



Soul Cycles

Personal & Collective Evolvement
Alternative Healing
Social Artistry

A Healing Presence

These are my notes of a lecture on „Healing Presence“ by Peter R. Breggin, a psychiatrist, a forensic medical expert and the founder of the Centre for the Study of Psychiatry and Psychology in Bethesda, Maryland, that I want to share with you.

What’s wrong with treating emotional crises the way we treat medical emergencies? Why should we transform ourselves in the process of trying to help others? How can we fine-tune ourselves to the feeling of others?

In medicine there is a concept of “heroic treatment”-radical interventions reserved for extreme cases. Using a penknife for an emergency tracheotomy can fall into that category: In a restaurant a man has a severe allergic reaction to eating shellfish and goes into laryngospasm. His throat tightens and closes shut, preventing him from moving air in or out of his lungs. As a doctor, you locate the exact spot in the cartilage of his throat where it’s safe to penetrate. You slice through cleanly with any available sharp knife and then insert the barrel of a pen or some other tube to keep the air passage open. That’s heroic. It’s also potentially disastrous if the doctor overreacts and takes such a drastic action without cause.

Especially for those of us trained as health care providers, heroic treatment has great appeal. We go to the limit to drag our clients from the jaws of death. We pull out all the stops, give it our best shot and so on. When our client is in an extreme condition, there’s little or nothing to lose, we tell ourselves.

Emergency medicine is the model that many professionals use to approach psychological emergencies. It spills over into how many of us in everyday life feel we are supposed to respond to friends, family or others in dire need. The role of the heroic or authoritarian plays into a “culture of helplessness.” There is an overall tendency to surrender our physical and spiritual health to “experts.” The experts in turn typically have too little time and too little interest in us as individuals to provide treatments that meet our personal needs.

Perhaps more than medicine and surgery in general, psychiatry has had- and continues to have- its heroic treatments. Biological psychiatry continues to display an unrelenting tradition of heroic treatment that impacts negatively on the entire mental health profession, and even on society in general. It encourages people in general to seek quick and dramatic “fixes.” There is an occasional place for heroic treatment. If the potential for productive life remained in me, I’d want a surgeon to take heroic measure to revive me from a stroke or heart attack. I’d want the same for someone else. But there’s too much “heroism” in how most of us generally approach giving help.

From therapy to friendship to family life, doing something drastic or dramatic to the other person is rarely in their best interest. Being genuinely helpful has more to do with a certain way of being than with doing a certain thing. Healing presence does not smack of heroism; it’s more like radiating comfort with oneself and others, even under emotional duress.

Too many of the things we do in the name of help are aimed at getting others to conform our expectations. We want to get their minds and their behaviours in line with our standards for them. We try to do it through several means, including advice, guidance, and direction; new insight and understanding; moral instruction; moral boosting and the like. In frustration, we can end up trying to argue the other person out of feeling upset. Sometimes in righteous frustration, we resort to outright force.

The creation of a healing presence focuses on ourselves rather than on the person we are trying to heal or help. In creating healing presence, we don't change the other person as much as we transform ourselves in response to the other person. We find within ourselves the inner resources that speak directly to the other person's psychological and spiritual needs. This can be stated as the principle of emphatic self-transformation:

To create healing presence, we fine-tune our inner experience to the inner state of the other person. We transform ourselves in response to the basic needs of the person we are trying to heal and help. Ultimately, we find within ourselves the psychological and spiritual resources required to nourish and to empower the other human being.

Emphatic self-transformation may at first seem unrealistic, abstract, or impractical. In reality, it can become a living principle that guides us in all our encounters with people we care about and love. Although it remains basic to all relationships, it becomes especially crucial when we are faced with psychological or spiritual emergencies- extremes of emotional turmoil in which the other person feels hopelessly overwhelmed.

Empathy and the willingness to transform us lie at the heart of being helpful. To help other people, we must be willing to change ourselves to become more responsive to their needs. Healing presence is a way of being that by its very nature tends to reassure and encourage people, to lend them moral and spiritual strength, to provide confidence that they can overcome suffering and continue to grow. Ultimately, the goal is to help the individual develop his or her own healing presence.

The concept of healing presence has a spiritual aspect. It is generated by qualities we usually attribute to the soul, being, or self. These attributes include empathy, love, awareness of values and ideals, and, depending on our views, devotion to humankind and to a higher power. Healing presence is not magical. It's the product of ways of being in relation to each other. It expresses the reality that the very presence of a person can have a healing effect. At times I will speak of "healing aura"- the relationship or atmosphere created by healing presence. It is a psychologically and spiritually positive ambience that envelops people or a place. Some people understandably reject the concept of an aura that invests a relationship or a place. I have accepted it simply because I occasionally experience it, always in a positive manner. The concept does not require a belief in mystical realities. It can be understood as the personal, subjective experience of a positive, joyful, or loving attitude towards other individuals and life. Our healing presence helps us to create healing aura with other people. As people learn to join with us in creating this healthy space or aura, they also learn to create the same beneficial conditions with others in their lives.

Aura comes from the Greek word aura, meaning breeze or breath of air. It has come to mean any distinctive but intangible emanation or radiation, something subtle, gentle, and invisible. Originally it was used to designate physical emanations, such as the aroma of flowers. Now it is usually reserved for more psychological or spiritual emanations from a person, place, or situation, such as the ambience of a room or the radiance of an individual's personality. As something that surrounds everyone involved in the experience, healing aura bathes and inspires the healer and the healed, the therapist and the client, the teacher and the pupil, the parent and the child. Healing aura is a mutual responsibility and a mutual creation. The task of the healer or therapist is to take as much responsibility as possible for its creation with the person being helped. Yet the healer and the client must remain aware that healing is a shared process requiring the efforts of everyone involved. Because it is an environment or an atmosphere, healing aura is beneficial for us as well as for the people we are trying to help. Healing aura is an energy that surrounds and gives energy to everyone involved in the experience.

Charisma shares some qualities with healing presence, but it encourages a model of leaders and followers. Charisma is the ability to inspire followers with devotion and enthusiasm to a cause. It encourages disciples rather than independent persons. It is a way of investing oneself with authority over others rather than vesting others with authority over themselves. Charisma can be helpful in inspiring people. It may play a useful function, for example, in being an exciting speaker or workshop leader. In groups, when we want to hold the attention of others or to sway them to a point of view, charisma plays a role. But a good speaker or workshop leader should remain more interested in empowering the listeners and participants than in leading them down a pre-determined path. Similarly, a therapist's enthusiasm for his own life and for therapy can inspire a client to feel encouragement and hope. Ultimately, however, the therapist's task is to help the clients discover these resources within themselves. Charisma, at its worst, is the inflated presentation of oneself as a magnificent helping person. It depends on communicating a flawless sense of potency. This masquerade is inherently undermining to our clients, patients, students, or children- to anyone who seeks his or her own independence and empowerment. It suggests that we have qualities that are beyond their reach and that they must depend on us for the accomplishment of their goals. It creates mythology in which we are the central figure and they are lesser beings.

Unlike charisma, which inspires followers and disciples, healing presence embraces all the people who participate and creates conditions in which people feel nurtured, promoted, and empowered in their own independent growth. Again, unlike charisma, healing aura is not something we generate entirely on our own. It requires us to involve another in our personal experience of ourselves, while involving ourselves in their personal experience of themselves. It is a way of being with another person- a healing awareness and ambience that surrounds the helper and the helped alike.

Healing presence- and the creation of healing aura- is at the heart of being a helpful person. It allows us to be as helpful as we can in almost any circumstance in which people are emotionally distressed or upset. It allows us to promote growth in most situations. It also applies to handling our everyday relationships with people.

*Hearing these words from a professional psychiatrist gives me lots of hope and inspiration for our ways to work with people.
With love, Betina*