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**ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY OF HEALING:**

**HER CONTRIBUTION TO A RESEARCH PROJECT ON CHANGING NOTIONS OF HEALING**

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*... sense perception only gives information of this external world or of 'physical reality' indirectly, we can only grasp the latter by speculative means. It follows from this that our notions of physical reality can never be final. We must always be ready to change these notions.*

*Albert Einstein.*

There are times in the life of a psychotherapist when a single client can propel a healing practice to another level.. This is a particularly potent possibility when the therapeutic relationship is a creative partnership where both step into the unknown together. Add to this a call for healing that cannot be ignored. As Jung said, at some point in an individual's life: "The glowing coals of consciousness buried deep within the personality begin to break into flames." Old structures of the self burn away with an intensity that feels capable of obliterating a person's whole reality. Meeting with a client in the midst of that transformative fire can transmute both client and therapist.

In 1995 a woman referred by a physical therapist was that special emissary. In her early 40's, married, raising two teenagers, Peg had initiated a process of exploration that ultimately restructured her life in every way. It transformed mine as well, for through working with Peg, seeds were planted that are now blooming into an incorporated, non-profit project providing support services and research on the inner process of healing.

When Peg came to me I was struck by her fortitude to resolve an unremitting experience of severe body pain. At the time I was completing a three-year training program in Psychosynthesis. This model of spiritual psychology, developed by Roberto Assagioli, a colleague of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, fleshed out the body of my work in health and healing. Educated in humanistic psychology in the 70's, I had trained with Carl Rogers who became a dear friend and mentor. As a person he modeled a true congruency between theory and practice. He, as an exemplar, and his research on the components of the therapeutic relationship: positive regard, empathy, and genuineness; were the bedrock of my teaching and counseling. Building upon that with a doctoral degree in psychological education and developmental psychology, my fascination with the interplay of spiritual growth and the process of self-actualization

continued to flourish. In practice, it was clients such as Peg who catalyzed and concretized my trust of the authenticity of holistic healing.

Below are excerpts from an interview conducted with Peg in June 2001 as part of research for The Healing Bridge Project, Inc., <http://www.thehealingbridge.org>. With full informed consent, she offered her authentic experience to serve the healing of others. Our therapeutic work together concluded in 1997 but her process of healing continues to this day. At points in the story below, I comment on the context of our therapeutic alliance and her road to healing.

### **Peg's experience of pain**

Beginning in January of 1995, the healing that I was aware of needing was physical. In the abdominal area of my body I had endometriosis, fibroids and cysts. I also had intestinal problems and was pre-cancerous in one area with different diseases and things going on in there. I was going to doctors and through procedures, tests, and surgeries. There was a lot of internal bleeding and a lot, a lot, of pain.

The pain had gradually built up over the years, so I wasn't fully aware of the extent of it. Looking back, now that its gone, I am amazed at what I lived with – it hurt to sit, it hurt to stand, to bend over, even while lying still in bed there was a continuous burning pain in my pelvic area.

Back then, I just knew that I would like to get the pain taken care of, so I kept going to different doctors and they kept trying different approaches. Drugs or surgeries would help, but only temporarily. Then the pain would manifest again in another way, in a new form, but in the same area of my body. Eventually, every organ, muscle, joint, and function between my belly button and my knees was messed up in some way.

The context of Peg's life, one that appeared stable and successful, belied the intensity of the pain.

### **A full life**

I was married, raising two kids, and working at my own craft business. I was involved in my work and I was very, very busy and I was pushing myself to be the best. It was important for me to make a lot of money, and to prove to myself, and to everyone, that I could be successful. It was driving me. My self-worth gauge was how much money I made.

By that measure, I was an okay person. I was involved with a large group of artisans and I was a top seller. I was also on the Board of Directors for the organization and was managing many aspects of the business. That made me feel important. But I was suffering with this intense pain all the while.

### **Trying every possible approach**

The various doctors kept trying to clear it out, clean it out, make it better. But nothing was really helping permanently. In my medical process I went through all the gynecological and gastrointestinal possibilities. There was still a lot of pain but the doctors said they'd done everything they could, short of removing the affected organs. Then one doctor suggested that there might be something going on in the joints, or within the bone structure, so, he sent me to a physical therapist.

When I met the physical therapist we went through the initial screening. Even though I had never met him before, I recognized him as someone I was familiar with and liked very much... I knew he had answers for me. Sure enough, the sacrum,

hips, and pelvic area were out of alignment, the tailbone was broken and hinged, pointing toward my spine. The sciatic nerve was pinched. There was scoliosis of the spine.

### **The big jolt**

After the x-rays, etc., I came in for my first appointment of the hands-on physical therapy. The therapist started to loosen up my body, beginning with the head and neck and upper spine. He was holding my upper body and rolling it around when all of a sudden something happened inside of me. Some really big jolt occurred. I don't know how to describe it. I felt it physically, it was a very deep pain. Although he was working on my upper body, the pain hit me in my abdomen, very low in the pelvic area, and it just ripped through my body. And there was a really, really intense emotional content to it. It shook me up. I was sort of in a daze while I went through the rest of that session. All I could tell him was, "It hurts!"

Connecting fully to the hurt within her body helped Peg realize how much hurt she had ignored within the context of her life. Her determination to heal spread into all corners of her reality.

### **An intense power**

After the initial shock of that jolt that overwhelmed me, I quit my job. The next day, I wrote my resignation letter. I couldn't do it anymore. I had been in a lot of turmoil within myself over my reasons for being there, doing that work, because of my drive to make money and to be the best. After this jolting experience, I knew that it wasn't what I wanted to be doing any more. So I just focused on the process with the physical therapy. I did my prescribed exercises and went to my appointments twice a week.

### **Opening to new awarenesses**

Now, I was starting to become aware of a difference in my reality. I started to pick up on people's thoughts, and I had a sense of a deeper understanding of things. It started to become clear to me that the circumstances and the things that were happening in my outside world were communicating with me. There was an exchange going on. It wasn't just me in the world, going about my life. The world was talking to me! And it was blowing my mind. I was like, "What's going on?" I couldn't tell anyone about it. My husband would have said, "Yeah, sign her up for the loony bin!" But, it was very clear to me that this was happening. Like, I'd be wondering about something and someone on the radio or around me would immediately give me the answer. Things like that would happen consistently and I'd think, "This is impossible!"

I to be aware of the essence of people. I could see what a person was like, or about. And began then I would know things. Sometimes I would know things that were going to happen before they happened. This was quite exciting but also scary. I thought I was going crazy.

Even though Peg could not make sense of her experience, her trust of the physical therapist and the skill, safety and compassion he provided allowed her to open to what lay beneath the bodily symptoms.

### **Linking pain and emotions**

I was ready to really dig into what was going on with this pain in my body. Now I

realized that there were some very significant aspects of my diseases, my physical problems, that I had not been aware of before, that clearly involved my emotions, and also who I am. Sometimes my mind would relate the physical therapy to previous experiences I'd had. During a session, or thinking about it later, I'd sometimes have flashbacks and remembrances of being abused years ago in a very degrading way, sexually and mentally.

I stayed in the physical therapy process for a couple months, but my physical symptoms were intensifying. They weren't getting better they were actually getting worse. It was to the point where I was bleeding constantly, vaginally and rectally, and the pain was intensifying.

At this point Peg started treatment with Lupron to block the production of estrogen. Her energy, insights, and awareness continued to intensify. The pain started to subside, but when it returned several months later she chose to have a hysterectomy, convinced it "was the final course of action that was definitely going to resolve the pain."

### **The pain returns**

The surgery was a piece of cake – it was not a problem. After the designated healing period I was supposed to be all better. Well, I wasn't. That autumn the pain came back again. And it was just as bad as ever. It was just the same – with no uterus in there – it was the same kind of pain. I thought, "Good Lord! What's going on?"

### **Seeking the best helper**

I was still watching the day-to-day occurrences in my life, noticing how many coincidences were fitting together. I followed the cues and leads that were coming in. And I was praying. I knew I had to go back to the physical therapist and figure out what happened there. So, as difficult as it was for me, I went back and told him what was going on. I said, "Something really big happened to me here and I need to figure it out. I want to know what it was all about." He didn't think he could do anything more for me, but he thought it would be helpful for me to see a psychologist and talk about it.

Peg made the therapy appointment yet, even with clear directions, she got lost on the way to the office. She had strong intuitions this therapist wasn't the one she needed to work with and asked for another referral. This was the start of her work with me.

### **Starting psychotherapy**

I knew immediately when I walked into her office that she was going to help me. At the end of our first session she recommended a particular book that I had very recently been told about, or come across, from about five different sources and I thought, "Okay, she's hooked in! This is lining up now. It's starting to feel right." (The book was *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* by Christiane Northrop).

### **Connecting to the whole**

Now it was January again, one year after I had first begun physical therapy. Now I was beginning to work with transpersonal psychotherapy. I started to explore mentally and spiritually what was going on behind my physical problems. Jane, my therapist, took me into my mind, into different levels, to areas that were in pain.

Peg needed to share her whole story. Together we re-traced her life history and the hurts pushed to the side, with particular attention to her relationships. We explored her

sense of herself, her roles, her body, and past and current intimate relationships with men. Slowly she started to engage more deeply with the physical pain. By using internal dialogue, imagery and deep listening, Peg came into relationship with her pain. Session by session, she tentatively explored her physical experience. She discovered internal resources that helped her stay present to a trustworthy sense of self and was able to allow her body to open to a felt-sense of what had been held inside.

### **A Critical Encounter**

There was one particular session that was a turning point for me. In a trance state, I went into the pain in my pelvic area and experienced what it felt like. For the first time I was really in touch with a feeling of being completely isolated and alone, pushed on and pushed down, not heard, not listened to. I could feel it so strongly. I hadn't realized that there was a part of me that felt that way, which had been stifled for so long. And that part of me was in excruciating pain. But, I got in touch with it. I really tried to understand the feeling, understand the depth of it, and get a sense of it. After I did connect with it, I felt the pain, I felt the emotional anguish.

Then, Jane guided me to the opposite of that -- to the resolution to the pain -- to the comfort, the other part of me that connected with the Source of the healing: the Answer.

Through feeling her internal capacity to protect and comfort herself, Peg realized the potency of the safety she felt throughout treatment with her former physical therapist. The intense and often bewildering feelings she had during hands-on therapy began to make sense.

### **Opening to safety**

In our therapy we barely addressed her personal connection to the physical therapist who had treated and referred her. We held him to the side of her awareness, yet acknowledged the significance he represented. As Peg continued to explore her relationship to her internal pain, spontaneous, meaningful insights about his role in her healing process occurred daily.

I realized it was the first time that I had been with a man who was physically "intimate" with me that was helping me, and not hurting me. I realized that I trusted him, that he did want to help me. And I realized that prior to that, in the relationships I'd had with men who were physically (sexually) intimate with me, it wasn't for me. It was never something for me. It was always a painful experience for me, and something I participated in for unhealthy reasons.

I was able to relate my internal emotional and physical turmoil to my own perception of myself based on experiences I'd had with men -- and to my own interpretation of my value and worth as a person. The part of me that was my healthy sexual expression had not been allowed to come forth, and had been dying.

In therapy sessions I got in touch with it and I was able to be aware of it and to get to know that aspect of myself. And, too, there was the other part, the comfort and the security, the part that my physical therapist represented, that was at another level within me and had also been beyond my grasp to know -- just as the hurt part had been beyond my conscious knowing. Now I felt both. I felt the pain and I felt the comfort.

Peg had deep respect for the potency of her discoveries. She committed herself to the healing process on all levels. All the attention and energy she gave between therapy sessions to journaling, body-oriented disciplines, learning, and spirituality facilitated the focus and effectiveness of our sessions.

### **Loosening the block**

After that point I focused on working with the different processes that Jane gave me to do. I was writing and drawing every day. I still wasn't working. I devoted my total concentration to this healing. Every day I did my physical exercises and then I would meditate.

I would often go into self-guided meditations and have experiences in deep levels of my mind that would then manifest in my everyday world, in my waking consciousness. In my inner travels, I became aware of the course of the flow of life energy in my body. I realized that the healthy upward flow of emotion was blocked around my diaphragm and it was pooling up and stagnating in my abdomen. There was so much old, unreleased emotion in there that was bleeding and swelling and crying out in the only voice I would listen to: pain.

I began a search for another type of therapy to help me work through the block and release suppressed emotion. I learned of different modalities that work with the body's energy system, and tried several therapies such as Reiki, Shiatsu, Acupuncture and Barbara Brennan work. Each one gave me comfort and helped to gently loosen the block, open the passageway, and gently coax that cut-off part of me who had not been able to speak up and be heard, to come forth and be in the world.

There was a point in our therapy when it was crucial to extend beyond our work together. As Peg's healing progressed she found opportunities to express a new sense of being within her body. A form of aerobic dancing helped her build up her body after excessive weight loss. Educating herself on energy therapies increased her respect and intrigue with her own self. Even though embarrassed and frightened she allowed herself to "come into" her own body.

### **Learning to dance**

Now, this was that lost part of me coming forth that had never had the courage, or had never been allowed, to express. But I knew I had to allow this part to come forth, so I started going to the [aerobic] class. And I just did it. At that time I was just about skin and bones. I had lost a lot more weight, and was all hyper and flinging my scrawny arms everywhere. But as I did, I could feel the energy exploding from my body. I kept trying and I kept going to class and gave it all I had.

As we continued therapy and I witnessed the ways Peg found her most authentic expression, I was continually moved by how she unearthed the perfect resources for nurturing her healing process. I found my role was to simply provide a container for her to explore and experiment, trusting, along with her, that her process was impeccable. The people she met, her art, study and physical expressions were all crucial aspects of integrating and synthesizing her therapeutic discoveries.

### **A healing dance instructor**

At the beginning of every class he would say, "This is your class. Take it at your

own pace. And always keep in mind you're in competition with no one but yourself." He said exactly what I needed to hear. He invited us to greet each other, "make a new friend," and he had inspirational things to say throughout the class. He made exercising so much fun. He was enjoying himself and we all did too. Again, I was in a "relationship" with a man who cared about helping others – a genuinely compassionate and giving person. And it really nourished that part of me that had been so hurt.

It also provided a way of allowing my sexual expression to come forth. The instructor was a physical specimen! He presented himself as a sexual being, but in a positive way, not in a way that was demeaning, flaunting, degrading, dirty, or any of what I had associated with sex before. He was just a fine masculine figure, okay with being a man. So, I started to allow myself to express my femininity in this class, just by dancing and letting that energy come through. I don't mean provocative dancing, just being at ease with being a woman and allowing my body to feel the music, move, have fun and express the fun.

As Peg opened to forms of natural healing, she discovered deeper levels of awareness. Though her pain was diminished, the new energy she embodied was not fully released.

### **Releasing the block**

But I was aware that the block was not gone, that the flow of energy was not completely open and I was still seeking out energy workers to help to open it up. My search led me to a Rubenfeld synergist who in one session helped me to feel the full intensity of that blocked energy and move it from the abdominal area up and out of my body. It was a very intense and profound experience. I physically felt it, my body was shaking and convulsing. I emotionally felt the content, I was moaning and crying and wailing. And as she gently guided the mass upward through my body, I could feel it moving and breaking through the barriers. It was a terrifying experience in some ways because I didn't think I would survive once it hit my heart, and I didn't know where it was going to go. It did pass through my heart and I did survive and it came up and was released out of my mouth. The deep unexpressed anguish, fear and rage came out of my mouth in waves of sounds, words, noises, screams – on and on. When it was finally spent, this therapist, who was my mother's age, gathered me in a sobbing ball in her arms and held me and rocked me. I felt clean and loved and comforted.

On another level, Peg experienced a healing of her history and relationships with her family.

### **Releasing my dad**

Directly after that experience, I traveled to visit my family for Thanksgiving. My Dad was ill and it was to be the final gathering of our complete family. I ended up staying there with my parents for a month, while Dad went through the dying process. This was a very healing time for me.

When Dad was diagnosed with cancer two years prior, he began to write his memoirs. While I was there in my childhood home, helping Mom take care of him, I typed up the stories he had written of his childhood and adolescent life. These were stories that he had never shared with his seven children, and they helped me to understand who he was and what his struggles were and how valiant, strong and courageous a man he really was. This was a special time for me – a very beautiful, loving, sharing experience. I learned so much watching my parents work together to see Dad safely and comfortably pass from this world to the next. He died at noon on Christmas day.

Returning to a focus on the body, Peg expanded her healing process through weight training. Again, another teacher assisted her in having a physical relationship with herself that was “helpful and healthy, not harmful or threatening.”

### **Transformation On All Levels**

That January 1997, after I returned to Pennsylvania, I decided that I wanted to build up muscle as part of my physical healing. Now my body was really changing, and was becoming well proportioned, and defined, and attractive. In a very short time, between the dancing and the weight training, I went through a complete physical transformation. I think one reason I changed so quickly was because while I exercised, I was aware of the flow of energy through my body and mentally focused on directing the energy to assist in the process. I also was aware that in order to develop and maintain muscle and coordination in the physical body it was necessary for me to develop the relating emotional, mental and spiritual muscle. Once this was accomplished, the pain was gone. Gone.

People at the gym noticed the rapid changes in my body and many approached me and asked how I did it. I wanted to be able to help others, so I studied and became certified as a personal trainer. Now, for the first time in my life, I had a body that was free of pain. Even the scoliosis was gone. My tailbone was pain-free for the first time in thirty years! I felt strong and beautiful, confident, and expressive.

Finally pain free, Peg discovered the parallels between physical healing and mental, emotional and spiritual healing. She created a unique form of practice, and with careful attention, respect and refinement, her healing process became the foundation of a new life.

### **Linking a physical and spiritual practice**

I discovered that building strength in my mental process and emotional process was similar to the process of building strength in the physical body. To build strength, you want to take the muscle that's become established in a certain "way of being," in a weakened condition, and gradually work it into a strengthened condition. To do that, you hold yourself in perfect alignment, add a little weight, and you push the weight, and you pull the weight, and you resist the weight. And you take it to a point of discomfort. You don't take it to a point of pain, because then you may cause injury. But you feel the discomfort. Then you release the weight and lengthen and stretch that muscle. When you do this consistently you build strength, you build endurance, and you develop flexibility in your physical body.

I took that process to the spiritual level. Allowing the part of me that was so weak and encouraging that part of me to come forth was extremely uncomfortable. But I tried not to let it get too painful. If I started to feel pain, I would hold back a little bit and give myself rest and gentle care. But more and more I was taking myself to the point of being uncomfortable and going through a process of not just pushing forward, but also a process of resisting other challenges that were putting the weight on. And building strength. As the weak part of me got stronger, and stronger, I felt better and better about myself, and it's wasn't so uncomfortable. In weight training, after you build strength in a muscle, it starts to feel good to put weight on in, to exercise that strong muscle.

It was the same thing learning to dance and with weight training. Going through the process was uncomfortable. I had to stretch my usual boundaries and limitations – by forcing myself to ask people to help me, and by persevering through the uncomfortable stages, and by pushing the usual inhibitions away. As an ongoing part of the process, there were circumstances and attitudes that came up that required resistance. All these elements of the process were important, the pushing, pulling, resisting and stretching. Persevering through the process – resolving the issues, building confidence and strength – was so liberating and exhilarating.

I knew that physically I had healed because the pain gone. I didn't have it anymore—spiritually, or personally, I knew that this part of me that had been injured and was weak was healing because I was glad to be a sexual being in the world, and to express that in a way that was comfortable for me. So, I knew that part of me was healing.

Peg's process highlights all the elements so crucial to whole person healing. In natural ways, her physical prompting guided her into creating a path that embodied the theories and models of holistic healing. With varied helpers, facilitators, supports and a

unique combination of approaches, she found her way back to a sense of a whole self. She understood her life and the intelligence of her being in ways she never imagined.

### **A certain joy**

There was a certain joy that came forth as a result of this process that was beyond anything that I'd ever experienced in my life. The freedom to be myself! To be expressive and know it was okay to do that – and not be afraid. It wasn't that I was being sexual in the way I used to define it. It was not that I was calling for attention. It didn't even involve the act of sex or physical touching with another person. It was an acceptance of my sensuality or femininity– just being a woman. And being okay with that.

### **The power of going inward**

The wounded part of me drew my attention with physical disease and pain. By looking deeply into it, I became aware that the pain that I had in my physical body I also had emotionally and mentally, and also at the spiritual level. I went in, through my emotions, through my mind, into an internal world – a world that I consider to be the spiritual world, being that it's invisible in the physical world. I went inward and explored those regions and saw what was going on that was being manifested in the physical world. That allowed me insight into my physical expression and showed me ways to work through and resolve the pain.

Once I reached the spiritual level, I was able to draw the courage and strength I needed to work with the pain. I think of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects as distinctly different expressions of the same thing.

This process resulted in big changes, not only in my physical body, but changes in my emotional expression. And mentally there were changes. I could understand things that I didn't understand before. I could relate to physics and comprehend it, whereas before it meant nothing to me. Because I had gone through this process internally, I understood that the same processes that I was experiencing within myself were being described in physics. It made sense to me.

### **The Healing Bridge Project**

You can find a more complete report of Peg's story on The Healing Bridge Project website <http://www.thehealingbridge.org>.

Assisting with and bearing witness to Peg's healing inspired the development of this extensive research and service oriented project..

### **Our shared mission is to explore the following questions:**

- What is it about the human psyche and soul that seeks to be healed?
- What is the meaning of healing?

The interviews presented on the website blend diverse perspectives in service of a clearly articulated understanding of the direct, lived experience of psychospiritual healing. In an effort to distill shared principles across disciplines, the study of these interviews will identify common threads that weave through the wide range of perspectives on healing.

As Peg's story demonstrates, each person's healing process is deeply personal and a unique reflection of the ever-changing context of their lives. The Healing Bridge Project

seeks to assist individuals and professionals with co-creating a holistic healing process that most fully supports them. To help link individuals with support, learning, and resources, The Healing Bridge Project's educational website presents stories of individuals and healing oriented practitioners which offers:

- In-depth information on psychospiritual healing
- Stories of individuals engaged in on-going psychospiritual healing
- Supportive functions
- Networking and community building
- Links to respected health care resources

### **Ongoing Dialogue and Education**

Long term, The Healing Bridge Project plans to provide an ongoing forum for dialogue and education on healing approaches, discoveries, insights, and resources. In addition to the web site and literature for both professionals and the public, this aim can be served by:

- Developing cooperative referral networks among practitioners
- Continuing to identify emerging insights into healing modalities

The scope and promise of this project contributes immensely to healing on individual and global levels. It offers a common language and vehicle to share ideas, provides a means to solicit support and mentoring, and serves as a ready source for learning more about what professionals across disciplines understand and offer the healing process. For all of those contributing to The Healing Bridge Project it is our hope that the possibility of deep, inner healing will shift from being an exceptional occurrence to a conscious, lived experience for many.

We invite you to visit <http://www.thehealingbridge.org/home.html> and stand on the bridges of healing with us, connecting with whatever supports healing in the most meaningful ways for you and those you care for.

### **Reference**

Northrop, Christiane, Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom, <http://www.drnorthrup.com>

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