

## Chapter 4

# **The Unbearable Oneness of Being**

“You can feed her all day with the vitamin A and the Bromofiz, but the medicine never gets anywhere near where the trouble is.”

– Frank Loesser, *Guys and Dolls*

*Naaman is a captain in the army of the king of Aram, and a leper. One day his servant says: "Master, I heard of a man in a far-off land, a healer. Elisha is his name. You must see him." Naaman sets off on a journey loaded down with ten talents of silver and six thousand pieces of gold. Surely, he thinks, getting healed from such a dreadful disease will be a costly affair. When Naaman comes before the healer, he is told to wash seven times in the River Jordan. "How dare you insult me with such foolishness!" responds Naaman. "Aren't you going to mix a brew, or smooth a salve over my flesh? If bathing is all it takes, surely the rivers of my own land are as good as yours."*

*"Master," whispers the servant, "what's there to lose?" So Naaman swallows his pride and lowers his body into the River Jordan seven times. And lo and behold, when he steps out of the water his flesh is as smooth and soft as silk.*

– Adapted from Kings 5:1-14

When I was in graduate school, finishing my master's in teaching, one of my professors used to say: "In the classroom there is nothing like a good prop, especially if the students get to eat it after it has served its purpose."

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The prop I like to use is a loaf of organic, multigrain, freshly baked bread. I hold it up and ask, “Can you name some of the ingredients?”

“Yeast, flour, water,” my students call out.

Then I break off a piece, and continue. “And how about this? What ingredients are present here?”

“The same.” We conclude that even the tiniest crumb contains all of the ingredients.

“What if I change something in the mix, say, add a little more water?” I ask. No one seems to doubt that every morsel of the loaf will reflect the change.

Wouldn't the same hold true for the Holy Human Loaf? A mix of flesh, intellect, mystery, and passion? Doesn't it make sense that here too, the smallest change in the batter – a flash of insight, a disparaging remark, a flicker of hope – will affect every atom we're made of? In spite of the growing body of scientific literature on the biochemical effect of beliefs, in spite of decades of the emotional detox many of us have endured with our various therapists, in spite of the cathedrals we've built to honor the Mystery pulsing through us, when a symptom shows up we, like Naaman, look for brews or salves to make us well. Somehow we think that if we tinker with our hormones long enough, the numbers will line up and our bodies will perform as instructed.

Next time you sense a volcano of rage lift you out of your chair, or feel a wave of gratitude wash over you, stop and observe your breath. See if you can let go of the story for a few seconds and just sense the current of energy generated within you. Is it possible that what you're experiencing isn't having physiological consequences? That although the trigger was not physical, not even a single cell in your body is detached from the experience? This is not trigonometry. It should not require extensive training to observe the answers to these questions in your own body or in another's.

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Just watch your best friend turn beet red when the man she's been telling you about enters the room.

One of the great revelations for me in these last fifteen years has been seeing just how much our feelings and the yearning of the soul is mirrored in our biology: how eloquently the body speaks of everything we try to keep hidden from ourselves and the world.

“Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved,” said the philosopher Soren Kirkegaard. When we bring the idea of this Oneness of Being into our daily, laundry-and-dishes consciousness, we get closer to Kirkegaard's notion of seeing our difficulties as mysteries to be lived; mysteries which continually call us to be more intimate with ourselves, each other, and the world. We begin to see our difficulties as mysteries to be lived and put to good use, rather than problems to be solved and be done with, or worse yet some sort of karmic punishment to be endured.

What else can each task set before us be if not an invitation to understand this Oneness more and more deeply? I can't say this principle is easy to adhere to in my own life. But I keep opening myself up to it a little more each day. The alternative of feeling unlucky or undeserving or powerless is simply no longer an option.

Lucy, a woman with honey-colored hair and a round, open face, was sitting directly in my line of vision at a lecture I gave in Chicago some years ago. As I spoke I watched her eyes grow more alert, her mouth slowly widen into a smile, her body lean forward in anticipation. At some point toward the end of the session she sighed out loud and said: “God, this sounds too good to be true, but it makes a lot of sense!”

She stayed in touch with me for the next four months via phone and e-mail. During that time, Lucy began to challenge her lifestyle, rethink a good many of her beliefs, and

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draw a great deal of strength from her family's rich tradition of Irish folk wisdom.

When she called to tell me the news of her pregnancy, she said, "Remember that talk you gave at the conference? You said your baby journey was the first time you really followed through on something. I decided to go for broke. You know how professional athletes, when they ask them if they would change anything about the game, say, 'I left it all on the court,' meaning they did all they could do? Well, that's what I decided I was gonna do. In this game I was gonna leave it all on the court. It was like some switch got thrown inside me. I could feel it."

When a magazine reporter called a year later and asked for a testimonial about my work, I asked Lucy if she'd be willing to share her story. "Sure, I love talking about it," she said.

But when the reporter e-mailed me the story, it was quite different from the one I had witnessed. Mainly it was a tale of the mechanics of Lucy's acupuncture sessions and a list of her vitamin supplements. There was no mention of the work she had done revising her beliefs and opening up the neural pathways so that the medicine could *get* to where the trouble was. All of that was forgotten.

Fifteen months later I heard from Lucy again. She was desperately trying to give her son Benjamin a baby brother, and this time neither the acupuncture nor a medicine cabinet filled with vitamins were doing the trick. Why? Perhaps because the ever-changing, Holy Human Loaf called Lucy was not the same loaf she had been three years earlier. It was time to begin again, and to set out in search of images and clues, sensations and revelations to point the way.

When we are lured into thinking that this or that thing will do it for us, that all we need to do is do yoga every day, or meditate, or drink wheatgrass, we leave out the

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most essential piece of any practice and sometimes do more harm than good. We reinforce the false notion that we are less than a miracle.

A beloved teacher and scholar, Arthur Green, tells a story of a bookstore in Berkeley during the sixties with a sign over the entrance that read something like this:

*Scientology Doesn't Work.*

*Transcendental Meditation Doesn't Work.*

*Chanting Doesn't work.*

*Yoga Doesn't Work.*

*You Work!*

The only practice that will do it for us is one we can engage in with every fiber of our being: a practice we deepen and reinvent over and over again. A practice we can live as if our life depended on it.

Soon after her second child, another strapping boy, was born, Lucy and I discussed this idea of, as she put it, “fessing up” that so much of our lives has to do with our choices.

“If I just said it was the acupuncture and the vitamins that did it for me, I was off the hook, but if I had something to do with it, not getting pregnant meant I failed; it was my fault.”

When your mind tunes into radio YSKB (You Should've Known Better), you have a choice of turning up the volume or changing the station. The tools and ideas I share in this book were the golden rope I hung on to when there was little else I could do. The thing about a golden rope is that you can use it to climb up to heaven or you can tie it into a noose.

Yes, we are co-creators of our lives, but co-creators only. Saying that our actions can make a difference doesn't mean we're omnipotent. Our lives have been shaped by countless

forces, and we, each of us, always do the best we can. So, to paraphrase a famous line of Winston Churchill's: Never, Never, Never, Never blame yourself. Never! You'd be giving yourself too much credit. Besides, it's a huge waste of natural resources, namely your time, your talents, and your life force. No matter what real or perceived errors we've committed over the years, the good news is that with each breath we can begin again.

One other thing that helps me see how I nail down the hardwoods and hinge the doors of this house called my life is paying attention to the words I use.

We create by naming things.

We see a number on a lab report and we name it. Premature Ovarian Failure, Hostile Mucus, Incompetent Cervix, Poor Responder. We then flap that name at the person like a hat, leave out the seventeen thousand variables that make them who they are, and create them in our own image. Depending on how powerful we appear in the eyes of the person we name, she can either accept our vision as fact or ignore it as best she can.

The mouth is the gateway between the inner and outer world. That which crosses to the other side reveals us startlingly to ourselves as the most impressionable of creatures. We may find that we've unwittingly ingested other people's beliefs the way one absentmindedly swallows an hors d'oeuvre at a cocktail party.

"Our insurance *only* pays for three IVF cycles, and I was told with my numbers I might not even be a *candidate* for ART," lamented Amelia at one of our twice-monthly phone support circles.

"It sounds like you're running for office, and you don't have the budget for a decent campaign, and even if you did, the elections are rigged," I suggested lightly.

"That's exactly what it feels like," said Amelia.

“I know, but it’s a feeling, just a feeling,” someone else said. “I’m beginning to realize I can only walk toward this baby one step at a time, and it works a lot better when I do that. When I start freaking out, I keep reminding myself that by the time I’ll get to point B, I might know something I couldn’t know today. But I have to live my way to that point. I guess I’ve given up wanting to control everything all the time.”

When it comes to healing, I often think about the three little words whose utterance might induce droves of people to set out in search of more satisfying answers.

“I don’t know.”

What if the expert you turned to said, “I don’t know. I don’t know how to help you. This is the only thing I can offer for now. If you find out anything more, please come back and tell me.”

An interesting term often crops up in the medical terminology of reproductive difficulties. When no readily identifiable diagnosis exists, either structural or hormonal, aspiring mothers and fathers are told they have “unexplained infertility.” As if the creation of life on any level, whether a fully functioning kidney or a regular heartbeat, is ever fully explainable.

In 2001, a few weeks before the World Trade Center tragedy, I interviewed Dr. Zev Rosenwaks, director of the Center for Reproductive Medicine and Infertility at the New York Presbyterian Hospital.

“With some couples, everything in their diagnostic work-up checks out, and the cycle fails. Then I see women with all the cards stacked against them, and they end up with a healthy baby. Even in the best of circumstances we have no more than a sixty percent marker of viability. In other words, there is a lot about this that’s quite beyond us.”

Sadly, this kind of humility rarely reaches the consulting

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rooms.

Peter, a tall, imposing-looking man with a high forehead and a good-natured laugh, spoke about this at a recent workshop:

“When we did our first in vitro, our doctor himself called and asked that we both get on the phone. ‘We did it!’ he said. ‘I think we got that last good egg just in time, the numbers look great, congratulations!’

“At seven weeks, a day after we saw the heartbeat, the nurse left a message telling us the numbers didn’t look good. When Catherine went in for the D & C...”

Peter’s voice trailed off, and he looked down at his hands, “And ...the doctor told us he didn’t know what happened. He said, ‘It’s not like there is something we could’ve done to prevent it.’

“The pregnancy was their doing, but not the miscarriage.”

To borrow the perfect words of theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel: “How embarrassing for man to be the greatest miracle on earth and not to understand it.” I’m certain that somewhere near the floor of the soul, underneath our terror and our need to be right, we do sense the Mystery and yearn to understand it. No backdrops bring forth the Unbearable Oneness of flesh, intellect, heart, and soul as startlingly as the world of baby making.

There may be hidden reasons why our bodies behave as they do, and there are many we can learn to decode. We’d certainly be foolish not to try. If the body can’t handle the workload, or if it’s the heart that’s frightened, or the soul that wishes to soar, we must stop, pull up a chair, and find out what the trouble is. Otherwise we can blast our ovaries with stimulants, produce caravans of embryos of the highest grade, and still go home to an empty nursery.