

The Wisdom of Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. is a pioneer in training physicians in relationship-centered care and has been in the private practice of psycho-oncology for the past twenty years. In her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom (Stories That Heal)*, she helps us to discover and claim the many gifts of healing that each of us has, many of which arrive along the path of suffering. In the following paragraphs, she invites us to be present to ourselves and others in new ways.

Being Present

Those who don't love themselves as they are rarely love life as it is either. Most people have come to prefer certain of life's experiences and deny and reject others, unaware of the value of the hidden things that may come wrapped in plain or even ugly paper. In avoiding all pain and seeking comfort at all cost, we may be left without intimacy or compassion; in rejecting change and risk we often cheat ourselves of the quest; in denying our suffering we may never know our strength and greatness. Or even that the love we have been given can be trusted.

It is natural, even instinctive to prefer comfort to pain, the familiar to the unknown. But sometimes our instincts are not wise. Life usually offers us far more than our biases and preferences will allow us to have. Beyond comfort lie grace, mystery and adventure. We may need to let go of our beliefs and ideas about life in order to have life.

The loss of an emotional or spiritual integrity may be at the source of our suffering. In a very paradoxical way, pain may point the way toward greater wholeness and become a potent force in the healing of this suffering.

A woman with heart disease and chronic angina once told me of the downside of the surgery which has relieved her symptoms. Before this surgery, she had suffered frequent chest pain from her disease. Over the years she had modified her diet, learned to meditate, and had been successful in controlling most of her pain. Yet some of her pain had been resistant to her efforts. Paying very careful attention to this, she had been shocked to notice that she experienced pain when she was about to do or say something that lacked integrity that really wasn't true to her values. These were usually small things like not telling her husband something that he did not seem to want to hear, or stretching her values a bit in order to go along with others. Times when she allowed who she really was to become invisible. Even more surprising, sometimes she would know this was happening but sometimes the chest pain would come first, and then, examining the circumstances which provoked, she would realize for the first time that she had been betraying her integrity and know what it was that she really believed. She had learned a great deal about who she was in this way, and though she was physically more comfortable now, she missed her "inner adviser."

This is not actually so surprising. It is known that stress can affect us at the weakest link in our physical makeup. It raises the blood sugar in people who have diabetes, precipitates headaches in those with migraine, and stomach pain in people with ulcers. It causes people with asthma to wheeze and people with arthritis to ache. What is new in this story and so many other that I have heard is that stress may be as much a question of a compromise of values as it is a matter of external time pressure and fear of failure.

Unexplained pain may sometimes direct our attention to something unacknowledged, something we are afraid to know of feel. Then it holds us to our integrity, claiming the attention we withhold. The thing which calls our attention may be a repressed experience or some unexpressed and important part of who we are. Whatever we have denied may stop us and dam the creative flow of our lives. Avoiding pain, we may linger in the vicinity of our wounds, sometimes for many years, gathering the courage to experience them.

Without reclaiming that which we have denied, we cannot know our wholeness or have our healing. As St. Luke wrote in Acts of the Apostles 4:11, the stone rejected by the builders may prove in time to be the cornerstone of the building.

What we believe about ourselves can hold us hostage. Over the years I have come to respect the power of people's belief. The thing that has amazed me is that a belief is more than just an idea - it seem to shift the way in which we actually experience ourselves and our lives. According to Talmudic teaching, "We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are." A belief is like a pair of sunglasses. When we wear a belief and look at life through it, it is difficult to convince ourselves that what we see is not what is real. With our sunglasses in, life looks green to us. Knowing what is real requires that we remember that we are wearing glasses, and take them off. One of the great moments in life is the moment we recognize we have them on in the first place. Freedom is very close to us then. It is a moment of great power. Sometimes because of our beliefs we may have never seen ourselves or life whole before. No matter. We can recognize life anyway. Our life force may not require us to strengthen it. We often just need to free it where it has gotten trapped in beliefs, attitudes, judgment and shame.