

Healing as Metaphor

I haven't written a word yet, and already I can tell you that this is not the essay I intended to write. When I was fully engaged in the life of illness and laboring in the work of recovery, there is little I hated more than well-meaning friends (and even strangers) offering what they imagined to be words of comfort: this will make you a better rabbi. I still find these words theologically offensive. But I can't deny that they are true.

There's a line in a song by Carrie Newcomer I've always loved: "when I get healed, I'm gonna be a healer / that's just the nature of those things". I don't believe that everything happens for a reason, or that God only gives us what we can handle. I do believe that we can learn from our deepest and most painful struggles, and, sometimes, these wrestlings can make us better.

I suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm when I was 26 years old, halfway through Rabbinic school. I underwent eight hours of open-cranial brain surgery (but not before I demanded that someone read me the Psalm that asks, "I look to the mountains, from where will my help come?"), five weeks of inpatient rehabilitation, five months with my mother living on my couch to help me to cook, bathe, answer the telephone, and to press me to perform the endless cycle of physical therapy home exercises every day. Rather than Bible, Midrash, History, Talmud, and Liturgy, I studied occupational therapy, vision therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, psychotherapy, cranial-sacral therapy and practiced getting out of my wheelchair to use a walker and then to learn to walk with a cane.

I finger-painted profanity, cursed God, groaned when a classmate offered to put a note in the Western Wall to pray for my healing, and laughed ironically when my friends held hands around my hospital bed, tears streaming down their cheeks, in a healing circle.

I found solace only in the Book of Job and cherished the wisdom of crying out in pain, screaming at the God who Creates Everything. Job wisely asks, "Though I speak, my pain is not assuaged; and though I forbear, what am I eased?" But the Israeli poet, Yehudah Amichai, acknowledges, "I learned to speak from my pain".

Ultimately, Ecclesiastes feels most true to me: "to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven". In my case, there is a time for fury and a time for gratitude.

My teachers at HUC are the greatest of my life. But the aneurysm was my graduate school. I learned Bible and Talmud and Liturgy and Theology from my hospital bed, in the physical therapy office, and on the acupuncture table. I know what I need to know as a rabbi because of how I've navigated through my own healing: how to sit with discomfort, with silence, with not knowing; how to be patient with the long process of healing (seeing healing as a verb, not a noun); how to allow the natural course of the developmental process to unfold its stages of grieving, healing, reconciling, and struggling. I've also learned how to fight for my health, how to work through a seemingly insurmountable challenge, to live through wanting to die.

More than five years after the aneurysm, I am an ordained rabbi, working as the Assistant Director of the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health at HUC in Los Angeles. I know that God put me on earth to do this work (this belief, though dissonant, exists beside my belief that everything does not happen for a reason). My work at the intersection of Judaism and Health is a space of holiness for me, even as I negotiate my own Judaism and my own health in light of my experience.

In the Talmud, Brachot 5b, a wise and respected sage who has fallen ill is asked, "are your sufferings welcome to you?" The sage answers, "Not them, nor their reward". I hear in these words echoes of words

I've heard throughout the past five years, this will make you a better rabbi.

Though neither my sufferings nor their rewards were (or are) welcome to me, I cannot deny that I am learning from them, nonetheless. Through my work at the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health, I encounter Jews with disabilities (some not unlike my own), I sit beside friends suffering the worst losses of their lives, facing illness and death, I see bad things happening to good people everyday. I am in love with the Torah as a source of healing wisdom (sometimes). For the first time since the aneurysm, I joined a synagogue this year and restarted a dialogue with Shabbat, traditional ritual and prayer after many months of angry silence. When people ask me why bad things happen to good people, I know the weight of the question because I have held it with both hands. I find myself drawn to chaplaincy, to hospitals, to people wrestling with unthinkable pain, with full awareness that there is little I can do but offer to walk beside them. I know what I don't know, what I can't know, what it is impossible to know. And I, like Rainer Maria Rilke, live the question now.

I recently read the classic book, *Illness as Metaphor* and loved it. I loved the internal contradiction of understanding illness as a metaphor and, simultaneously, knowing that the premise is faulty. As my dance teacher, Gabriella Salvatore, used to tell me, "no pain, no pain." Illness is illness. And illness is metaphor. Both are true.

HUC is still bringing me the greatest teachers of my life. The director of the Kalsman Institute, Michele Prince, models excellence in every area of our work together: she asks sensitive questions about my special needs and pushes me to work hard. The Founding Director, Bill Cutter, teaches me poetry and professionalism in one breath. I go to work every day and I know that I am a healer. As Carrie Newcomer reminds me in her song, "it's just the nature of those things".

On her new album, Carrie Newcomer recorded a song with which I've fallen in love, *The Clean Edge of Change*. The stanza resonating in my heart this season is the bridge, poised midway through the song, "and who am I, who makes this sound, who rode the shadow all the way down to the clean edge of change / in the clear space of knowing that there's as many names for dark as light / I'm choosing mostly now to speak the ones that get me through the night, but always with humility, with a worn out but a grateful heart..." As time passes, I, too, find myself standing on the clean edge of change.

Still, I never seem to want to take sick days (even when I have the flu); I hoard them like only a survivor might understand. More than I care to admit, I await the next tragedy, the next trauma, the next reason to need more help from doctors, specialists, and therapists than I can even imagine. I live every day balanced precariously on the edge of safety. And I know this, more than any certificate or graduate course, makes me a rabbi.