

The Healer Hero: The Call to “Be” as well as to “Do!”

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This calendar year of 2018 is a most special moment in American history. As such, the Journal of Health and Human Experience is specially themed as “The Hero Year.” Under this theme, our Spring edition honored deeply both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy as our nation remembered the 50th anniversaries of their horrific assassinations. And now, in this our Fall edition, we are remembering the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I and the very first Veterans Day by honoring our Healer-Heroes --- that is, honoring the health leaders of our Armed Forces who tend the wounded and save the lives of those who suffer in battle or suffer violence, trauma, or poverty in any and all forms throughout the world.

In addition, this August as a nation we were all grieved deeply at the passing of one of our nation’s true heroes, Senator John McCain. His life is an honor to us all. His leadership is and will always be a legacy that will challenge us to serve one another tirelessly and selflessly. His being for years a prisoner of war during Vietnam is an absolutely irrefutable image of illuminative bravery and selfless dedication to the service of others. Indeed, Senator McCain will always be for us a hero. And, while he himself was not a physician or other healthcare servant, his life taught us what it means to be healers for one another. That is so well caught up in his own words to President-elect Barack Obama: “...more unites us than divides us.” Indeed, these are the words of a man who was and will always be for us a real “healer.” And to honor his living legacy, we have a special book review of his memoir, “The Restless Wave,” in this edition of the Journal.

In this same spirit of honored remembrance, I also recall the passing of another who was an immense gift to those who knew him and especially to those for whom he was a healer-hero. Navy Medicine for many years was enriched by a nurse who had a long career of bringing healing to others. When I had the honor of meeting him, Captain Moise Willis, NC, USN was Deputy Director of the Wounded, Ill and Injured Directorate at the Navy Medicine headquarters, known as the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. While he hardworked innumerable issues, cases and initiatives, what was truly impressive was his humility and dedication to patients as human persons in search of healing. CAPT Willis had begun his Navy career as a sailor – a hospitalcorpsman. He then transitioned (a.k.a. “mustanged”) to become an officer in the Nurse Corps after completing undergraduate nursing studies. He clearly was always present to his patients regardless of his rank or position. He was a selfless servant healer. He never saw himself above others. He always was present as a friend and a peer to all those searching for care. To use a favorite literary image, “Mo” was truly a man for others. In an era when too many seem to be caught up in the adoration of metrics of productivity and relative values units, in a

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preoccupation with results and money saved, Mo Willis never lost what always has and what always must be the center of healthcare itself, namely patient-centered care. His legacy, like Senator McCain's, moves us to bring healing back to healthcare itself. CAPT Willis passed away very unexpectedly and at a very young age in 2016. To honor his gifted life and legacy, we have dedicated the inside back cover of this edition to his memory.

With Senator McCain's and CAPT Willis' lives before us, we are amazingly humbled by calling to mind and sharing the image and memory of all our Healer-Heroes. In the most special ways possible, their dedication to the selfless service of others pushes us as individuals and as a society to hear those in need as they cry out in the nighttime of their lives for comfort and care. Many of us have had, in our growing years, our own many moments in which we remember how the very presence of these unique leaders has changed our own lives and moved us to care for others more than we care for our own selves. This has certainly been true for me.

I was born into a militarily-related family. I had many family members who served in the various uniformed services. Among them, my uncle, for whom I was named, was in the Army at the start of World War II. A private first class, he was sent to France not very long after D-Day and the Normandy Invasion. Sadly, he lost his life shortly afterward on August 8, 1944. He had just turned 20. Awarded the Purple Heart, he is buried in the Brittany American Cemetery in St. James, France. My own dad was a master sergeant army medic who served during World War II on the island of Saipan. His duties involved caring for children who had stepped on landmines and lost limbs. He was passionately dedicated to their care, and this passionate care remained central to his personhood for all of his life. My mom and many of her peers were very active in the USO and later as Gray Ladies working in the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. For me in my own life, this dedication in our family to both healthcare and the Armed Services led me over many years to understand that "healing" and being a "healer" are not facile experiences. They are not easy. They surely are about something far deeper than the giving of a prescribed medication, taking a temperature, or the completion of a procedure. Healing and being a Healer are something "more."

Allow me to share one story and image that is central to my memories of all this --- and to what I am trying to convey. This is a story I have shared on a number of occasions both personally and academically. I also have used it in other publications. It is very important for my reflections here.

When I was in high school, a group of my classmates and I became volunteers in our school's Community Service Corps. Our volunteering brought us to visit Wounded Warriors returning from Vietnam. Sometimes we were even able to bring them to our homes for dinner. On one occasion, the hospital staff asked me to visit a newly arrived Marine. I walked into the ward and approached his bed. I stopped short --- and nearly lost my breath as I saw an image that I had never seen before. It is one I wish never to see again. He was lying in his bed peppered with shrapnel. It was everywhere, including all across his face. He gave me a hello as much as he was able to, given his stark and striking condition. I said hello back. As he began to say a few more words to me, I could not believe that my right arm moved and I lifted my hand toward his face almost without thinking. I was bent on touching the steel shards. It was as if I were looking to touch something different.

Just before I got to touch his face, the Marine grabbed my arm, pushed it away, raised his voice, and clearly brought me back into reality. “It hurts, kid. It hurts. You don’t need to touch it. I’m no animal for you to stare at. And this ain’t no zoo.”

I was deeply apologetic and almost came to tears. He realized what was going on and wiped the incident away. In fact, several weeks later he came with me to my parents’ home for dinner.

However, this incident was one of the most profound that a fifteen-year-old could learn. I went to serve the needs of a wounded person, a patient. But in the end, he served my needs far more --- especially my need to get beyond turning other people into objects. He called my attention that he, a man who suffered for his country’s bravery, was hardly a victim because he was wounded. Rather, even lying on his bed, his body embedded with shrapnel, he continued to serve our nation’s “defense” by serving the needs of a fifteen-year-old to get beyond himself and learn to live life on life’s terms. In this clear instance, the young Marine embodied the very meaning of healing and what it means to be a hero. He was not a victim, nor just a survivor. His strength of character and his presence at the moment ensured that he would be a victor for the remainder of his life. He would use his wounds as a means of teaching others and bringing them into a deeper sense of what it means to be human and alive.

Over the many, many years since I experienced this moment, I have come to understand that this Marine as a patient was also himself a healer and a teacher. In a sense of incredible mystery, he himself was a person whose wounded self from battle embodied what it means to be physician, or nurse, psychologist, social worker, or anyone else who is what we call a healthcare “provider.” In fact, this young Marine began a deep process in me that only in my much later years I have come to understand, namely that one does not “provide” healthcare. One must learn first and foremost to “be” a healer by being the source of compassion, empathy, care, and human love. And one only truly learns this when one goes deep within to see the wounds inside the self, and how I or you or others are in need of healing within ourselves.

This is what we celebrate in this Fall edition of the Journal of Health and Human Experience. In this edition, our articles call us all to remember in a very strenuous and impactful way that healing is not just something physical or even emotional and mental. Healing is an experience of totality that touches deeply into the very meaning of our lives --- what some have called over the centuries one’s “soul.” And the process of being a healer is not just something for which one must be academically astute and professionally credentialed. It is not just learning “to do” something. No, being a healer only becomes truly genuine when the healer goes within and sees their vocational calling as springing forth from the rapids of one’s own experience of being wounded and in need of healing for one’s self. It is learning from within the experience of the self and in the most ultimate way possible “to be and become” an actual healer for others. It is not just about “doing;” it is about “being.”

And this gift is amazingly present in all of our women and men in uniform --- especially those who are part of the various corps in the Armed Forces who selflessly serve the healthcare needs of those who are wounded or suffering in any form. Indeed, we honor these who are truly “Healer-Heroes” for leading us all to be instruments of healing and peace for all those we meet in our lives.

Preface

May the pages of this edition lead us all to honor these wonderful heroes. And may this moment of honor move us to hear more deeply, to see more expansively, and to serve with greatest love those who need our care in every way in our world including those who starve each day for social justice and human rights.

When I walked into that young Marine's hospital room back so many years ago, I had no idea that what I was about to experience that day especially in its challenge. I certainly never expected that it would remain with me decades later and push me always to do the best by being committed to the challenging horizons of always trying to become a better person for others. Painful as that moment was, I am so glad it did!

