



The Healer's Art

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Part I

Helping Ourselves Heal

CHAPTER 1

The Art of Healing



The healing arts refer to a group of practices designed to enhance our physical and emotional health. These include traditional forms of medical and psychological treatment as well as complementary health practices, such as music, art, drama, and other creative approaches. Three states in the United States (including my state of Kansas) refer to their medical regulatory bodies as “healing arts” boards. What is the *art* of healing, and how we can learn and implement it more fully? Isn’t healing a process reserved for Jesus Christ? How can imperfect individuals, such as you and I, participate in and facilitate healing in others? This book attempts to answer those questions, even if in part, and help us each learn the healer’s art.

There is so much that needs healing in this world—relationships, identities, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as broader systems such as communities, governments, and cultures. We cannot escape internal and external strife. In many ways, the human condition is one of “woundedness” in this fallen world. As much as we would never expect to walk through water without getting wet, sometimes we can find ourselves expecting to traverse our mortal journey here on Earth while avoiding the injuries and wounds associated with it.

In my experience, no one is without wounds, however hard to detect they sometimes can be. Over the years, as a clinical psychologist, I have been privileged to sit down with hundreds of individuals who appear to have a life

of ease and those to whom others look as being perfectly “put together.” Without exception, conversations with these individuals have revealed significant worries, challenges, and trauma that others never would have supposed existed. I have experienced this time and time again.

We all carry wounds, and many of those wounds are not visible. President Henry B. Eyring shared the following insight from one of his mentors:

Many years ago, I was first counselor to a district president in the eastern United States. More than once, as we were driving to our little branches, he said to me, “Hal, when you meet someone, treat them as if they were in serious trouble, and you will be right more than half the time.” Not only was he right, but I have learned over the years that he was too low in his estimate.¹

I agree with President Eyring’s higher estimate. In fact, I would be hard pressed to think of anyone I have known over the years who didn’t have “serious trouble,” either now or in the recent past. Troubles and trials seem to be part of the allotment we are each given in mortality. I’m sure you could make your own list of wounds that you are currently carrying.

The sheer prevalence of such difficulties should come as no surprise to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We are plainly taught that part of the purpose of this life is to be tested. Tests are hard. They require effort. Tests are intended to demonstrate what we have learned and where we are in our learning process.

Counseling together about you and me before we came to this Earth, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ declared: “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.”²

The Savior taught yet another reason for such wounds that need healing in this life. When He and His disciples encountered a man who had been born blind, the disciples assumed his blindness was caused by his or his parents’ disobedience. Jesus gently corrected them and taught: “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.”³

While some of our wounds result from our choices or those of others, many simply cannot be traced to anything more than the vicissitudes of life.

The causes of loneliness, mental illness, unmet expectations, loss, and physical limitations mostly go without explanation. One of the principles the Savior teaches in the account of the blind man is that such wounds allow God to manifest His healing power in our lives. That healing power can subsequently lead us to draw closer to Him in gratitude, love, and humility. This process of sanctification is surely part of the “good” that such experiences were meant to provide us.⁴

The account of the blind man and the disciples’ assumptions about the cause of his blindness spark important questions about how we perceive such conditions in ourselves and others. Elder Alexander Morrison, an emeritus member of the Quorum of the Seventy, wrote an insightful book, *Valley of Sorrow*, in which he detailed some of the myths surrounding mental illness that are all too prevalent in members of the Church.⁵ As so many of our wounds are associated with our mental and emotional health and because our belief in myths prevent us from truly healing, a brief discussion of some of the myths Elder Morrison highlighted should be useful.

Myth 1: All mental illness is caused by sin

The various causes of psychiatric illness continue to be poorly understood, even for those with advanced training and expertise. Although there have been, and will continue to be, wonderful advances in technologies that allow us to understand this more fully, the truth is that most of the time, and for most people, the questions of why we experience mental illness go unanswered. Sometimes in our puzzling over why these things occur, we can attribute familiar concepts that seem to easily make sense of it all. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we are certainly familiar with the idea of sin. We are taught that sin leads to unhappiness⁶ and, by extension, obedience leads to happiness.⁷ If we are not careful, this simplistic and incomplete understanding of happiness/unhappiness can lead us to believe the myth that “bad” things in our life (mental illness, trials, adversity) are caused by sin.

As previously mentioned, there are many explanations for the experiences we have in life, not all of which we understand. And while sin can certainly be the explanation for some of the pain and suffering we experience, many of the

wounds that need healing, including mental illness, often have other causal factors. As Elder Morrison points out, “The truth is that many faithful Latter-day Saints who live the commandments and honor their covenants experience struggles with mental illness or are required to deal with the intense pain and suffering of morally righteous but mentally ill family members.”⁸

Myth 2: Someone is to blame for mental illness

How quick we are to blame ourselves, others, or situations for our difficulties. Perhaps we do this because of our need to understand and simplify complex phenomena. Perhaps it feels easier if we can blame someone or something. Whatever the reason, there is no evidence to suggest that individuals cause mental illness. We do know that mental health conditions arise, partially, from an intricate blend of genetic and environmental factors. Teasing these factors apart has not only proven to be a very difficult endeavor but can take precious time and energy away from other productive efforts to heal. Resist the temptation to assign blame for your wounds. Instead, focus on what you can do to partner with Jesus Christ to experience the healing you need and desire.

Myth 3: People with mental illness just need a priesthood blessing

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have been blessed by the restoration of the priesthood. The priesthood has been defined as “the power of God delegated to man by which man can act in the earth for the salvation of the human family.”² Providing blessings of healing and comfort to individuals through priesthood authority is one of the ways the priesthood is to be used on the earth. In the scriptures we are instructed that those who have received the priesthood shall “lay [their] hands upon the sick and they shall recover.”¹⁰ Many, including myself, can testify of the miracles and healing that have occurred through priesthood blessings. With that as a doctrinal backdrop, we have been counseled that often we also need to incorporate the blessings of God that flow through other sources—doctors, mental health professionals, other people, and so on.

In his October 2013 general conference address, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland spoke of how the Lord heals us of our various infirmities. He counseled us to “seek the advice of reputable people with certified training, professional skills, and good values.” Elder Holland continued, “If you had appendicitis, God would expect you to seek a priesthood blessing *and* get the best medical care available. So too with emotional disorders. Our Father in Heaven expects us to use *all* of the marvelous gifts He has provided in this glorious dispensation.”¹¹

President Dallin H. Oaks taught plainly that “Latter-day Saints believe in applying the best available scientific knowledge and techniques. We use nutrition, exercise, and other practices to preserve health, and we enlist the help of healing practitioners, such as physicians and surgeons, to restore health.” He went on to summarize that when we need healing, we typically “pursue all efforts [spiritual and scientific] simultaneously.”¹²

Myth 4: Mentally ill people just lack willpower

An unfortunate misconception is that those affected by mental illness are somehow flawed or just need to “get over it.” This myth is most certainly a carryover from nineteenth and early twentieth century conceptualizations of mental illness, where individuals were punished, imprisoned, and isolated for their conditions. No evidence supports this claim of lacking willpower. Having met with thousands of individuals with mental health concerns, I know of no one who ever chose to experience mental illness or who could rid themselves of their illness simply by wishing it away or trying harder.

Myth 5: Whatever the cause, mental illness is untreatable

If ever there was a myth that led to discouragement and despondency, the idea that there is nothing that can be done about mental illness would surely win first prize. As is the case with so many of these myths surrounding mental illness, it is based on outdated and faulty conceptualizations. A great deal of scientific data demonstrates the effectiveness of treatments, both pharmacological and non-pharmacological, for many kinds of mental health conditions. Even in cases where causal factors are still unclear, we have been

able to identify strategies, tools, and medications that ameliorate symptoms and improve quality of life.

One of the themes of these myths is causation. What we believe to be the source(s) of mental illness ultimately influences what we believe will “cure” them. Believing in any of these myths, even in part, delays and complicates healing. These myths distract us from the truth, disempower us, and tend to cause inaction. Part of the healing journey for each of us includes debunking such myths and coming to a fuller and more accurate understanding of our wounds.

Art vs. science

Let me return to the idea of healing as an art. One of the things that characterizes art, especially in comparison with science, is its emphasis on subjectivity. Science seeks to apply objective principles to understand natural laws. Art, on the other hand, although highly technical, is more subjective and does not lend itself as well to objective principles and processes. This is not unlike the process of emotional and spiritual healing in our lives.

As a clinical psychologist, I spend a lot of time trying to apply scientific findings and principles in a creative and individual way to help people heal. From this perspective, psychotherapy is very much a scientific art form. For example, over the last few decades, a great deal of work has been done to develop treatment protocols to deliver evidence-based therapies to individuals with a variety of mental health conditions. These protocols tend to be task-based and principle-based with a variety of steps and activities meant to accomplish certain treatment goals. One of the challenges with this work has been to maintain enough flexibility to make the treatment meaningful and effective for each person.

I once treated an adolescent for anxiety with a manualized form of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). One day this young man came into my office and, over the course of my checking in with him and his mother, I discovered their family dog had just died. To press forward with the treatment task I had planned would have been futile and insensitive. He didn't need to practice cognitive restructuring as much as he needed a safe place to grieve the loss of his beloved pet. I was able to shift the focus of our time together, listen

to how he was feeling about this loss, and weave into our conversation previously learned skills that helped him with his grief. That was healing at that time for that young man.

Context matters. Personality characteristics matter, as do a whole host of other factors. When therapy is delivered in a highly rigid, impersonal manner, it does not produce the benefits of the therapy—not because the therapy doesn’t work, but because it (science) must be delivered in a way that accounts for the individual (art). In short, delivering scientific principles creatively and individually produces the strongest treatment effects.

The art of healing requires a similar approach. Throughout this book, we will examine many well-founded principles associated with healing. These are essential. However, their application may look very different for you than they do for me. Our ability to remain flexible and attentive to individual factors will increase our ability to facilitate healing in ourselves and others.

While Christ is perfect and perfectly exemplifies all attributes, we can and must press forward, trying the best we can to be like Him and learn the healer’s art. Nephi counsels us to “do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and your Redeemer should do.”¹³ Jesus Himself, on multiple occasions, said it most eloquently and yet simply: “Follow me.”¹⁴ Our Savior, at His core, is a healer of souls. In fact, He is the Master Healer,¹⁵ the Great Physician.¹⁶ How can we fully follow Him without learning the healer’s art? And who best to learn this “art” from than Him?

This book is about a journey—a journey we each must make to be transformed by the healing power of Jesus Christ. I know you may have questions about your ability to do the work that healing requires, the strength it will take to find healing, the particulars of how to heal, or even the Savior’s ability to heal you completely and permanently.

This book addresses these fears and doubts and describes the pathway of healing in a very clear and practical way. The journey will be long and difficult, but for those who are willing to engage in the process, the end result is assured. Remember, too, that without wounds that need to be healed, we couldn’t truly be tested, nor could we develop the faith necessary to become all that God and His Son intend us to become.

You will notice at the end of each chapter (except for chapters 1 and 2) is a section to help you translate what you will read and learn into action. Those

sections have three activities: questions to ponder, a space for answers to those questions, and a plan to act on what you have learned. Please resist the urge to skip these sections. As you will learn more fully throughout this book, healing takes time and effort. Taking the time and effort to reflect and use these application sections to change your behavior will help the Lord teach you and will facilitate healing in your life.

I invite you now on this sacred journey to more fully learn the healer's art. May you be blessed with insight, strength, courage, and joy as you begin to apply the principles that will be discussed. As you do so, your life will be blessed, and you will bless the lives of others. All of this will happen through and because of the Master Healer, our Savior Jesus Christ.

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 2. Abraham 3:25.
 3. John 9:3.
 4. Doctrine and Covenants 122:7.
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 6. Alma 41:10.
 7. Mosiah 2:41.
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 9. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*. 5th ed. (Deseret Book, 1939).
 10. Doctrine and Covenants 66:9.
 11. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Broken Vessel,” General Conference (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), October 2013, Gospel Library App.
 12. Dallin H. Oaks, “Healing the Sick,” General Conference (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), April 2010, Gospel Library App.
 13. 2 Nephi 31:17.
 14. Matthew 4:19.
 15. Russell M. Nelson, “Jesus Christ—The Master Healer,” General Conference (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), October 2005, Gospel Library App. *Ensign*; Carole M. Stephens, “The Master Healer,” General Conference (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), October 2016, Gospel Library App.
 16. See Mark 2:17.

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