

Desolation and Hope

My daughter is deeply involved in her indigenous Polynesian culture and has been learning about the unspeakable crimes that colonists, for hundreds of years, have inflicted throughout the world.

From Hawai`i to Honduras, from Massachusetts to Moorea, indigenous people have suffered from disease, war and conquest brought by outsiders.

From the sin of human slavery to the decimation of cultural treasures, the often forgotten wars waged against indigenous people, too often in the name of "god" and "civilization" is truly horrifying.

When Gandhi was asked: "What do you think of Western civilization?", he famously replied: "I think it would be a good idea."

And so the question becomes, how can these travesties be remedied?

Can they be healed?

Should, as many are urging today, historically oppressed people rise up with weapons and arms?

Is a violent response the proper or effective or just way to redeem stolen lands, stolen cultures?

Yet the beauty of indigenous cultures is that for thousands of years, they learned to live in harmony with the land and very often with each other.

The Hawaiian tradition of ho`oponopono, gathering the community to resolve injuries, disputes, even crimes, through dialog, confession and forgiveness, speaks to a way other than violence as the way forward.

Because restoring human wholeness seems to be at the root of reconciliation.

At the root of healing.

Restoring wholeness is a soothing balm not only for conflicts between people, but in relieving poor health within a person too.

All of which points us to the difference between cures and healing.

Cures restore something to what was.

Healing looks forward to something new, even if a cure can't, won't or doesn't happen.

And this distinction between cures and healing is a vital one, because while not every malady can be cured, every malady can be healed.

I offer these examples.

She was just 38 when the diagnosis of terminal illness came.

For a few months, there was rage and despair at the unfairness of it all.

Four young children still needing to be raised.

A husband to love.

A new career just beginning in a field she adored.

How could God do this to her?

To them?

But as the months passed, and the diagnosis did not change, she began to change how she saw the diagnosis.

It slowly became an entry way into the suffering of so many others – when it used to be so easy to say “I know how you feel,” now she really did know.

And it became an entry way into God.

A faith that had been strong before, now took on deep mystery.

Profound insight.

And a glow that is usually reserved for pregnant women.

In a sense, she was pregnant.

Not with a child, but with an expectation that she was moving, sooner than she wished, but moving nevertheless, into the far country where God may be known face to face.

When she died that February morning, with a loud groan and a great exhaling of air, it was as if her spirit filled the whole house.

Then, moving upward and outward – into the great mystery that awaits us all.

There was no cure.

But there was profound healing.

Then there's the story about a fellow named Fred.

He too was on the receiving end of a terminal diagnosis.

After a brief period of distress, he says, “something amazing happened.

I simply stopped doing anything that wasn't essential.

If it didn't matter, I didn't do it."

His terminally ill life is suddenly alive with joy and insight and wonder.

But then the doctors change their minds.

What he has is rare, but not something that will kill him.

And better yet, there's a cure!

Fred says: "When I heard this over the telephone, I cried like a baby!

I am afraid my life will go back to the way it was!" P. Senge, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, 25-6, modified.

Fred is cured.

But he's freaking out — because maybe he won't be healed.

We live in a country and in a culture that typically short-changes healing, because we are so often obsessed with cures.

But our faith gently reminds us that healing is perhaps what matters most of all.

And healing can always happen.

Even without, and sometimes even despite, a cure.

That truth is hammered home in Mark's gospel today.

Mark continues his rapid-fire reflections on the ministry of Jesus.

And what you can't miss is that where Jesus is — there is life, not death.

There is healing, not sickness.

From Peter's mother-in-law who, upon her recovery becomes the very first deacon, immediately serving those in need; to the whole town of Capernaum, where the sick are healed, disease is routed, and devils are sent packing.

This is what the Kingdom of God looks like.

This is God, alive in the world.

And yet, there remains loved ones addicted to ice.

Kidneys that fail a beloved spouse.

The unending ravages of COVID.

There are the starving poor in Somalia.

Malnourished children in Appalachia.

And here too, in our own Palama.

Yet it is here, where the finger of God touches the tragedies of this fallen world, that the call to seek healing, and not necessarily a cure, invites us into deep contemplation.

In the midst of all his healing, Jesus gets up early, before sunrise, and heads off to the desert, to pray.

Jesus goes to the desert because it's in the desert, and in all of the other desolate places that find their way into our lives, that God draws most near to us.

I don't know why that is.

But it seems that desolation, which may come in the form of a lonely place or a cancer diagnosis, reveals windows that are not otherwise readily apparent.

Windows that allow us to peer into the profound mystery that is our life.

Windows that open, just as every door closes.

As one writer puts it: "It is a truth long known that some secrets are hidden from health." J. Updike, *Collected Poems*, 28.

Jesus heals those in desolate circumstances.

Then heads for the desolate places to encounter the Father.

And I wonder if what we are to take from the desolation that will invariably arise in your life, in mine, is not that it's caused by God; but that when it comes, God is waiting.

As always.

Only now, perhaps we can see, perhaps we can hear, the still, small voice that longs to assure us that we are each of us beloved children of this God who gathers the outcasts.

Who heals the brokenhearted.

Who binds up our wounds.

And who better to do so than the very one who was wounded by us?

And for us.

So that we might hope in his steadfast love.

I hope that my daughter, in her passion for justice for her people, might come to grasp that violence is never the answer to injustice.

That the beauty of native peoples is their inherent understanding that they are connected to that which is bigger than what our senses perceive.

That going back to the way things were is likely impossible.

But that moving forward to the way things might become is worth the devotion of a lifetime.

Because, in the end, it is the cross, that horrific reality of human sadism; that eternal symbol of the desolation God endures for our sake, that brings us home.

The cross makes it possible to venture out into the abyss of faith.

Seeking healing.

Even when a cure is denied.

Because in Jesus, death is not the worst thing.

Because in Jesus, death is, even now, defeated.

And the God who is faithful to us in life is faithful to us — even in death.

This is the message of Jesus Christ.

Proclaimed in Galilee.

Proclaimed to the ends of the earth!

Tell it again when you leave this place today!

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