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# Time Does Not Heal All Wounds

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In studying the way, realizing it is hard;  
once you have realized it, preserving it is hard;  
when you can preserve it,  
putting it into practice is hard.

ZEN SAYING



AMONG THE MOST FREQUENTLY REPEATED PHRASES about suffering is that “time heals all wounds” or “this too shall pass.” Time passes. It does not heal. Healing is an active process not a passive one. If we have a cut and do nothing to clean it out or do not apply a salve, it will probably form a scab. It might take longer and it might develop an infection, but the wound will most likely close and leave a scar.

When I was about five years old I ran away from home. I didn’t get very far; the downstairs vestibule. I waited what seemed like an eternity for someone to come looking for me. When no one did, I put my hand through a small decorative pane of glass in my attempt to open the door. A little sliver of glass was left in the soft fleshy part of my hand. It closed up with that glass inside.

When we experience woundings to our heart, soul, and mind, it feels as if we have been torn open. Sometimes we are bleeding, figuratively, from every orifice of our bodies. Eventually the bleeding stops and the wound closes, but what has closed inside? Have we healed or just closed up with our anger, fear, resentment, and doubt inside? Occasionally we develop a “weeping wound,” which doctors define as a wound that doesn’t heal because of noxious matter that continues to fester and ooze. How many “weeping wounds” can we sustain before our entire system becomes infected?

As we begin to explore the meaning of healing through loss, we discover the ancient spiritual roots of the healing arts. From prehistoric time, the healer or shaman was the most powerful teacher and wise one of the clan. In many languages, the phrase

*to heal* comes from the expression “to be whole,” derived from the belief that when we become sick, we lose our wholeness. Something or someone has broken through our wholeness and caused dis-ease within our body. To heal is to come back into that lost wholeness and ease. Returning to wholeness often means that we must somehow integrate the disease so it is no longer identified as a threat. Once it becomes part of us, we have incorporated what was thought to be a threat into our hearts and souls and minds. This explains how it is possible for someone with an incurable illness to be healed—they can use the disease as a path into wholeness. My friend Philomena lived twenty-one months past the three-month life span doctors had given her. In those two years she reached out to find her healing and possibly her cure. She searched for all those places inside where she felt “not whole” and eventually became the person she always wanted to be. Her last words to me were: “If the price of this illness was learning all I’ve learned, I gladly pay with my life because I’ve become the person I always wanted to be.”

Healing and curing are two very different concepts. Healing is a spiritual idea and curing is a medical one. Healing is an active process. It doesn’t happen to us; we must participate in the process of our healing. Healing happens for us. It is a gift we give to ourselves in the moment we decide to stay “open” to that which has broken us.

In chronic pain management, we are taught not to tighten around the pain but to relax and allow the pain to be present. The idea is that when pain is resisted, it intensifies. When we breathe deeply and acknowledge the presence of pain, it has room to move and can flow through us more readily. Pain is there to tell us something, to warn us of possible danger. This is as true for emotional, spiritual, and mental pain as it is for physi-

cal pain. When pain speaks, we need to listen. All it takes is paying attention to our pain so that when it comes, we remember to breathe and get soft. We don't want to fight with our pain. We want to learn from it.

Time does not heal. But healing does take time. Give yourself the gift of time. To become whole means that as we open to the pain, we open to the loss. We break open and, as a consequence, we get bigger and include more of life. We include what would have been "lost" to us if our hearts and minds had closed against the pain. We include what would have been lost if we had not taken the time to heal. As singer/songwriter Carly Simon tells us: "There's more room in a broken heart."

