

NEW AGE HEALING MYTHOLOGIES

INTRODUCTION:

I am a psychotherapist, Reiki Master Teacher, and Body/Mind/Soul oriented healer. I have been involved in the Modern Spirituality/Healing Movement, often referred to as the "New Age Movement" for practically all of my adult life. Like many of my contemporaries, however, I have mixed feelings about calling myself a "New Ager". As much as I appreciate the innovation, freshness, empowerment and, in some ways radical stance of the New Age Movement, there have always been certain tenets popularly professed that made and make me uncomfortable.

I have always considered myself to be a "bridge" person, - one foot in the alternative world, and one foot in the more established traditional world - trying to integrate the two. I often feel torn, presenting alternative healing methods and spiritual ways of looking at the world to my more mainstream friends and associates, and also affirming the sometimes-healthy skepticism that the mainstream world has of my alternative healing world. There has certainly been a plentitude of skepticism, even criticism and outright scorn hurled at the Modern Spiritual Movement by the proponents of allopathic medicine and traditional religion. Where, I started wondering, are the voices from within our movement that ask the discerning, sometimes difficult questions? Perhaps because we are relatively "new" ("in our New Age"), and because we have existed largely outside of the mainstream, we have hunkered down and developed an insular attitude? Perhaps, like all new movements, the New Age Movement is going through its own developmental process, and, as in all developmental processes, our thinking and view of the world and ourselves matures as we do. I would like to add my voice, and the voices of those I have interviewed to this process.

This book is an extension of an article I wrote in 2004, published in Spirit of Change Magazine. I wrote that article with the intention of looking at and critiquing our some of our New Age Movement's cherished tenets from within, with both love and discernment, and also, hopefully with some humor, and with the realization that I am holding myself as accountable as anyone else. My intention then, and now, is not to offend, but, in the spirit of mindful inquiry: to catalyze thought, curiosity, discussion, possibly controversy, and hopefully change.

The main philosophy and cluster of tenets I am bringing into the spotlight of inquiry is one that appears throughout New Age literature, teaching and

treatment conceptualization: the idea / belief that "You Create Your Own Reality". Oh, Blasphemy! Yes, it is this sacred cow I wish to challenge, along with the off-shoots and consequences that develop as a result of this assumption, which has been largely unchallenged from within.

To be fair, this guiding belief has been challenged, although not widely enough. The best challenge I have read, which inspired me to think and write about this is in Ken Wilber's book "Grace and Grit", which describes his deceased wife's spiritual healing process and eventual death from very virulent breast cancer in the early 80's. In this beautifully heart-breaking and opening book, Treya and Ken Wilber explore their journey from diagnoses to death. All the spiritual and psychological implications and "meaning making" they encountered as a result of this experience is explored with great honesty, compassion and wisdom. And ironically, since Ken Wilber's "job" was and is being a leading modern spiritual philosopher, he devoted an entire chapter to the interpretations of meaning surrounding responsibility for illness and healing that are assigned by different cultural philosophies (the new age being one.)

Steven Levine, in all his books about death and dying, also presents an alternative view, which leans towards compassionate acceptance, and differentiates between healing and cure. Being a practitioner of Buddhist Mindfulness, his focus is on acceptance and non-resistance of what is. Paradoxically, he explores how this very acceptance can sometimes lead to cure, but sometimes not, and to him, the healing is present in the attitude of compassion and acceptance, not in whether a life was ended or extended.

Rabbi Harold Kushner addresses an aspect of this vexing issue in his book "When Bad Things Happen To Good People". He recounts his own spiritual crises and healing resolution when his young child died of a horrendous genetic disorder, and how this event affected his spiritual evolution, and the spiritual guidance of his congregants.

Much more prevalent, however, are the beliefs and guiding principles stating that all of our experiences and conditions are caused by our thoughts, intentions and actions, and that everything we encounter in life is a reflection of our internal world and process, and that the purpose of our Spiritual development is to be able to control all outcomes.

From Carolyn Myss, who proposes that "biology is biography" (and wrote a book originally entitled " Why People Don't Heal") to the very popular "Conversations with God" to the generally beloved Deepak Chopra: "Why did you allow the tic to bite you ?" the theme resounds. From the current popular healing anthology "Infinite Grace" which surveys the major healing schools in the United States, to countless channeled information, (much of which I respect),

and to my own training as a Reiki Master, and even the way I used to think and teach, the staunch belief that illness and traumatic experiences are caused by the person undergoing them is still held to be true, and goes widely unchallenged.

LOCUS OF CONTROL

As a psychotherapist, I have been very influenced and involved in the trauma therapy movement, also relatively new, which emerged in the early 80's and is based on the works of Boston based therapeutic, psychiatric and neurological research, as well as the recovery movement, and social movements influenced by feminism and the effects of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on Vietnam vets. The trauma movement is not a proponent of the philosophy that "we create our own reality", although it does point towards holistic healing, empowerment and personal responsibility.

In fact, trauma theory proposes the concept known as "the locus of control" which holds that as a defense mechanism to protect the psyche from the devastation of traumatic abuse or attack, "victims" (and I use this word consciously), often take inappropriate responsibility for events that they in fact have no or little control over, because they can feel that at least they still have some power and control over the events in their lives. If they somehow "created" the traumatic event, abuse, attack, catastrophe or illness, then, conversely, they can "un-create it", protect themselves from a feeling of loss of control, and/ or prevent it from ever happening again. They can protect themselves from the most subtle and destructive effects of trauma: the attack on the sense of self, which often takes the form of self hatred: "I should have/could have done something".

Now, those of you who are in the New Age world know that saying the word "victim" in a New Age context is something akin to yelling "fire!" in a crowded theater. Sit back and watch the reactions fly. (I recall a friend of mine once screaming "There are no victims, Judy!", pulling on her hair and becoming somewhat apoplectic.) Why is calling someone a victim, or labeling abuse and catastrophe victimization such a mortal sin in our community? The answer I usually get, and used to give myself, is that the word implies a lack or reneging of responsibility, and therefore, a tendency to stay "stuck".

But the totality of the experience of victimization goes much deeper than that. It implies powerlessness and extreme vulnerability. It implies that sometimes, no matter how well we live and think and act, how "protected" we might think we are, terrible things can happen to us, and sometimes there is nothing we can do to prevent it. And, whether we who have "undergone" traumatic events call ourselves survivors or victims, the fact remains that without acceptance of the

totality of the event, including, but not limited to, our powerlessness and helplessness at the time, we cannot completely grieve, and without grieving, we cannot completely heal.

DISCERNING APPROPRIATE FROM INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSIBILITY

As a result of 22 years of assuming the "bridging" position, I have acquired a strong liking for integrating and synthesizing polarities. The answer, to my mind is not to swing over to the other polarity, and state that we are always victims, and that we have no influence over our destinies. The answer is the ability to discriminate, or as people involved in the twelve steps have known for a long time: The ability to change what we can change, accept what we can't and have the wisdom to know the difference. In the process of discriminating, we can discern a deeper, perhaps wiser perspective for healing. Rather than taking blanket responsibility for everything that happens, we can strive to understand the difference between influencing an event and causing it, and between resiliently, creatively responding to life and controlling everything in it.

Today, when someone comes into my office and wants to work on " why I created this cancer" or "why I created getting raped", or "why I keep getting into abusive relationships", my first impulse is to discuss and explore together what aspects of their experience they really did have an influence over, and which ones they did not. Many clients are shocked (and relieved) that I do not automatically make the assumption that anything that happened to them is automatically their creation. As discussion unfolds, almost invariably the locus of control emerges, and in some cases, actually becomes the first problem to explore.

For example: An older woman came for therapy, and presented with the statement "I want to work on why I got raped twice and why I always get into relationships with men who don't love me." The latter part of the statement did yield some very good exploration, expression, healing and change for her, but with former, we hit a wall. She was convinced that, even though she walked down a crowded street in a good neighborhood in broad daylight, that she created the event of being grabbed, hit, and raped.

"How?" I asked.

She answered " I must have, the spiritual teachings I believe in and everything I've learned say that you create everything that happens to you."

"But how," I stubbornly persisted, "could you have done that?"

"I don't know, maybe on a Soul level, or in a past life? It's got to be my choice, I must have wanted it to happen or needed it to happen for my Soul's growth. I don't really understand it, but I must have made it happen."

In "Friendship with God" Neale Walsh writes about the concept of "choosing on a Soul level" with more complexity and subtlety than others I have been exposed to, however in light of the questions I am posing now, still appear problematic. He writes of: "Three Levels of Experience - superconscious, conscious and subconscious", in which "God" describes three decreasing levels of awareness from which we "intend" and "create" our experiences, explaining how most people are not "aware" of what we are creating most of the time (pages 115 -116).

The problem I still have with this idea is that it implies that in "Mastery", a state of being leading to wholeness, health, balance and wisdom, (i.e. one we would all like to have), each individual is completely and omnipotently responsible for every event that happens to them (even if it involves others).

Mr. Walsch says: "And so, for a person of "elevated consciousness" outcomes and results are always intended and never unanticipated?"

"God" answers "Indeed this is true".

He goes on to say that " the degree to which the event appears (underlines are mine) unanticipated is a direct indication of the level of consciousness at which an experience is being perceived."

Again, "God" says "That is exactly correct".

This exchange ends with Mr. Walsch concluding that "therefore, the Master always agrees with results even if they do not appear favorable, because he knows that at some level, he must have created them."

Bingo! Locus of control. (And what does he means by "agreeing" with results"? Is he talking about acceptance, or denial of any painful or shameful feelings?)

To me, this exchange reveals more of a desire for and distortion of the need for control, denial, and as the psychologist Marsha Linehan would say "inhibited grieving", than a truly expanded view born of compassionate acceptance and broad vision of all possibilities. Do we need to believe that we control everything in order to accept it?

Losing discernment between the capacity to learn something valuable and acquire meaning from a traumatic event, and taking inappropriate responsibility for creating it muddies the waters for the healing potential of what meaning and purpose may arise from the trauma. What often gets "created" instead is inappropriate blame and self-hatred for the person suffering, and may actually create the stuckness and blockages to healing that it is trying to clear. True creativity, in the form of feelings of empowerment and the ability to think widely and broadly, allowing shifts in perspective, may in fact be blocked.

Also, from a spiritual perspective, a lack of clarity about who the "you" in "you create your own reality" is (i.e. Soul, ego, Higher Self, etc.) leads to confusion over responsibility, as illustrated in the above discourse, and the conversation I had with my client. The consequences of failing to distinguish between a "Soul" level of choosing or intending, and a conscious ego/ self choice, in the body, in 3- Dimensional time and space, can lead people to assume that they are responsible, often, for catastrophic, harmful and painful events. In my observation, this leaning feeds guilt, shame and inappropriate responsibility, inhibits healing grief, and on the other end of the spectrum, spikes grandiosity.

FIRST DO NO HARM

Most proponents of the "create your own reality" theory really do mean to empower and heal, and not to cause harm. But there are many unintended harmful consequences that I have observed as a result of this philosophy, some very damaging. Most trauma survivors already have a "belief system" and a mental template that leans towards shame and a feeling of responsibility for everything that has gone wrong in their lives, and the lives of the people they love. Often their abusers actively blame them, and often this happens as children, when they are most vulnerable and unable to assert the truth of their experience.

When the seed of self blame is already there, due to abuse or trauma, the well-meaning but sometimes misplaced belief that "you create your own reality" often creates a syndrome that is called by the trauma movement "blaming the victim". As stated earlier, the word "victim" is so negatively charged in the healing world that I have come to rephrase this as "blaming the sufferer", but the idea is the same.

In an attempt to empower, consciously, and an attempt to ward off our own fears of vulnerability, unconsciously, we New Agers add onto the trauma already experienced, such as being raped or attacked, or receiving a diagnoses of a serious or even terminal illness, by implying that the experience is their fault,

that they did "choose it", and/or deserve it. And even if we are careful not to imply that it is their fault, it is often taken that way.

Ken and Treya Wilber write very eloquently about this, and how it affected his and his wife's experiences. In "Grace and Grit", Treya Wilbur describes numerous encounters with well-meaning therapists and healers who gave her, - often uninvited - advice and analyses of how she had either created or maintained her illness. She writes about how painful and often devastating the effect of this was for her, and how little help it was. Almost humorously describes developing a "psychic immune system," where her intuition would act like a healthy T-cell in a healthy immune system, rejecting "toxic" suggestions that demoralized her or attacked her sense of healthy self.

A friend of mine with a fairly good strong sense of self walked into a nutritionist's office after he received a diagnosis of cancer. He is a warm, fulfilled spiritual man, who loves his wife and child, and is happy in his job. The first words out of the nutritionist's mouth were: "Let's examine your lifestyle, so we can figure out how you created this cancer." My friend was healthy enough to get up and walk right out. But many people, especially when dealing with the considerable shock and fear of news like this, are more vulnerable, and not as clear. I have heard stories about people who have been told to get off their antidepressant medication because "it muddies up your auric field" and "they are not taking responsibility for their thoughts", and people who do not respond to treatment being told that "They must not want to heal". Or "be ready to" or "they are choosing their illness".

OUR OWN LOCUS OF CONTROL PROBLEMS:

Why is it so attractive to the New Age community to embrace this belief? Why have we been so uncritical of it? Is it like the fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes?" Is the pressure of consensus thought so strong that we're afraid to say "The King is naked?" or, "The King is vulnerable"?

Perhaps we have been afraid of our own vulnerability to harmful events that we cannot control? Perhaps we are afraid of the pain and grief that sometimes accompanies events in life. I must admit that in spite of the perspective I hold and have been expressing all throughout this article, when hearing about a contemporary who has just been diagnosed with a serious illness, I have caught myself having the thought "That won't happen to me, I take care of myself." Who among us hasn't? Once again I face the experience of vulnerability, the fears of it, and the ways we have designed, consciously and unconsciously, to cope with it.

I find myself facing my original questions and original polarities. If we are never truly challenged from time to time and have to stretch through some "Dark nights of the Soul" how can we claim to know the experience of vulnerability, and claim the experience of being truly human? For me, creativity has less to do with control and more to do with letting go, cultivating trust and the willingness to be surprised. If being "spiritually aware" means nothing surprises you, what have we done with what Zen Masters call "Beginner's Mind"? Where is the space for "The Great Mystery"? Have we talked ourselves out of the wonder, humility and gratitude that come from not knowing? Is "you create your own reality" just a fancy defense against impermanence? Allowing for the unknown seems to be a recurring theme, and an integral ingredient.

Again, swinging to the other side of the paradox, for me, facing difficult situations with an attitude of spaciousness, and using abilities, support and faith has helped to overcome the paralyzes of fear in many of the difficult situations. Allowing new possibilities to incubate and grow has largely depended upon receiving (and learning how to receive) support, cultivating acceptance and flexibility, perceiving the "right action" appropriate to the situation, and finding the courage to proceed.

Spirituality, grace, even "magic" seems to imbue all of these steps and stages. Receiving and recognizing support from my circle of family, friends, mentors and spiritual guidance, calls for both psychological growth and development of faith. Acceptance, which involves a process that is similar to both the development of Mindfulness and psychological process of grief, starts with denial and fear, and ends with allowance, acceptance faith and compassion. Right action, a Buddhist concept, is also dependent upon mental and emotional clarity, and hard won self-knowledge. Finding the courage to proceed is based upon equal amounts of faith, trust, and a willingness to keep expectations loose, and be surprised life's responses. Is this the same as believing that we control and are responsible for everything that happens to us in life?

IMPLICATIONS AND BALANCE

Like all cultures, the New Age culture has spawned its own mythologies, however, it would benefit us to use the highest discernment in sorting out facts from myths, parables and metaphors when stepping into the delicate realm of people's hearts, souls, minds and traumas. Although there are many events in our lives that we do not create, we can have a healing influence on them. We must walk our talk of compassion, acceptance, and unconditional love by acknowledging that experiences of trauma, disease and even death do not imply spiritual failure and that healing occurs through the vulnerability to pain and

suffering as well as strength and triumph. This applies to all events in our lives, whether we control them or not.

Could it be that we are taking our own "Mythology" too literally? In this case the "Myth" is that on some level we create everything that happens to us. Like all cultures, our New Age culture has its belief systems and myths. Just like the creation myths of the ancients, perhaps it is time, in the maturation process of our community of healers and healee's to look into how beliefs become myths, and myth's become assumptions. We need to sort out "fact" from belief, image from teaching story, metaphor from reality.)

The questioning of the "create your own reality" belief can have far reaching effects. How do we then understand: intersessionary prayer, intentionality, vision, creativity, energy healing and spiritual practice as healing modalities, and the balance of the polarity of acceptance vs. change? My mentor, Dawna Memont says that "the way we do create our own reality is the way we respond to events, not how we control them."

I stand in the integrative position, with one foot in the Modern Spiritual Movement, one foot in the Trauma field, grounding cord into a territory of honesty, compassion with self, continued questioning and common sense. Anyone care to join me?