

Grumpy Thoughts ON Healing

Getting clear on what healing means in Goddess religion

I WAS THINKING good thoughts when I broke my ankle. I was happy. I was taking good care of myself. I was walking slowly on a path where I walk every day in the hills near where I live, taking a good-bye hike over the land with some of my friends before leaving for three months. I slipped on some gravel, landed hard on my left foot, and felt something snap. Hours later, after rescue by the Volunteer Fire Department and a long drive to the hospital, an X-ray confirmed my fears — I had snapped the fibula and, perhaps worse, torn a ligament and generally wrenched the whole joint out of its accustomed alignment. While my friends carried on with the planned goodbye party and barbecue, I had surgery.

Breaking an ankle isn't the worst thing that can happen to you in life. But it's not the best thing, either, especially four days before a three month trip. Most people seemed to expect that I would cancel the whole thing and stay home. But, even in my nauseated and weak post-operative state the day after surgery, it seemed to me that I had many reasons — spiritual, financial and emotional — to go on the trip, and very few to stay home in a flat with many steep stairs, or in a cabin with no indoor plumbing. A broken ankle was no real impediment to teaching magic or leading ritual. I could still play the

drum, smile and nod wisely, and make the occasional profound, life-changing remark. I just couldn't walk while doing it. I would need a lot of help, but everyone from the organizers of all the planned events to the participants was eager to offer their support and deeply hopeful that I would still come.

Lying helpless with a broken ankle, I found myself alternately despondent, hopeful, accepting and angry. What angered me most was a constant, low level assault of emails and calls presuming to tell me why this had happened. I received message after message that said more or less the same thing: "This is the Goddess' way of telling you to slow down," or "The Goddess wants you to get some rest." By the end of the week, I was snarling at quite innocent people, telling them to keep their opinions of the Goddess to themselves before they had even opened their mouths. There are some deep assumptions embodied in those messages. This is, in fact, a hidden theology that I take issue with. And after the fourth or fifth email, it occurred to me that maybe our community needs to get a bit clearer on what healing involves.

The first assumption is that everything that happens is a direct message from the Goddess. This is a dangerous theology. For example, imagine that I had a lover who wanted

me to relax and slow down, and who communicated that desire by breaking my ankle. "That's abuse, not love," any true friend or competent therapist would tell me. "You don't deserve treatment like that!" All of my friends would unanimously agree that I should leave the creep.

Why, then, would I want to worship an abusive Goddess? One who is such a bad communicator that she must inflict a violent injury instead of speaking directly to someone who regularly spends a major part of her day in an open and receptive state, listening for just such messages? No, if I truly believed the Goddess was telling me to relax more by breaking my ankle, I would have to change religions. It's just that sort of thinking that I had always disliked in the Bible, where poor Job is made miserable just so God can prove a point.

SHIT HAPPENS. Religion, spirituality is in some ways an attempt to make sense out of the shit that happens. But maybe there is no sense to some shit, no why, no message. Maybe there's just a slippery hillside and a sudden fall, random chance, a moment of bad luck.

It's terrifying to believe that bad things can happen for no good reason. It's much more comforting to think that there's always a cause, (which can presumably be avoided next time), a

lesson (which, once learned, would prevent further recurrences of the same thing.)

But Goddess religion is not about easy comfort. Randomness, chance, is what allows freedom to exist in the universe. If everything is a message, if everything is planned by an omnipotent Goddess, then there is no free will. And to me, freedom is worth far more than a broken ankle any day. If there's no why, however, there is still a what — not why it happened but what I can learn from it and how I can choose to act. There's always something to be learned from any experience, and sometimes the most painful events are also profound teachers. Any rotten experience can be an initiation. Which is not to say that the Goddess is handing out lessons like a sadistic schoolmistress, but simply that we can, of our own free will, choose to learn from whatever happens to us.

My friends, in their well-meaning messages, were trying to tell me what I should learn. Among Witches, healers, spiritual people, one of the most prevalent and dangerous assumptions we make is that we know what somebody else's experience means, that we are supposed to be interpreters for them. But healing does not take place by having someone else define your experience or create your story.

An illness, an injury, a sudden catastrophe is more than a physical event. It's an assault on one's sense of self. One moment I was a healthy, competent adult who for more than four and a half decades had been quite capable of going to the bathroom unassisted — and then I wasn't. On Saturday morning I was someone who regularly hiked around the hills for a couple of hours a day. On Sunday I was someone for whom the other side of the room lay across a wide chasm. On Saturday, I was independent — by Sunday, I was forced to depend on the kindness of friends, family and strangers for even a cup of tea.

Healing is, in part, the reconstruction of the self. We do that, as human

beings, by finding our own meanings, telling our own tales. We can't heal someone by circumventing the process or by imposing our own story. We can help each other heal by providing help, support, entertainment, practical aid. I had friends who came and cooked me dinner, showed me slides, talked about political issues and teaching, wheeled me on quiet country roads and let me go as far as I could on crutches, introduced me to bird watching, scouted bathrooms and restaurants, helped me in and out of tubs, gave me massage or arranged doctors' appointments. One woman on our trip taught me to use my crutches more effectively, another came with me to the French hospital and gave me secret acupuncture treatments while we were waiting for my cast to be changed. Others explored my healing in a way that left the meaning and interpretation to me.

I'VE LEARNED A LOT from my ankle. I've received a tremendous amount of love, support and help, and learned to ask for it gracefully. I've learned that a broken ankle can be just that, and not a field to play out every issue around dependency and control in my life and that of generations of my ancestors. I've learned in a direct, visceral way what it means to move through the world as a disabled person — from the barrier a single step can pose to what it's like to be almost forgotten on an airplane while waiting for the wheelchair to arrive. I know the tremendous difference that a public commitment to accessibility can mean, and why we need laws mandating access. I know these things now not just intellectually, but through the frustration of not being able to join my friends in museums or sites where no thought for the disabled had been taken.

I've learned how many of the airports of Europe provide for the

disabled, and about varied cultural approaches to medical care. And a lot more, besides. That learning is a gift. The gift I didn't receive, however, was much rest. Rest for me means being able to stroll through the countryside on a long walk — not having to mount a paramilitary operation to scout every bathroom and figure out how to get into it. Rest means being able to make myself a cup of tea and sit down with a good book, not having to wait for someone else to make it differently from the way I like it. The ankle left my ability to work intact, but took away many of my

sources of relaxation and regeneration.

Healing happens. My bones have knit, and I'm walking again now, trying to recover the use of all the rest of

Shit happens. Spirituality is in some ways an attempt to make sense out of the shit that happens.

my muscles which lost strength in six weeks of limited mobility. I can make my way through an airport without a wheelchair — I even bought groceries and walked home with them the other day. But what I've learned, what meaning I take from it, what story I choose to tell, is my own to decipher. Only by doing that work for myself can I truly heal.

If you were one of those who sent those emails, don't apologize. I deleted them so quickly I truly don't remember whom they came from. Just stop, next time you feel the urge to comfort someone in distress, and say, "Am I truly supporting their own healing, or am I trying to do it for them? Am I invested in their learning what I think they should learn, and why?" When the person being healed takes charge of the process and tells the story, we can learn to truly be healers for each other.

Starhawk is the author of many books on Goddess religion, from "The Spiral Dance" to "Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Tradition." She is a feminist, activist, teacher, Witch, gardener, drummer and one of Reclaiming's founders.