

# The Mythic Arc of Healing

A physician's personal healing crisis and the mystery of healing.

By Brad Lichtenstein, ND

What are myths but stories that help us make sense of the world? We turn to the Classics for guidance, inspiration and solace, recognizing that we are not alone in our plight, that the struggles we endure now are the struggles of men and women throughout the ages. The mythic arc is universal – the separation, the search and the return. An event happens, a defining moment; we find ourselves instantly disconnected from all we know, and our daily routines and habitual ways of living become outmoded and obsolete. Forced into uncharted territory, like Persephone abducted by Hades, we come to recognize how little we know ourselves, how to live or what road to choose. With time, deep reflection, contemplation, and completion of many harrowing tasks placed in our way by the gods and goddesses, maybe we find our way home again. Yet while this home may look like the one from which we departed, at least on the exterior, it is new; on some fundamental level, the odyssey changes us for good.

Separation takes many forms. A partner admits an affair, a child leaves home, a loved one dies, a job is lost. Separation also appears as a diagnosis. For some, one word or phrase rips them apart and turns their world upside down. However, others feel as if the naming process carries them home, making everything clear, and they can say with relief, *Now I know. This suffering is real. It has a name.* Over the years, I have primarily witnessed the former, initiating the descent into the Underworld as the questions unfold. *What are my myths about life? What do I believe about health, disease, recovery, invincibility, habits, practices, relationships, work? What is it all about?*

Medicine and practitioners of the healing arts embrace their own untold myths. One common story speaks of how only the pure hearted, healthy and balanced can serve those who are ill. If this were the case, who, I wonder, amongst us would be in practice? If you were to engage any of us “believers” in further discussion, I am certain we would admit such a standard to be neigh impossible, for the myth implies that the healer be utterly free from baggage, both carry-on and cargo. Who might that be?

I, myself, have been seduced by this myth. This past year I plunged headfirst into my own personal Hades, causing me to examine my stories and question my very existence. The height of my fall occurred, ironically, during the quarter I was teaching a course so aptly

entitled *Myth, Ritual and Healing*. During the second week of the winter quarter, while at a birthday party for a colleague, I was suddenly overcome by the feeling that an elephant had somehow entered the room and decided to stand on my chest. And, at the same time, a giant hand had a vice-like grip on my heart. Sitting on the floor unable to catch my breath, sweating, shaking, with pain radiating down my right arm (not the left) and up into my jaw, my friends *kindly* urged me to let them call 911. Within ten minutes I was hooked up to a 4-lead EKG, pulse oximeter and nasal oxygen.

Despite unremarkable findings, the paramedics, along with the four naturopaths in the room, persuaded me to get further workup at the ER, *just to be safe*. Four hours in the ER, three rounds of nitroglycerine and two rounds of morphine revealed nothing by conventional standards. The nitro did exterminate the elephant, but the death-grip squeeze remained. The medications administered helped soothe the pain momentarily, only to return within 10 - 15 minutes. For no logical or apparent reason, I tried, unconvincingly, to mask the degree and intensity of the pain from my friends who accompanied me. With no clear diagnosis, the doctor strongly recommended that I stay overnight for observation until they could determine what was going on. I didn't listen; against medical advice, I went home. Despite the tremendous pain, I *believed* that the cause was not my actual heart, or on the material level whatsoever, regardless of the physical manifestations of symptoms.

For the next four days, the squeezing persisted, although with variable and ranging intensity. After several sessions with my acupuncturist (in addition to visits with a variety of providers who ruled out heart attack, angina, panic attack, reflux, dislocated rib, gallbladder or liver issues, viral or bacterial infection, etc), the pain abated. In its place was a debilitating, 24-hour headache. Then, like magic, it was over. Sigh, relief, move on. *I am stressed*. Within a day or two, I was functioning as if nothing happened. The separation was incomplete, the wilderness left unexplored, transformation failed to take place.

A week later, in the midst of a lecture, the demon hand found its way back to my “heart.” Somehow, I summoned enough determination and will to finish my presentation, though not necessarily the smartest or healthiest approach. After class, on my way to my

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## healing & consciousness

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office, I collapsed. A colleague, who happened to be walking by, helped me to an exam room where I was given oxygen, aspirin, acupuncture, and rescue remedy. My pulse clocked in about 135, more than double its resting rate, and my usually exceedingly low blood pressure crept up to around 128 over 100. Blood was drawn, labs ordered and within an hour I was feeling “better”, which translates to the ability to sit upright, walk slowly without falling over, talk coherently and remain fairly oriented, even though the demon hand relentlessly continued to squeeze

It was during this “attack,” while lying on that cold, uncomfortable exam table looking up at the ceiling, that I first saw it. Willowy, transparent and grayish-white, I saw what I took to be my soul floating five feet above me. A thin wisp of a tendril connected us from the center of our torsos. At that moment, I knew, with absolute certainty, that if this thread were severed, my life, at least in this form, was over. When my attentive and caring colleague asked what I thought was going on, I remarked, *This is a spiritual crisis*, to which she replied, *That may be true, but we need to treat your physical symptoms now.*

More visits ensued – naturopathy, homeopathy, acupuncture, conventional care, cranio-sacral, shamanic healing. My acupuncturist was continually unsettled by my imperceptible heart pulse and persistent husband-wife block. After each session I would feel better, rest, and continue with business as usual. But there was nothing usual about it and my “heart” was not going to let me forget.

Moments before one of my evening shifts at the teaching clinic, without warning, I had the strong sensation that my soul was tearing itself from my body and that my life force was pouring out. Grabbing a wall, I stumbled to an exam room, and help was summoned. By this time, experience taught me the protocols that would temporarily alleviate my symptoms, and now another colleague eagerly complied. In the midst of her treatment, she commented as a matter of fact, *Your heart is broken.* A half an hour later, another naturopath, an amazingly gifted and intuitive cranio-sacral practitioner who came to check on me, looked me up and down and stated without a pause, *There’s a battle for your life, and your soul is trying to leave.* How did he know? Could he see it as well? Could he hear that shadowy figure shouting, *I’m out of here!*

The Divine, *the vis*, spirits, guides, god and goddess – whatever term you may use – send messages incessantly and we fail to pay heed. How common is the theme of blindly traveling down the same path until discomfort becomes so profound and tragedy strikes before we finally take initiative and change course? My “clinic incident” demanded attention. I had to be driven home, once again, where I remained until

symptoms resolved a week later. And still, denial insidiously crept in. The mind, so eager to forget pain and ignore the warnings signs, proceeds on its merry way as if the gods are dead, or at the very least, mute.

Since my health status was fairly public knowledge, I was constantly approached by individuals with concerned faces and knitted brows, asking, *How are you?* They offered theories about causes and mechanisms and advice about treatments. Even those who claim an affinity for energetic or spiritual medicine wondered aloud about biochemical pathways and pathologies. Few inquired about meaning and significance. Few asked where my soul might be trying to go, or what made living in this physical body so traumatic.

Just last week, four months after the initial incident, I experienced another “event”, although the form has somewhat mutated. I wish I were able to say I have ascended into the light, returned home, but I am still hanging around the gates of the Underworld, hoping to cross the threshold any moment. While I could offer the “reasons” I believe my soul was traumatized and longed to depart from this world, they would fail to emphasize my deepest concern. How, I wonder, do we step into the mystery that is our lives? How do we respect life as a journey rather than a destination, view healing as a process not a conclusion? How do we reconnect with the numinous, spirit, the gods and goddesses?

I am not suggesting that we ignore the physical, material plane. Not at all. However, to care for the person, we must care for the whole, and show deference to the stirrings of the soul. Acknowledging the process differs from asking pointedly, *What do you think is going on?* Such words appeal to the rational, logical mind, lack mystery and depth, and fail to invite soul into the room. I cannot help but wonder what it would have been like if my doctors inquired as to the journey my soul was trying to take as they ran EKGs, inserted acupuncture needles or administered nitro. What would have happened, if they – and I – examined the myths of my heart, rather than giving supreme authority to the myths of the laboratory?

For now, I remind myself to respect the process, appreciate the journey, step into the unknown, and listen to the musing of my own soul.



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