

Healing Spirit

how three faiths converged to heal my body and heart

CHARLES BURACK

"Reflections" is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement. This issue offers a reflection on interfaith spirituality and healing.

I n early May 1999 I contracted pneumonia. I was soon to discover that more than my lungs needed healing. It began on a Thursday night as a sense of weakness and wooziness. By the morning, I was experiencing a full-blown delirium, but I thought it was just a vicious flu: my body ached, sweated, shivered and

burned with fever; I was dizzy and nauseous and had no appetite or thirst. I lay in bed all Friday, getting up only to drink a few cups of water and fruit juice. I was too incoherent to even watch TV! On Saturday I felt only a mild delirium, and though I was still feverish, shivering and sweating, I no longer felt the full body aches. It seemed I was on the mend. I went to sleep that night, hoping that I would feel even better the next day. In the middle of the night, I woke up to go the bathroom. I remember walking slowly to the washroom and standing in front of the toilet.

The next thing I remember is waking up. My head was resting on something hard and cold, my arms were pressed up against something hard and cold, and my chest was balanced on the same. I turned my head and saw a faucet and a ceramic wall; I realized I was face down in my bathtub, with my chest resting on the ledge and my legs on the bathroom floor. I realized I must have collapsed.

*Dr. Charles Burack teaches literature, spirituality and creativity at St. Mary's College, UC Berkeley, and John F. Kennedy University. A widely published writer and award-winning scholar, he is author of two books: *D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and *Songs to My Beloved* (Sacred Arts, 2004). He is actively involved in interfaith education, arts, counseling, and chaplaincy and can be reached at www.charlesburack.com.*

Labyrinth, original art, Lonnie Hanson



As I pulled myself out of the tub, I felt a swooning come upon me. I knew I was going to black out again, so I sat down on the bathroom floor, leaned up against the wall and waited to lose consciousness. When I awoke, I was slumped against the wall. I waited a few minutes to be sure my energy was back and then slowly stood up. After drinking a glass of water, I went to sleep. The next morning I entered the washroom and noticed something that astonished me: my towel rack was missing, and there were two holes in the wall where it had been. I looked in the bathtub, and there it was. Evidently, I had tried to grab it to brace my fall. I had a flash of memory of grabbing at something as I was losing consciousness. Looking at the towel rack and the tub, I was amazed I hadn't been seriously hurt. I spoke to a friend who worked at a hospital, and she said my symptoms sounded worse than a bad flu. She urged me to go to the hospital. Later that day, another friend drove me to the emergency room. The x-rays revealed I had pneumonia, and the doctor said I was totally dehydrated. They injected me intravenously with two liters of saline solution containing antibiotics. Within an hour, my fever dropped from 103 to under 100.

On Monday morning I woke up with greater energy, an appetite, and no headache, but I still had a slight fever, was coughing a lot, and could feel the soreness in my lungs. Over the next couple of days, I got a little stronger, but was still unable to walk more than a few dozen yards because of the dizziness and weakness.

The woozy weakness and sore lungs persisted for weeks. On a couple of occasions, I forced myself to take a mile walk. Usually, my daily walks ranged from three to six miles, so I thought a mile would be easy. It wasn't. Indeed, every time I took a walk or tried to resume my normal activities, I was exhausted and dizzy that day and the next.

After six weeks of this up and down course, I began to think I may have gotten a relapse. Three friends had had pneumonia the previous year, and two had gotten relapses when they tried to resume their daily activities, so I feared that I too had relapsed. Follow-up X-rays revealed, however, that the pneumonia was gone. The doctor said it would take time for my body to heal from the damage caused by both the infection and the severe dehydration. I was not reassured by his assessment, especially since the emergency room doctor said I would be fine within three weeks of taking the antibiotics.

I remembered that a friend had often told me about a medical doctor who was a powerful spiritual healer. In fact, she had recently called me and said he was going to be giving an evening lecture followed by a three-day workshop on Sufi healing practices. This particular form of Sufism is connected to the mystical tradition in Islam. Though I felt a bit skeptical about some of the claims about the doctor's amazing healing powers, and though the lecture was to be held at night – the time I felt most weak – a voice in me said, "Go!" to the lecture.

On a Thursday night in mid-June I attended the lecture. The doctor (I shall call him "Muhammad") led some meditations and demonstrated various Sufi healings.



Going; photo, Cetta Kenney

He was a Jewish man who had converted to Islam – and taken a Sufi name – a few years earlier after meeting a powerful sheikh and spiritual healer from Jerusalem. This sheikh was the greatest healer Muhammad had ever met, so Muhammad had become his disciple and apprentice. My friend told me that Muhammad had been a well-known healer long before meeting the sheik. But with the sheikh's help, he now performed many miraculous healings.

Just being in Muhammad's presence had a calming and invigorating affect on me. My lungs seemed to fill with expansive light, and some of the soreness diminished. After the lecture, I spoke with Muhammad, and he said that pneumonia was often caused by intense grief. What might I be grieving about? I wondered. On the way out of the room, I spoke with a member of Muhammad's organization about the possibility of taking the three-day workshop. I said I was recovering from pneumonia and couldn't commit to the full three days but would like to try coming one day at a time. She said that would be fine.

That night I had one of the most restful sleeps that I can remember. I awoke feeling sure I needed to attend the workshop. I would try to take one day at a time. If my energy held up or got better, I would continue going. If not, I would drop out.

Over the next two days, we did some wonderful meditations, chants and healing techniques, all of which were soothing, centering, energizing, and transformative. All

of the healing techniques involved focusing attention and intention and calling in Allah's (God's) love. Sometimes we focused on healing each other, and sometimes on ourselves. Muhammad said that as healers and self-healers we are just conduits for the Divine Healer.

As a Jewish man, I felt a little uncomfortable praying to Allah. I had never prayed to Allah before and associated the name with Islamic fundamentalism. Yet the presence of love in the room was palpable, and I experienced its healing power in both myself and others. So I decided to try to let go of my unease with the name "Allah."

On the third day, Muhammad and his wife (whom I shall call Noorit) focused on the spirituality of relationships. Noorit had been a Christian who also converted to Islam and become a follower of the sheikh. Several workshop participants told Muhammad and Noorit that they wanted to heal their primary relationships. One man, who spoke of being distant and emotional, was profoundly transformed as we watched; his face seemed to liquify and relax and then fill with light, joy and peace. It was astounding, as if he had been transfigured. Indeed, he was transfigured. A couple of others also asked for healings and were deeply moved by the experience.

As Muhammad was about to move on to a new topic, I heard an inner voice urging me to ask for a healing too. I hesitated briefly and then asked for a healing that would remove any blocks I had to finding, recognizing and marrying my beloved. Muhammad and Noorit agreed to do the healing.

My birthday was two months away. I was about to turn 44 and was still unmarried. When I was a teenager, my good friends used to say I would be the first one married. Well, all of them were married by their early thirties, leaving me the lone bachelor of our original group of friends. As I reached my mid-thirties and was still moving from one relationship to the next, I wondered if I were meant to marry. Though I had spent many years in therapy trying to sort out my resistances to marriage, I still seemed unable to make a lifelong commitment to any of the women I had been in relationship with.

Muhammad and Noorit asked me to stand up in front of the group and close my eyes. Noorit stood to my right and Muhammad to my left. He began to vocalize the critical inner voices he heard in my psyche – the voices that held me back from committing to a lifetime partner. Immediately, I felt a powerful field of rhythmic energy in my body. A tremor was running up and down my body, and I began to pant or gasp. The energy moving through me was powerful and a little alarming. It did not feel like my energy – it felt like an energy being added to me. While I was listening to Muhammad, I was even more focused on the rhythmic, moving tremors and my panting breath. Some of the inner voices that Muhammad channeled were accurate; others were not. Throughout his naming of the voices, I tried to stay as present with my body as I could.

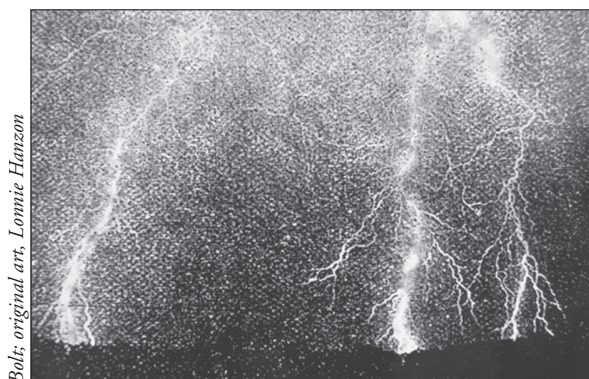
At one point, I heard someone in the audience say "Bring in the love of God." I then felt Muhammad move toward me and heard him say "Let the love of Allah enter him and cleanse and fill his heart."

Suddenly, I felt a huge bolt of energy rip into the front of my body. It seemed to come from above and in front of me and to tear into my chest and to open the front of my body. It was like being struck by a huge bolt of lightning. I could feel my body begin to go into convulsions and paroxysms. The energy was so powerful that it began to bend me backward. I could feel my back arching backward. It seemed to bend more and more until my head was just a few feet from the ground. Noorit was in front of me, putting her hands on my chest very gently and lovingly. She had moved in front of me for most of the healing once Muhammad had begun the channeling. Her presence was very loving and nurturing. While I was bending backward, I felt as if the loving energy coming through her hands was preventing me from completely falling back on my head. It was as if her hands had magnetic power that kept me suspended.

As the energy continued, I felt myself losing more and more control, and then sensed other people coming behind me to keep me from falling. The energy of the bolt was like a terrible-wonderful fire burning through my body, consuming what it would consume. Most of the fire was in my breast region, but it also extended from there and may well have included my pelvis and genitals.

Suddenly, it felt as if my whole body convulsed orgasmically and my head blew off or open and my spirit was catapulted into an utterly new realm. It was like the dome of heaven opening up, and when it opened, there was a gorgeous purple light filling the space, and around the fringes of this purple light, a gorgeous rose light began to rise. So it was as if the purple heaven were ringed by a vaporous rose crown. My spirit was rushing into the center of this purple, rose-ringed heaven. My spirit was moving at an incredible speed.

Suddenly, I had no strength to stand and allowed myself to collapse into the arms of those behind me. The vision began to shift to one of bright white sparkling light. It was like a shower of twinkling light, a curtain, a milky way of flickering white light. This light continued for some time as my body quivered and quivered. Slowly, the light began to fade, and the quivering got less, and I was able to stand on my



Bolt; original art, Lonnie Hanson

own power. There was a moment when the others were holding me that I felt like – and had a vision of being like – Jesus after the crucifixion when his body was held up by those who loved him. And Noorit, who was in front of me with her hands on my heart, felt like Mother Mary. I had completely surrendered to these people, and my head was thrown back and arms draped over their shoulders. I was struck by the identification with Jesus and a little confused and embarrassed by it – I was raised in a Jewish family and had even attended rabbinical school! – but I accepted the feeling and the vision and let my judgmental thoughts pass.

When I regained my feet, I opened my eyes and saw a very bright white light in me and in the world. I embraced, or was embraced by, Noorit, and she held me for some time. It felt very loving and nurturing and maternal. I closed my eyes during this embrace and enjoyed the white light. Eventually, we released the embrace, and I opened my eyes. The world was still aglow with white light! I felt like a different person, as if the experience had both taken away and added to who I am. I felt radiant and expansive.

Slowly, I started to walk, and as I began to sit down on the floor, the group began to applaud. They seemed to be tremendously moved by my experience.

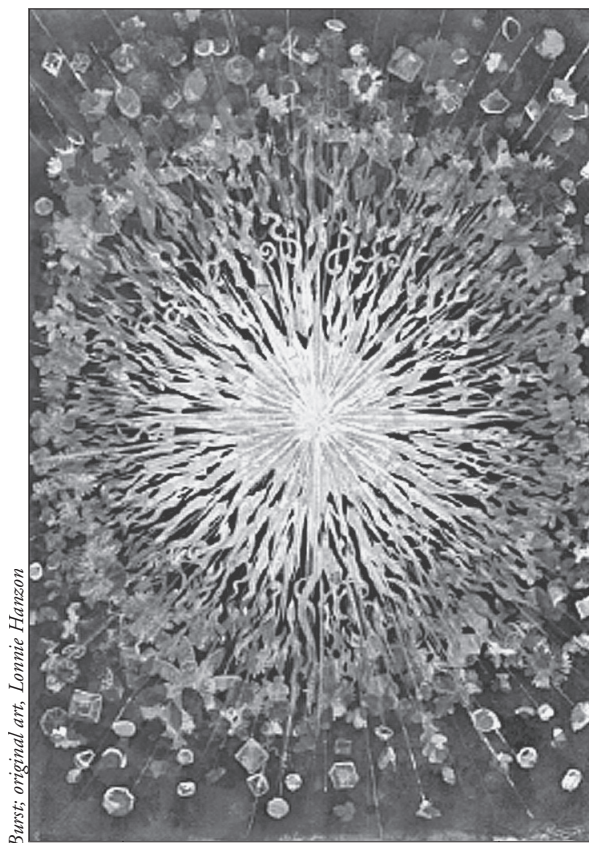
During the intense period when my body was being torn open, there were tears streaming from my eyes, and I was moaning and gasping and screaming in joyful and agonizing ecstasy. Overall, the experience felt like a cosmic orgasm. My bodily responses were almost like an intensified full body sexual orgasm, but the overall tone of the experience was not sexual – it was one of love and terror, pain and bliss. I felt the power and light of God's light and fire in me. A part of me thought I might actually die. Indeed, the next day, as I was driving home from therapy, I began convulsively sobbing when I realized that one of the miracles was that I had not died physically. God had brought about a spiritual death and rebirth but had not wanted to take my physical life.

After the healing, I felt immense gratitude to God and to Muhammad and Noorit. They had given me the priceless gift of a lifetime. I could feel tremendous thanks and love and grace and generosity surging through my heart. I went to lunch with one of the seminar participants (whom I shall call Deborah) and felt called to treat her as well as the fellow standing behind us in line. I didn't feel that the treating was from me alone – it was my way of expressing gratitude to Allah, but it was more my expressing of Allah's grace. Allah's love had prompted me to treat Deborah and the stranger. And at the same time, it was an act of thanks from me to Allah. The young man was quite surprised by my offer. I told him I just had a wonderful healing and wanted to share my appreciation. When he got his food and thanked me, I said "Don't thank me. Thank the force that healed me." I had wanted to say, "Thank God," but wasn't sure the young man would understand.

A year or so after the healing, I met Andrew Harvey, a well-known poet and mystic who has written inspirational books about the Sufi poet and mystic Jelaluddin

Rumi. I told Harvey about my healing experience and asked him why I had a vision of Jesus during a Sufi healing. He said he wasn't at all surprised by my vision. He said the Sufis consider Jesus to be the prophet of love. How natural that Jesus would appear to assist in my heart healing!

Three years after the healing I became involved with a woman named Mary Ann. She had been raised Catholic and become a Sufi. She was not a Muslim but a member of the Sufi Order, founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan, that affirms the equality of the world's religions. In October 2004, Mary Ann and I were married in a beautiful interfaith ceremony held in a rose garden in northern California. Our guests included Jews, Sufis, Catholics, Protestants, Unitarians, Buddhists, and Hindus. After the ceremony, several friends told us that the ceremony had been a powerful interfaith healing experience. Yes, I thought, this too is one of the gifts of Muhammad and Noorit – and of Allah, and Jesus, and Adonai!



Burst; original art, Lonnie Hanson