

The 10 Commandments of Healing

As part of this issue about spirituality, I asked Dr Balfour Mount to share some of his thinking on this subject in this reflection. His wisdom has always moved me and I hope it will do the same for you. Remember, we are spiritual beings and our work in cancer and cancer education is spiritual work, full of meaning and purpose and a great opportunity for us to do work on ourselves as we search for our own wholeness. That's not a bad thing to bring to the clinic, the bedside, the classroom, or the research laboratory!

—Joseph F. O'Donnell, MD

How important to attend to the insights of our teachers, that is to say, the men, women, and children who have been our patients and their families. We are indebted to them for the legacy they leave us. Paradoxically, their end-of-life lessons have not been about dying, but about living. What is the core lesson they have taught us? It is that healing is the central goal of life. I am not speaking of *physical* healing, a person can die healed: what I mean by "healing" is a shift in our quality of life away *from* anguish and suffering, *toward* an experience of integrity, wholeness, and inner peace. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines healing as a process of adaptation, a "coming to terms with things as they are."

The psyche, it would seem, has an intrinsic tendency toward healing, a will-to-wholeness, as it were. How can we experience that? How can you and I find inner peace in the turmoil of each day? Let me summarize our patients' message to us as "*The 10 Commandments of Healing*." They are:

1. BE TRULY PRESENT TO THIS MOMENT. Healing, like love,

celebration, awe, wonder, and ecstasy, happens in *the now*, in the present moment, free from ruminations of the past and fears about the future. As Oliver Wendell Holmes stated it, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

And yet I find that I spend most of my time preoccupied with the past or the future. I must come into the present; be aware of the persons and things that are around me *right now*.

2. TRUST. Healing involves letting go, a leap of faith, "diving not drowning" as Carl Jung expressed it. Lou Gehrig's disease patient Phil Simmons called it "learning to fall." We fall *from* head, *to* heart; *from* egoism and our carefully constructed defense mechanisms, we fall *into* forgiveness of ourselves and others, the realization of the staggering potential of our essential selves, and an awareness of healing connections.

We may experience these connections at four levels: a sense of connection to self (Carl Jung's individuation); connection to others (Martin Buber's "I-thou" relating); connection to the world perceived through our senses (as with music, or the grandeur of nature); and connection to ultimate meaning, however perceived by that person: God, the Other, the Cosmos, the More, the unity of all things.

3. ATTEND TO YOUR WHOLE PERSON NEEDS. According to the time-honored metaphoric classification, we are "body, mind, and spirit," or, "body, spirit, and soul," depending on your preference. We must care for our needs in *each* of these domains *every* day.

4. BE OPEN TO DEEPER RELATING. Recall that our inner life is relational in its expression. It is re-

flected in how we relate at the four levels noted above.

Within your religious or wisdom tradition seek out teachers who speak from personal experience, not dogma. Go to depth. As C. S. Lewis observed, "The process of living seems to consist in coming to realize truths so ancient and simple that, if stated, they sound like barren platitudes." Lewis continues, "They cannot sound otherwise to those who have not had the relevant experience: that is why there is no real teaching of such truths possible and every generation starts from scratch."

5. LISTEN TO YOUR INTUITION. As Joseph Campbell put it, "Follow your bliss."

6. CREATE. Identify things you like to do. Make time for your creative side each day.

7. DEVELOP YOUR SELF-REFLECTIVE SKILLS. Monitor self, noting your thoughts and feelings. They are *not* reality. They are your *response to* reality. Let go of them and come back to your center of calm. Work on becoming self-aware with questioning that asks, "What is my personality type and how does that influence how I feel about myself, how I relate to others and to the situations I find myself in? What are my defenses—the walls I build to protect myself, but that also imprison me?"

8. BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF. Progression toward healing is slow. Indeed, the goal is never reached. The journey is everything. You are a unique experiment in creation, with a particular potential to contribute to this world. What is it that you alone can do, *must* do, if you are to fully express your potential?

9. THINK SMALL. Give up illusions of control. Recognize that we are all in the same boat, *exactly* the same

boat. The ego-driven values of Western culture (“I am number one”; the need for wealth, power, and control; the distrust of all but the physical; the need to be the best in the world in what you do) stand in the way of healing.

Avoid power; neutralize the fantasies it creates in situations where it is bestowed on you. Humility and openness are essential antecedents to healing; joy, peace, and a sense of connectedness its products.

10. CELEBRATE. In the direst of circumstances, boundless peace is to be found within. Recall Viktor Frankl’s hard-won observation, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” If Frankl can find life worth celebrating in Auschwitz, chances are I can find my cup half full, perhaps full to overflowing, here and now.

These are the 10 commandments of healing that our teachers have given us.

Healing involves a process of opening, slowing, centering, trusting, hoping, and accepting. It involves recognizing the potential that still remains, in spite of all that has been lost.

For each of us the path toward healing will be different. The most certain path I have found is meditation. I do

not imply that it is the only path. It is just the only path I know. The purpose of meditation, in its many forms, is to create alert awareness with a still mind and presence to the moment.

There is no shortcut to healing. Carl Jung put it this way, “The attainment of wholeness requires one to stake one’s whole being. Nothing less will do; there can be no easier conditions, no substitutes, no compromises.”

How do we find healing? We must take up the journey anew each day. What better day to recommit than today? No one else can do it for me. No one else can do it for you. Hillel expressed it succinctly, “If I don’t do it, who will do it? If I don’t do it right now, when will I do it?”

I wish each of you well on your journey.

SUGGESTED READING

Arndt J, Goldenberg J, Solomon S, et al. Death can be hazardous to your health: Adaptive and ironic consequences of defenses against the terror of death. In: Masling J, Duberstein P, eds. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Sickness and Health*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. 2000;201-257.

Buber M, RG Smith, trans. *I and Thou*. Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark; 1973.

Cassell EJ. The nature of suffering and the goals of medicine. *N Engl J Med*. 306:639-645.

Cohen SR, Mount Bm, Bruera E, et al. Validity of the McGill Quality of Life Questionnaire in the palliative care setting: a multi-centre Canadian study demonstrating the importance

of the existential domain. *Palliat Med*. 1997;11:3-20.

Frankl V. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 1959.

Fricchione GL: *Medicine and spirituality: the separation challenge and the attachment solution*. *Contexts*. 1999;7:XX-XX.

Jung CG: *Psychology and alchemy*. Vol. 12 In: *The Collected Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1953:336.

Kabat-Zinn J. *Wherever You Go There You Are*. New York, NY: Hyperion; 1994.

Kagawa-Singer M. Redefining health: living with cancer. *Soc Sci Med*. 1993;37:295-304.

Kearney M. *A Place of Healing: Working with Suffering in Living and Dying*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2000.

Kearney M, Mount B. Spiritual care of the dying. In: Chochinov HM, Breitbart W, eds. *Handbook of Psychiatry in Palliative Medicine*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2000:357-373.

Lunn L. Spiritual concern in palliation. In Saunders C, ed. *The Management of Terminal Disease*, 3rd ed. London, England: Edward Arnold; 1993:213-225.

Martin PW. *Experiment in Depth: A Study of the Work of Jung, Eliot and Tynbee*. New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul; 1955.

Reading A. *Illness and disease*. *Med Clin North Am*. 1977;61:703-710.

Saunders C. *Spiritual pain*. *J Palliat Care*. 1988;4:29-32.

Simmons P. *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. New York, NY: Bantam; 2002.

Tolle E. *The Power of Now*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Namaste Publishing; 1997.

Yalom ID. *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Basic Books; 1980.

BALFOUR M. MOUNT, MD
*Emeritus Professor of Palliative
Medicine, McGill University*