

Toward a Theology of Wellness

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A young boy runs back and forth, up and down the length of a room with soft padding underfoot. He is clearly agitated and sits down suddenly and begins to rock back and forth, hugging his knees. A young man comes up to him, sits down beside him and, hugging his knees, begins to rock just like the boy. They keep this up for a few moments until the boy gives a sideways glance toward the man who is moving just like he is. They establish eye contact, the first person-to-person contact this young boy with autism has made with anyone in a very long time.

I saw this scene last year during a screening of a remarkable film titled, *Autism: The Musical*. Elaine Hill, whose son is the boy in this scene, discovered that while therapists and physicians had failed to make much progress in helping her son to communicate and function in the world, the actors with whom she worked as a director, could and did make a big difference. “Other people tried to force him to respond and act in ‘normal’ ways,” she said. “But actors aren’t afraid to act strange—they do it all the time. Instead of expecting my son to get how to function normally they joined his world first and built a bridge to ours.” Elaine Hill received a vision from her experience. She gathered a group of kids living with issues all along the autism spectrum, and she worked with them to write, produce, and perform a full-blown musical. The film is a chronicle of their triumph—kids who barely speak or know how to interact with others are able to sing and dance and imagine whole new worlds.

Autism results when the brain receives too much sensory material, too much information. The mind panics and tries to regain control. One way of doing this is to close up the self and do nothing but engage in repeated actions that are familiar, acknowledging no new external stimuli. But if another person can join in the repetitious behavior, there is a chance that the anxious mind of the autistic person might recognize a link with the outside world that is less frightening or as dangerous than it appeared to be.

This is a mirror, a true image of what Christians have to say about healing. The Christian gospel is about the healing of humankind’s ancient woundedness, our persistent and tragically self-destructive behavior.¹ We

close in on ourselves. We are afraid. The world overwhelms us and so in a million and one inventive ways we shut each other out, we lash out from our anxiety and fearfulness. We hurt ourselves. The Christian tradition calls this alienation and isolation “the fall.” It is the story of Adam and Eve, who were originally at one with creation, who knew and delighted in their status as creatures until they were compelled to hide from God and from one another. They lost their capacity to speak to God. And almost immediately their children began to behave in murderous ways. Sin and death have come into the world. But in Christ, God enters our human condition, God joins us, God builds a bridge so that we might know once again whole and holy relationships, with one another and with God. God restores us to health.

Wellness and the Reign of God

The concept of wellness lies very close to the heart of the Gospel. The word salvation itself is closely related to the Latin word for health. Jesus said he came so that we might have abundant life. He tells his friends that they must be whole, wholesome, and complete, just as God is: “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) The Greek word for perfect is *teleios*, which means to be brought to completion, to maturity, to wholeness. Perhaps the most significant sign of Jesus’ identity and his inauguration of the Reign of God was his ministry of healing. Story after story in the Gospels tells us about Jesus’ compassion for those who are sick or suffering. When the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus if he is the one they have been waiting for, he tells them to go and tell John what they have seen: the blind see, the lame walk, and the poor finally hear the good news. Even the forgiveness of sin is presented in terms of healing and restoration to a state of wellness. The woman caught in the act of adultery is set free from the judgment of her accusers and told to go and sin no more. Jesus restores the integrity of her personhood when he restores her to the community. He makes her well.

The early church continued to understand its experience of the Risen Christ in terms of health and wellness. Immediately after the experience of Pentecost, Peter and John encounter a man lame from birth and tell him all they have to give him is healing in the name of Jesus. The man walks. In some of the earliest writings of the Christian scriptures, Paul pictures the church as the Body of Christ, various parts working

together with ease and suppleness so that the whole body might move and grow into maturity. When one member is unhealthy or diseased the whole body suffers. Life in Christ is growth into the image and likeness of Christ who is the perfect image of God. The startling claim of scripture is that the fullness of who God is dwells bodily in Christ and that we come to that same fullness of life because we are members of Christ. (Colossians 2:9–10) To be in union with Christ is to be made well in an ultimate sense.

Wellness results in right relationships, the practice of communion and community.

In the first chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, Paul draws out the purpose of this union with Christ. He says, “God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.” (Galatians 1:15–16)

The healing and wholeness that comes from God is nothing less than the manifestation of the Risen Christ in the believer. Christ is revealed in us for the purpose of mission, so that God’s wholeness and healing love, known and experienced in Jesus, might be extended to the whole world. And that love bears wounds, just as the Risen Jesus showed to Thomas. Even in our obvious weakness and brokenness, we are called to complete reliance on Christ who is revealed in us and through us for the sake of the world. Wellness, in Christian terms, does not mean the absence of weakness or pain. After Paul prayed repeatedly to be relieved of some persistent ailment, the answer he received from God was: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Corinthians 12:9) God’s glory is revealed in the vulnerability and brokenness of Christ in the great mystery of the cross, and every Christian is invited to take up the cross and carry it with and for those who have no choice about bearing it. The wholeness God wills for us has to do with the transformation of our weakness into the love of God for all who suffer. Our wholeness is made complete in compassion.

***Theosis*—Ultimately Well?**

In the Christian tradition, what does it mean to be ultimately well? During its first several centuries, the church developed a rich theological notion called *theosis*, or deification. It can be summarized simply: “God became human, so that humankind might become God.” For the early church, this is the essence of salvation. In the seventh century Maximus the Confessor wrote, “Because God has become man, man can become God.

He rises by divine steps corresponding to those by which God humbled himself out of love for men, taking on himself, without any change in himself, the worst of our condition.”² By our adoption into the Body of Christ, we have access to the perfect life of God. Irenaeus of Lyons says simply, “God is himself the life of those who participate in him.”³ Our humanity is not obliterated by this union with God, but fulfilled. At the deepest level, our identity depends on our relationship with God.

Theologians of the patristic period describe the Christian life as a process of deification in Holy Baptism; body, mind, and spirit are infused with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and drawn progressively deeper into the eternal reality of God. For the baptized, resurrection begins now. Every Eucharist is an experience of remembering the Body of Christ, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. A second-century writer called the Eucharist the *pharmakon*, the medicine of immortality.⁴ Because we have already begun to taste resurrected life, we are empowered to join together in making the Reign of God a reality in this world. The Holy Spirit draws us into God’s project of healing the world. And while this healing work invites our conscious participation, it does not depend on our efforts. Holiness is not a matter of our achieving moral excellence or theological correctness; it is a matter of being grasped by the Spirit of God. We “press on” with the ministry of healing and reconciliation in this world, because Christ has already begun this work in us and in the whole of creation. (Philippians 3:12) This is the mission of the church, to cooperate in God’s agenda of mending creation.

Balance and Holy Relationship

Many physicians and other healthcare professionals describe a healthy body as one in which physical systems are in balance, working together with ease so that a person is able to meet the challenges of growth and change and able to engage in life-giving relationships. Similarly, for members of the Body of Christ, the image of the Holy Trinity itself illustrates this dimension of what we mean by wellness. Think of the great classical icon of the Holy Trinity, an image given its most popular form in the fifteenth century by Anton Rublev, a Russian icon maker.

In this image, based on a story in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis in which Christians have long seen a prefiguring of the Trinity, three angelic visitors come to Abraham and Sarah. They are said to be an appearance of “the Lord,” and they speak and act as one. In the icon they are pictured

seated at the table provided by the hospitality of Sarah and Abraham. The figures appear lovingly inclined toward one another. They seem to be peacefully attentive to each other, distinct persons in a dynamic communion of love, engaged in a holy communion that is radically open. The holy conversation at that table creates a space for the viewer, for us. We are invited into a transforming relationship with God and one another. Ultimately we call this eternal life.

The unity of God (i.e., the Trinity) is neither static nor simple. Neither is our life in union with God. To speak of the One God in Three Persons is to speak of the fullness of God's life as a kind of dynamic tension between differentiation and unity. This is expressed by the self-giving of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the icon of the Trinity, the cup on the table represents sacrifice. There is no healing, in other words, apart from encountering the boundaries of what it means to be a person, the self-giving required to be in relationship with other persons. Healing humankind as made in the image of God means embracing our diversity, the life-giving tensions that come with it, and the sacrifices required to sustain community. It means coming to regard diversity and tension in light of the love of God revealed to us in Christ Jesus. In a world of instant communication, fragmenting cultures, and massive weaponry, the stakes have never been higher. The very future of humanity may depend on cultivating a reverence for what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls the "Dignity of Difference."⁵ The wellness of creation requires it.

The church is an outward and visible sign of the mystery of Christ. Sacramental signs serve to communicate the reality to which they point. Healthy and well-differentiated relationships within the church signify the dynamic love of God in Christ which makes itself vulnerable to the wounds of the world. Healthy relationships—with others and with the self—make for a resilient diversity that is capable of meeting, embracing, and transforming pain and confusion, no small matter in a world of rapid change and chronic anxiety. Again, the human body provides an analogy. As the writer David Whyte points out, a healthy heartbeat is constantly changing, responding to stimuli and interacting with other physical and emotional processes.⁶ A sure sign of a heart about to die is an unresponsively dull, unwavering beat. Over time, a healthy heart, constantly subject to fluctuations and changes in rhythm, demonstrates a remarkably stable pattern. In a healthy body, organs and systems exist in complementary relationships capable of adapting and responding to challenges and change. Resiliency is a reliable indicator of good health and the diversity in which it is rooted.

Diversity, the source of what makes us strange to one another and even to ourselves, the disfiguring of which is the root of hatred and war, can also be healed into an image of Divinity. As the Jewish mystical tradition has it, “Unity in heaven creates diversity on earth.”⁷ Christ entered the full particularity of our human life, with its weaknesses and joys and sorrows. Jesus knew himself as a distinct individual in a particular time and place, in a world where hope for an abundant life was systematically crushed under the weight of oppressive political and religious systems. “Christ emptied himself,” says the letter to the Philippians, “taking the form of a servant.” (Philippians 2:8) In Christ, God took on our human nature, emptying himself into our wounded condition. He walked through a world where distinctions and diversity were kept under oppressive control. He touched those who were not supposed to be touched. He accepted and healed those who were supposed to be beyond hope. He died rather than make anyone else a victim. So the wholeness of humanity, its ultimate healing and reconciliation, does not require the elimination of differences or even conflict. It does require a transformed will and heart. It requires the “mind of Christ” who gave himself for others, who offered himself to God. Christ “emptied himself,” not clinging even to his own divine selfhood.

Healing the Self

Twenty years ago my son was born two months early. Jonathan was a strong baby and we were lucky that he was born without many of the complications that many premature infants suffer. He was, however, born with a particular congenital abnormality: he was born without a left hand. In the weeks following his birth I had a recurring dream in which the central figure was a little boy with two hands. I quickly figured out the meaning of the dream (or so I thought) by concluding that the little boy in the dream was a flawless, fantasy version of my son. I decided that God was telling me I needed to let go of that “perfect” fantasy child in order to embrace the reality of my son. A friend of mine, who was as much a spiritual director to me as anyone, listened to the story of my son’s birth and the recurring dream and the sense I had made of it all, and then rearranged my spiritual landscape. He understood what I thought the dream was telling me, but then he told me I was wrong. It wasn’t a fantasy version of my son in the dream; it was a perfect fantasy version of myself. My son was and is just

fine the way he is—it was me God wanted to heal. God was inviting me to release the impossible standards of perfection and performance I demand of myself. Ultimately, it was an invitation to heal me of the many ways I attempt to play at being God.

Accepting my own partiality, my own incompleteness, my creatureliness, the tension created by my weaknesses, is part of the work of salvation within me. It is an aspect of sustaining a healthy sense of self. Acceptance is not the same thing as the compulsive focus our culture puts on techniques for “self-improvement,” rather it is a clear and honest view of myself in the light of Christ’s love for me. In the twelfth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of four degrees of love.

There is the first infantile stage of “love of self for the sake of self.” “Give me that bottle!” We may progress to the next stage of “love of the other for the sake of self. “Oh, *you* gave me that bottle.” And so on to the more or less selfless stage of “love of the other for the sake of the other.” This is the place of genuine human love, a reflection of the love of God, the place of altruism. But, says Bernard, there is a final stage which is heaven’s healing. This is the “love of self only for the sake of the Other.” Knowing this love is to arrive at a true image of myself, a measure of the view God has of me, to see myself to some degree in the way the One who loves me into being sees me.⁸

Practicing Abundant Life

The church is called to be a communicating sign, a sacramental agent of the desire of Christ for this world. We pray our theology. We do it. We are called to practice what we pray so that our words will take on flesh and blood. Wellness, wholeness, abundant life is the will of God for all God’s people. Abundant life should be observable in the baptized community. People should be able to taste it and touch it. The Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church commits all the members of the church to practices that support and sustain the health of the Body of Christ, practices that aim to make God’s healing love not simply true, but also real. “Will you do all in your power to uphold these persons in their life in Christ?” we ask. “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Respect for the integrity, the dignity of every human person is central to the baptismal promises. The Eucharistic assembly is a model of differentiated unity—all the members of the church take distinctive roles in the celebration,

and all are needed so that the meal may be shared, the Body nourished and empowered for mission.

Churches have taken important steps to ensure that all their members can live in safety. Intentional ministries of health and wholeness have arisen in many places. For physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, there is an increasing interest in the importance of spirituality and the life of prayer in achieving and sustaining health. Prayer groups and ministers of healing are rediscovering the riches of our tradition in the laying on of hands and anointing. There is a growing recognition that genuine health depends on the interdependence and integration of mind, body, and spirit, and that promoting this integration is the business of the whole church. Promoting the health, reconciliation, and well-being of the world requires a church of richly diverse gifts, praying constantly for its own reconciliation, healing, and conversion to Christ.



Notes

1. Christmas Message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, December 17, 2008.
2. Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1993), 263.
3. *Ibid.*, 265.
4. Willy Rordorf, et al., *The Eucharist of the Early Christians* (Liturgical Press, 1978), 61.
5. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilization* (New York: Continuum, 2002).
6. David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* (Random House, 2002), 226f.
7. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 54.
8. *On the Love of God*, online version at Christian Classics Ethereal Library.