

Healing the World

Judith Helburn, MS, Certified Sage-ing Leader

I came to introspection late in life. The whirlwind of life was too exciting, too invigorating for me to slow down enough look within. For me, it was about action. I was a doer. I didn't know that to be a whole being, I also needed stillness and quiet. I didn't know that I needed to listen to inner voices as well as those out there. Yet, through the first seasons of my years, I was seeking I knew not what. It was in the autumn of my life that I realized that one could both do and be. It is the time for Harvest. It was then I discovered the Kabbalah and the story of the shards of Divine Light which gave me focus. The story explained my own desire to balance doing and being.

Isaac Luria, a sixteenth century Kabbalist, used the phrase "Tikkun Olam," usually translated as repairing the world, to encapsulate the true role of humanity in the ongoing evolution and spiritualization of the cosmos." Luria taught that God created the world and formed vessels to hold the Divine Light with which to finalize the work. But as God poured Light into the vessels, they shattered, tumbling down carrying Light sparks toward our newly formed world. By doing good deeds and helping to mend the world we are able to discover the shards and the sparks, and grow closer to that which is holy.

"...[O]ur personal inner work makes a difference. If we can raise ourselves to the station where the Divine can see and act through us, then we complete the momentous work of restoring at least one part to the Whole.... " Joseph Naft on www.Innerfrontier.org.

If our world, our universe, is holographic, then, we, ourselves, are the shards. Based on the premise that by healing ourselves, we heal the world and visa versa, what is the next step? First, we are only expected to do our part.

*"It is not incumbent on thee to finish the work,
but neither art thou permitted to desist from it altogether."*

Pirkei Avot

Where do we begin? I'm not certain that it matters. However, if we are content and happy, we are more likely to reach out to others. According to a study by the British Office for National Statistics, happiness is made up of knowing oneself and contributing to society. Other studies show that helping others helps us to live longer. Helping others moves us beyond ego, puts our own lives in perspective. Positive attitudes help our immune systems. Sharing our stories with other generations connects us to the future. Our stories help others to find precedents for dealing with the Unknown. It is one way of giving back.

David Brooks states in an interview by Charlie Rose about his recent book, *The Social Animal*, that we have a desire to merge with the other, be it another person or even God. There is happiness in connecting. [paraphrase] Further, Brooks says in an Op Ed column, NY Times, March 2011, "*We are social animals, deeply interpenetrated with one another, who emerge out of relationships.... [Our] unconscious mind hungers for those moments of transcendence when the skull line falls away and we are lost in love for another, the challenge of a task or the love of God.*"

I believe that what Brooks is saying is that grace is what happens when we let go of our egos and open ourselves. Now, in Harvest time, we have access to wisdom from the heart, not just the head. We as elders have more time to do our inner work. Even when what we work towards doesn't happen, something else does, opening up new possibilities.

Martin Luther King put it this way, "*An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.*"

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi states, "*If my outer world is degraded, then my inner world is degraded,*" so for me, I must reach out. I must give back. Eric Erickson wrote of Generativity—the act of giving ourselves to the needs of the rest of the world—saying that it is the single most important function of old age.

I do so by helping people be the best they can be in the second half of life. I lead a monthly "learn and lunch" for the Second Sixty of my Jewish community. I have facilitated a women's memoir writing circle for 14 years. I introduce Sage-ing or vital aging anywhere and everywhere I can. More importantly, I try to live Sage-ing as who I am.

One can be of service even unconsciously. I have volunteered to work [and play] in an Alzheimer's Respite Care group meeting once a week. Of course, that is a service needed and appreciated. However, a great gift has been given to me through this action. I have discovered that my unacknowledged fear of dementia as I age has diminished considerably. The people with whom I work are, for the most part,

charming, fun and able to carrying on interesting conversations. It is their memories which they are losing at this point, not their personalities and their intelligence, not their souls. They are not conscious of their gift to me, but I am. I have learned to listen. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, Harvard professor, writes of a lesson she learned from Mary Catherine Bateson. Bateson says in *Willing to Learn: Passages of Personal Discovery*, "You must listen to your daughter—she is from another planet, and she has a great deal to teach you." We must not only listen. We must continue to learn from others, old and young.

I am concerned for our planet. I do what I can—recycling, conserving energy, creating a small haven for animals and birds in my own yard, living mindfully. As I have aged, I have found that my needs and desires have lessened. I look beyond what it is that I want to what is best for the greater community. I have a cartoon from *Sally Forth* in which the family is planting a tree. Sally explains to a neighborhood child that the tree will bear fruit in the future—for others.

The buzz of my earlier life is no more. My energy and enthusiasm continue, but I am a quieter presence now. Making a difference makes me feel good. And when I feel good, I feel connected to all that is.