of definition—relinquishing the concept of enemy—will allow for healing through co-existence. Or perhaps, as we watch the invading cells recoding our own DNA until there is no difference between our cells and the invader, we will invent

ways to coexist with virulent aggression without losing our own integrity.

We are not yet sophisticated enough to be able to heal ourselves completely by using such an approach, but we can make a difference in the length of time we stay healthy, in the severity and speed of disease. Very often, mediation, reconciliation, co-existence with what was formerly defined as the enemy—whether it is something within our psyche or whether it is someone or some condition external to us—can also alleviate or relieve some of the physical symptoms we are suffering. For example, dismantling the rage which generally consumed him and the consequent state of 'red alert' in which he lived, made a significant difference in the T cell count and state of health of one of my clients with AIDS. The reduction of enemies without seemed to translate into a reduction of enemy cells within. If we give up the idea of an enemy, or come into relationship with what we have predicated as "other," and resist setting up barriers against what we fear, perhaps we may be able to heal ourselves more fully. Equally important is the necessity to maintain oneself despite the virulence of the invasion. The Dalai Lama instructed one of his delegates to Mao's government that he would not be effective until he stopped hating the Chinese. The task, then, was to give up hate without in any way relinquishing Tibetan culture and practice.

Much of what we suffer socially and politically is because we accommodate to ways of life which are unhealthy in every sense, physically and morally. Not one of us is free of the stigma of collaboration with some of the worst aspects of industrial and post-industrial anti-culture, including the making of enemies, the relinquishment of ourselves and the acceptance of alienation from nature. It is no surprise to see how frequently health occurs as individuals free themselves from the life-style of these anti-cultures. The attempts we are witnessing among many people to return to a life style compatible and interactive with nature cannot be dismissed as romantic. The fact is that retreat from contemporary life is promoting healing in many people. Maintaining an alliance with nature can often mean the difference between health and illness.

Multiple sclerosis is like friendly fire, a disease in which the defense system attacks itself, a munitions or nuclear plant exploding in its own territory, or a unit being bombed by its own planes.

Essential communication is stymied because of a break in the line. The ability of one part of the system to receive a message from the other part of the system is impaired.

Asthma is an illness in which the air taken in can't be given out. The bronchial tubes which must open, close down. The essence of the life force is perverted, so that one suffocates in the very air that can't be released. It is a mirror of what happens in us when we resist the creative, take in but do not release, are inspired but fail to express. An action dramatized in the body which is a pattern in the society. It is also like the segment of the population which co-opts and hoards essential resources, water, for example; taking in without giving out, closing down to others, without realizing that vigor and balance are eking away, until the very life of the country is threatened.

Those suffering from Epstein-Barr who are physiologically afflicted by unrelenting terror and despair and extremely diminished vitality, re-experience in their own bodies the circumstances of the modern condition. Rest and diminishing activities do not necessarily relieve chronic fatigue. Often, recuperation results from one's willingness to engage in strenuous activities which are vitalizing and to suspend those "sensible" activities which actually sap the zest of the individual. Enthusiasm, passion and creative expression are often the unexpected medicines for this illness.

Similarly, we can see the political or social equivalents of a heart which is attacked, bruised and broken when access to it is impeded, when the highways to the heart are blocked, when the activity of the heart is limited.

Sometimes the dilemmas of our own personal lives are enacted in our bodies and sometimes the dilemmas of the body politic are enacted in our bodies, and sometimes both. In each case, internal imperialism kills, imbalance is lethal, terror is rampant, communication breaks down, paralysis occurs, our defense systems become obsolete, too expensive or turn against us. Diseases are mirrors of prevailing political, ecological conditions. They are microcosms enacted in the human body, in ourselves, of larger events being enacted on the social, political and earthly body.

To heal ourselves is as rigorous and difficult as healing our societies or healing the planet. Healing the body requires exactly what it takes to heal the planet: a major, serious reorganization, if not total change, of one's life. This is where we see the intractable hold



which Thanatos has upon our individual and collective psyches. Those old but not wise ways, familiar and habitual, so-called safe, socially sanctioned, economically expedient, culturally proscribed ways which manifest clear and evident dangers, hold fast within us nevertheless. It sometimes takes an action as extreme and violent as the illness itself to wrest ourselves free from the very 'beloved' conditions which are killing us.

I want to say a few simple but urgent things here. These images and metaphors are not absolute; they must be shaped by the experience and understanding of each individual. My experience is that healing occurs or health is improved exactly when individuals commit themselves to finding the metaphors which are the perfect analogues for the nature of the illness which has afflicted them, their own psychological issues and the conditions in the world at large. The more particular and specific the analogue, the greater the opportunity to heal the condition.

Secondly, when I speak about disease as a metaphor, I do not mean that we are solely responsible for our illness. Genetics, environmental toxins, bacteria, viruses are real things to which we also fall victim. To blame the ill for their disease, to assume they did something wrong or did not prevent it from happening or did not respond appropriately, is as pernicious and naive as blaming the rape victim for the rape or the holocaust victim for the Death Camp. Nevertheless, it is infinitely useful as a healing procedure to ask why this person in particular might be suffering this illness in particular at this time.

Working within the metaphor of the disease, seeing how the symptoms resonate within, empowers us to act on our own behalf. Sometimes unbearably helpless against the already overwhelming disease-creating conditions of our society, we find ourselves capable of mobilizing heart, mind and spirit to participate in healing what might otherwise remain a grave condition. But individuals must determine what the metaphor of the disease is for them and work from that.

Disease is a desperate story which the body tells in the hope that we can act to change our life so not to lose it. On a personal level, if we can find the individual story the disease has enacted in us, we have a chance of changing the story, of finding the healing story which may save our lives.

These images are realities of the imagined world. They are

acting upon us in our daily lives. To give them credence—without attributing full responsibility for the conditions—is one step toward giving voice to what has been stifled in us, and beginning on the road to health.

There is another aspect to this, and it is also part of the healing. First cancer, then AIDS, and now the rash of immune system diseases, have forced us to create healing communities. Families and communities otherwise severely alienated and distracted from each other often find that the imperative of cancer draws them together and that somehow the individuals who care for the person are healed themselves, especially from their alienation. The kind of camaraderie we have seen in this century in resistance movements, solidarity movements, civil rights and women's movement etc., now occurs in the home. One sees this most vividly in the gay community as it confronts AIDS. Person after person seems to become the recipient of a kindly communal care involving everyone. Many people who for one reason or another were forced to give up children or family find themselves, not ironically, gaining their lives, not in child-rearing, but in the equally momentous task of attending someone who is dying. These death watches have become the means of soul making and community building.

In these times one factor after another forces us toward isolation, self-centeredness and self-absorption in our own lives. Ambition and the profit motive daily erode what we used to rely on as fundamental human values. Caring, empathy, and interdependence are too often dismissed as the illness of co-dependence. Those values which tied individuals, families and communities together have all but disappeared in the complete global demoralization since Guernica and World War II.

To be challenged by the absolute necessity for community and mutual caretaking is a dreadful blessing. The incontrovertible need to take care of each other, to cherish what is precious, to tend what we love, are joys to which extremis demands we return.

The core of this global issue is the will to *Life*, as distinct from our own individual or species will to live, distinct from the uninformed individual and species reflex to persist or survive no matter the way or the means or the consequences.

The will to Life and the values of Life. To live our lives devoted to the life force, to this planet, to nature, to what is green, is a shift of the most radical order.

Some years ago, I dreamed the earth had been devastated by nuclear war. In abject despair, I contemplated suicide, but a Voice demanded, "Have a child. New life! New life!"

Every day, I confront the tendencies inside myself to deny Gaia, to have other gods before Her, to diminish, trivialize and undermine zest, passion, play, solitude, idleness, contemplation, creativity, fertility, my love of the outdoors, the tenderness for the green things. Consciously and unconsciously, we need to come to the moment when we say, "We have become Life!"

Ethics, the oldest of philosophic concerns, long ignored in this half of the century, returns now as a constituent of the healing arts. How we live our lives, how we act toward ourselves and others, how we treat the environment, how we regulate our inner lives, has become of crucial relevance to our physical health. Finally, how we live as ethical beings directly affects how we live as physical beings. The health of the soul and the health of the body—and the health of the planet—have become as one.