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Healing: Bringing the Atonement to the Clinical Setting

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I approach this topic, one that some might find more suitable to a sacrament meeting than a professional conference, with a certain amount of diffidence. On the one hand, a discussion of the Savior within the context of the clinical setting may smack of a glib religiosity that ignores the demands for clinical excellence our clients deserve. And on the other, I feel so keenly about the living power of the atonement of Jesus Christ that I am not comfortable with a clinically analytical discussion of that atonement, as though it were just another therapeutic technique.

Let me preface my discussion with the observation that even my limited understanding of the atonement has been an experience so significant that to it I can trace major developments in my personal and professional maturation as a therapist. I have found—sometimes through unpleasantly pointed experience—that it is not enough to be professionally and technically competent. It has also been inadequate to be only prayerful and spiritual. As President Kimball observed in his centennial address at BYU, we need to be "bilingual" and speak the language of faith and also the language of scholarship. For me, the language of faith echoes and re-echoes with the atonement of Jesus Christ, the center of our faith.

Some years ago, I was faced with a very complicated counseling situation involving not only the use of my technical knowledge and expertise but my understanding of central principles of the gospel. A young man referred to me came with a chaotic record of self-indulgence and violence. Although he was a member of the Church, he had utterly and completely rejected his parents' teachings. He had agreed to come into therapy—even sought it—because he wanted changes in his life, but I want to stress that there was nothing of the magical in it. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is not a formula or a technique that can be applied

successful in changing. He felt no connections to God and thought prayer futile as long as his behavior continued to be characterized by willful disobedience. He felt out of control and had frequently been involved in incidents of extreme brutality accompanied by obsessive-compulsive behavior that, according to his own description, "totally consumed" him.

His symptoms were indeed serious and, by all professional measures, any prognosis for improvement was poor. Medication and at least temporary hospitalization seemed indicated but neither produced any change. Medication, in fact, exacerbated his condition by manifesting nearly every contraindication possible. As I continued to work with him, I started to feel the limitations of my technical skills. I seemed to make fewer and fewer positive contributions. For his own good, shouldn’t I refer him to another therapist?

One morning, as I anticipated our afternoon session, I reviewed his file of dictation and diagnostic tests. As I closed the file, fully intending to go through with my plans of referral, it occurred to me that we had never talked directly about his attitude and desires toward the gospel and God. In our session that day, I asked him if he had any interest in speaking about his feelings toward himself and God. He did! As we read scriptures together and I explained my understanding of those pertaining to the Atonement, many feelings we both had surfaced. He seemed more open to a more positive view of himself. He seemed surprised at how Christ might view him. I found myself sharing more of what I was learning about the love of Christ and His unconditional love for us all. My client seemed to absorb an awareness that Christ could forgive him in his current condition, and that He loved him.

Over the ensuing weeks, I saw a purposeful effort to employ approaches, principles, strategies, and action-oriented behavior that we had discussed many times but which simply had not "worked" before. He had a new feeling of hope. The despair about himself left and he became aware that he was healing. Over several months, the obsessive behavior slowly subsided. One day in our session he remarked, "I actually feel God loves me and that I’m a good person. I can’t remember when I’ve ever felt this way or thought these thoughts. But knowing that He loves me even in my worst possible moment of sin has made a difference I can’t describe. It has given me a faith that I can change and repent."

I have no question that a miracle took place in that young man’s life, but I want to stress that there was nothing of the magical in it. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is not a formula or a technique that can be applied...
with X person in Y situation to produce Z results. It is a relationship between two individuals, one of whom has unimaginable power, love and concern, and the other who usually has debilitating and even crippling weaknesses. I believe that one reason for my initial lack of success with this young man is that I was focusing on the wrong things. I was trying to make him behave as if he were strong instead of acknowledging his weakness and turning to the source of strength. My approach was "You can do it!"—when he had overwhelming proof that he couldn't. Perhaps I was expressing faith in him instead of faith in the Savior and asking him to build faith in himself when he needed to develop faith in Christ.

Obviously, a discussion of religious themes and spiritual qualities of life was appropriate in this case because this young man was trying to return to the Church and gain a testimony of the gospel at the same time that he changed a series of devastating personal and social habits. Such candid discussion is not always appropriate because our client may not perceive his agenda as what we would call "repentance." I wonder, for those of us who work with LDS clients frequently, how often we might accelerate that process if we understand the process more clearly.

It seems to me that we are able to be useful to others if we ourselves know the source of healing, and that we have also drunk from the living waters. Christ is able to heal because he is our Redeemer. By the nature of our tasks we are also engaged in a redemptive work and may, appropriately, call on those powers. I am deeply indebted to Eugene England, an English professor at BYU, whose thoughtful approach to the Atonement and personal love for the Savior has been an inspiration to me. He observed several years ago:

A deep feeling of estrangement haunts modern life...The feeling is not at all new to human experience, but in our time we seem especially conscious of it. More men (and women) seem caught up by the divisions in their lives to a terrible anguish or a numbed resignation. We find ourselves cut off from others, relating to each other as things, not as personal images of the eternal God; unable to say our truest thoughts and feelings to each other.

We find ourselves cut off from God, without a deep sense of joyful relation to him;...And we find ourselves cut off from ourselves. We sin. We act contrary to our image of ourselves and break our deepest integrity. We do not just make mistakes through lack of knowledge or judgment, but consciously go contrary to our sense of right; and therefore we not only suffer the natural consequences of all wrong action (however innocently done), but we also suffer the inner estrangement of guilt—that supreme human suffering which gives us our images of hell.

The sense of estrangement that he talks about is very deep and very real. All of us have felt it in anguished moments when our consciences accuse us. My young client lived, numbed and bewildered, with that flowing pain. The anguish goes beyond the loneliness, discouragement, and weariness that we all feel, sometimes for days on end in varying degrees. The feeling of being unloving is, in many ways, more damming than the feeling of not being loved, because it is harder to confess. Our loneliness comes, not only when we realize a void in our lives, but when we reach out for connections and find no one there.

I will never forget an experience I had only a few years ago while doing research on the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. The particular project I was working on involved observations of a medical team working with the chief medical examiner for the province of Alberta. Data collection occurred in the morgue at Foothills Hospital where autopsies were performed. I recall walking into the autopsy room one particular morning and seeing the body of a man on the table. His case history was brief and bleak. He was thirty-four (my exact age at the time), married with three children and had a history of depression associated with his current condition of unemployment, he had taken thirty ounces of vodka and twenty valium tablets. Because I had arrived early, I was the only one in the room. I walked over to review his medical file and the police report. I looked at him as he lay there and many thoughts crossed my mind. Could this have been me? How desperate must this man have been to take his own life? Could someone have stopped him? Did he know his wife and children loved him and needed him? How much despair had he been feeling in his life and for how long?

In trying to answer some of these questions, it occurred to me that the personal loneliness and estrangement and desperation that England talked about must have been very real for this man. He had experienced a lethal division within himself—an alienation from his self-respect, an estrangement from his wife and children, and likely no feelings of connection with God. I recall touching his hand and being wrenched by the profound sadness and the pain that this man likely had experienced just prior to making the decision to take his life.

Most of us are not brought to suicide by our loneliness, but all of us, I think, feel it. The young man whose story I began with perceived it as a seemingly irrevocable estrangement—from sources of righteousness in himself, an apparently unbridgeable chasm between his knowledge of correct principles and his ability to translate them into behavior. To sin and to know that we sin is devastating enough. To sin and to know that we may turn again to our sin at the first opportunity is the stuff of which despair, even suicidal despair, is made.

And this brings us to the second major point that Professor England makes.3 As you have all heard many times, the word atonement or "at-one-ment" suggests its healing power, its ability to heal the divisions in our lives, its ability to remove the estrangements and make us into new and whole beings.

Paul's simple statement, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," (Romans 5:8) is deeply important to me. I have come to understand some of the dimensions of that relationship by understanding that as human beings we come equipped with a sense of justice, as Eugene England has pointed out. When we sin, we know that we must repent. Yet paradoxically, the sense of
Gethsemane: only an agent of change in itself, but it also makes change possible. Forgiveness and new possibilities. I like Truman Cooper's idea that we find ourselves in a condition separate from the sunlight, in a condition of meekness and lowliness of heart, where we are powerless to change. The atonement is not possible. "God pierces to the heart of this paradox equation. It does not exchange forgiveness for our suffering or repentance, but "takes a risk, without calculation, on the possibility that a man can realize his infinite worth. It gets directly at that barrier in man, love for himself--unable to respond positively to his own potential, because he is unable to forgive himself, unable to be at peace with himself until he somehow 'made up' in suffering for his sins."

This attempt is, of course, futile. Because of the fall of Adam, sin has become part of our world and part of our natures. As we learn from the Book of Mormon, the natural man is an enemy to God. The atonement is the redemption and transformation of that nature. C.S. Lewis put it this way:

God descends to re-ascend. He comes down, down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb ancient and pre-human phases of life; down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He had created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift; he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover.

This analogy has the weakness of all analogies, of course, the first one being that Lewis's treasure cooperates neither in its fall nor its coming forth. But it is quite accurate in the idea that we find ourselves in mortality, in a condition separate from the sunlight, which we are powerless to change. The atonement is not only an agent of change in itself, but it also makes change possible.

The Atonement does not deny, ignore, reject, or judge our mortal condition. It accepts it, descends into it and below it--just as Lewis's diver descends into the water--and then transforms and transfigures it with forgiveness and new possibilities. I like Truman Madsen's meditation on the experience of Christ in Gethsemane:

Throughout His life, climaxcd by those incomprehensible hours in a garden beyond the brook Cedron. He suffered 'according to the flesh' the pains and afflictions of all the forms of evil doing. He participated voluntarily in the actual conditions that followed the wake of deliberate transgression. He 'took upon Him' the cumulative impact of our vicious thoughts, motives, and acts...Out of his life came a full knowledge of righteousness and a full knowledge of the effects of sin. This means that no human encounter, no tragic loss, no spiritual failure is beyond the pale of his present knowledge and compassion gained 'according to the flesh—that he might succour his people according to their infirmities.' (Alma 7)

And possibly the greatest and most gallant of those infirmities is the wish and desire to somehow atone for ourselves, to suffer enough to pay for our wrongdoing, to somehow present the slate of our suffering set against our misdeeds in the hopes that it will be an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord. I am in no way undervaluing the role of earnest effort in repentance, an effort that is often accompanied by bitter tears of remorse, shame, and sorrow. It is the attempt to come to God, clean and whole, after we have repented, because we have repented, that I refer to. Professor England's third point--a simple and powerful concept, is that we do not repent in order that God will forgive us. We repent because God has forgiven us.

When Amulek pointed out that the Atonement "overpowereth justice," it was precisely man's own sense of justice that he was talking about. When we realize that Christ is already extending forgiveness to us, not waiting impatiently to see if we can somehow merit His forgiveness, then we can accept it. England describes it this way:

Man's usual nature in his dealings with other men, and, most important to my point here, in his dealings with himself, is to demand satisfaction before he can accept, to demand justice before he can forgive. This is not Christ's way. It has a quality of mercy which allows us to be at one with ourselves and thus gain the strength to be the new person that our sense of justice in the first place demanded that we be. We do not repent in order that God will forgive us and atone for our sins, but rather God atones for our sins and begins the process of forgiveness, by extending unconditional love to us, in order that we might repent and thus bring to conclusion the process of forgiveness. And the center of the experience somehow is Christ's ability to break through the barrier of justice, in those men (and women) who can somehow freely respond, with the shock of eternal love expressed in Gethsemane.

Mother Teresa's eloquently simple thoughts expand on the ways we as professionals may extend the love expressed in Gethsemane:

It is not possible to engage in (direct service) without being a soul of prayer. We must be aware of oneness with Christ as He was aware of oneness with His Father. Our activity is truly service only in so far as we permit Him to work in us and through us, with His power, with His desire, with His love. We must become holy, not because we want to feel holy, but because Christ must be able to live His life fully in us. We are to be all love, all faith, all purity, for the sake of (those) we serve.

In short, in the therapy-change process the Atonement brings the hope of change, it brings the faith that motivates the work to change, and it creates the charity in which such efforts to change are nurtured and nourished.
Once we understand and accept the “shock of love” extended to us in Gethsemane, we can begin to understand the role of the atonement in healing the sense of estrangement we feel within ourselves separating us from our righteous selves, separating us from those we most long to love, and separating us from God. A group of our clients are those who need to understand the process in this way. They have come to us, usually, because their sins are controlling their lives and causing their pain.

However, this discussion would not be complete without some attention to another group of our clients who are deeply troubled, in pain, and bewildered by the causes of their own pain. Although they are undoubtedly making mistakes, we cannot attribute their suffering to their sins.

Not too long ago, a couple approached me to discuss an experience they had with an LDS counselor. I was their bishop at the time and they came in considerable distress. They felt that their family, to use their own words, was “disintegrating before their very eyes” and had, at the point of desperation, come to this particular counselor. They explained the problems of communication, the seemingly unsuperable obstacles of emotional isolation, the pain of their particular problem.

The counselor listened, then asked, “Are you keeping the commandments? Are you praying regularly? Are you attending your meetings?” etc. This couple honestly answered the questions in the affirmative—and as their bishop, I was in a position to know how accurate they were. In addition to the bewilderment they felt from these questions, which did not seem relevant to their particular situation, they were deeply hurt by what they perceived as disbelief on his part and thoroughly discouraged by his advice to go home and pray more, read the scriptures more, and be more faithful in their Church duties.

As it turned out, this couple did have some very specific problems related to ineffectively dealing with their teenagers. With some effective short-term therapy by a very competent counselor, who spent time teaching specific skills in relating to their teenage children, this family was able to solve what appeared to be an unsolvable problem.

Crucial as the Atonement of Christ is to the conquering of sin, it is equally crucial, I believe, in accepting the fact of unmerited suffering. There is a special agony in witnessing the torment of innocent children, the seemingly purposeless anguish of unnecessary bereavement, the agony of the innocent bystander whose hopes and dreams are shattered by the carelessness or malice of a stranger. If the Savior had not also accepted that kind of suffering, descended below it, absorbed it, and sanctified it with the promise of restitution and renewed love, even the most confident faith in the direction of the universe might well falter.

Professor England points out again that beyond the initial unjust suffering of the innocent are the horrifying consequences:

Victims and dispossessed and their allies have turned back in...escalation...blow for blow, hurt for hurt, raid for raid, riot for riot, all defended in the name of justice...

Each of us must come to a kind of love that can be extended equally to victim and victimizer, dispossessed and dispossessor—and even to ourselves—a kind of love that moves us to demand justice in society and within ourselves and then goes beyond justice to offer forgiveness and healing and beyond guilt to offer redemption and newness of life.

I am convinced by my thought and experience and the deepest whisperings in my soul that there is a source of that love—one that transcends all others and is therefore our salvation.*

As counselors and therapists, it behooves us to be sensitive to the dimension of innocent suffering and how the Atonement can there too bring healing. Yet this dimension is sometimes a difficult one to grasp. I would like to discuss some of its ramifications in a theological and literary framework provided by the Book of Job.

In reading this book, we usually think of ourselves in the position of Job and draw comfort in our afflictions from his own situation. However, I would like to discuss the role of the three friends who came to console him but who actually ended up accusing and condemning him. At one point, exasperated by their responses, he stops them with some vehemence: “Miserable comforters are ye all. Will your long-winded speeches never end: What ails you that you keep on arguing?” (Job 16:1-3; New International Version.)

That phrase, “miserable comforters” struck me. Even though our working situations are far different from those of Job and his friends, I found myself looking at the role they played in his circumstances and seeing in their behavior some pitfalls that may also confront us as therapists.

Job’s needs were real. He had lost all of his children, become alienated from his wife, suffered loss of social status, had lost the physical and emotional resources to serve others, was in physical pain from his afflictions, had a future of poverty to look forward to, and was held in derision. Furthermore, as someone who had daily sacrificed to God and whose worship was deep and real, he also felt alienated from God. His response to this situation was, not unnaturally, deep depression, possibly verging on suicidal thoughts, anger at the situation and at the comforters, and a reaffirming of his own integrity in the face of a desperate situation.

His comforters, however, after their initial silent mourning with Job which recognized the magnitude of the disasters that had befallen him, launched into a process of reinterpreting his experience in their own terms that should make us all very uncomfortable. For instance, they seemed unable to grasp the concept that Job may not have been concealing some secret sin for which God was punishing him. They obviously felt that the solution to this paradox of apparent innocent suffering was to unmask the secret sin. Relentlessly, they hammered away at him. Bildad asked, “Does the Almighty pervert what is right? When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.” (6:1) What grief piled upon grief for a father whose children lie dead to hear that God was punishing them for their wickedness! Eliphaz insisted, “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your brothers, ... you gave no
water to the weary and you withheld food from the hungry... and you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snakes are all around you." (22:4, 6-7, 9-10) This scenario would adequately explain Job's punishment, but there was one thing wrong with it. It wasn't true. Job had done none of these things. Thus, in addition to his other pain, he had to bear the grief of being falsely accused to his face by a friend. Job's friends had only one explanation for evil: It lay within the individual not within the universe. "It is unthinkable," they told him, "that God would do wrong. Job speaks without knowledge...to his son he adds rebellion." (34:1, 25, 37) Apparently, their view of mortality did not allow for a God who would permit evil, and they felt that someone had to cause it--either Job or God. Since God could not do wrong, then perforce, Job had to.

Job's comforters were not the only people who have ever fallen into this trap. Many make a simplistic assumption about the nature of mortality that could be summarized in the well-known phrase, "The righteous shall be blessed." While this statement is true, it is not always safe to reverse the terms and say, "If you are not being blessed, it is because you are not righteous," or even to imply that "the righteous will be blessed right now." From the Greeks we inherit a bivalued system: If our happiness is a blessing, then unhappiness must be a curse. From Western civilization, we inherit the Protestant work ethic which asserts that hard work produces rewards. In our Mormon culture these beliefs have turned into a myth. If we keep the commandments, read the scriptures daily, pray, attend our meetings, and pay our tithes and offerings, then we will not have problems in our lives.

It is easy to think that affliction, suffering, pain, and difficulties are the result of sin. None of us would disagree that sin brings suffering and that suffering may bring even more pain to those of us who "know to do good and doeth it not." (James 4:17) But in understanding that sin brings suffering, it is also important to understand that all suffering may not be the result of individual sin. President Romney in a conference address some time ago stated, "Just as Jesus had to endure affliction to prove himself, so must all men endure affliction to prove themselves." (5)

It is also interesting to note Job's feelings of anger and depression at the injustice of his sufferings: "What strength do I have that I should still hope?" he grieved. "What prospects that I should be patient?...My days have no meaning...I despise my life." (6:11, 7:13) These feelings in and of themselves may not be sinful, but a natural result of circumstances. The Lord does not chastise Job for any of his feelings--neither his depression nor his anger. Instead, he affirms at the ending as he had affirmed at the beginning that Job is "blameless and upright" and that he is, not the friends, who had spoken of me what is right." (1:1, 42:7)

In short, Job's friends failed to be helpful because they failed to distinguish between sin and suffering but had, through their own world view, inexorably telescoped the two. No wonder he called them "miserable." They ignored the complex reality of life's challenges and of Job's situation. They constructed a theologically simplistic relationship between personal trouble, or suffering, and sin. And they did it with a zealfulness that focused on rules and procedures rather than on the person and needs of Job. They seemed to be using gospel principles to punish Job, rather than to lift him from his own feelings of despair and discouragement. Thus, in an effort to provide an explanation in a situation where there was no explanation comprehensible to the mortal mind, they assisted in creating condemnation that only added to the catastrophe.

Sometimes what is needed is not an explanation but endurance, and what a counselor needs to do is not to fill a blackboard with formulae showing where someone has gone wrong but instead to soothe pain and provide strength so that, in a moment of rest, the sense of Christ's continued love--even in the face of the inexplicable--can begin its healing work.

Endurance was the characteristic of Job that the Apostle James singled out to hold up before the Saints of his day. Christ's consolation to Joseph Smith during his sufferings in Liberty Jail also referred to Job's situation. (James 5:11, D&C 121:10) But, as Brent Farley pointed out recently, Job's magnificent example of endurance and faith stems, in part, from the many points on which his experience parallels and even foreshadowed the Savior's. (11) It raises the possibility that the Lord does not require our understanding in all of our situations--even though he respects our desire to understand and responds to it. Instead, he requires our faith and trust in the face of our suffering. It may or may not console someone who is suffering to suggest that his or her experience can echo, however distantly, the Savior's. However, the psychological and spiritual benefits are real if that person can offer his or her suffering in consecration--not because he or she has conquered it or explained it away or because it no longer matters--but because that is what he or she has to give to the Lord at that moment.

In the case of the couple who had received such inadequate counsel, it was obvious they were not living perfect lives. Equally obvious, to be told that their sufferings were caused by their lack of faith would prevent such an offering. They needed to feel that they had the potential of doing something right rather than the unsubtle suggestion that everything even their most earnest attempts to be obedient to gospel practices, was somehow wrong.

I think it is instructive to go again to the Book of Job and see in the ending of the story some clues about what the appropriate role of a "comforter" is. After accepting repentantly the rebuke of the Lord for their presumption in judging Job, Job's friends enter his home and "eat bread with him...and they bemoaned him, and comforted him over all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him." In other words, they shared with him the daily rituals of eating and drinking, the homely realities that signal that life goes on. But at the same

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time, they grieved with him over his "evils," the grieving itself seeming to provide comfort. Also, on an immensely practical note, everyone gave him "a piece of money," so that the burden of temporal worries would not be added to his spiritual and emotional sufferings. (Job 42:11) In terms of the biblical story, Job's true vindication came in receiving "twice as much as he had before," but who is to say that the participation and support of his friends did not also play a role? Job's faith in the Lord, though sorely tried, enabled him to be healed from his afflictions.

I know of Christ's healing power, not only as I see it in others, but just as important, as I see it and feel it in myself. I know He is our redeemer and He can heal us. He sustained and healed Job in his suffering even with his "miserable" counselors. I firmly believe King Benjamin's injunction: "For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and forever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Jesus Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:29).

I believe we must be "bilingual"; we must speak "with authority and excellence to (our) professional colleagues in the language of scholarship, and (we) must also be literate in the language of spiritual things."12 For me, the vocabulary of the language of faith centers on Christ and his infinite atonement. As one of our fellow laborers of old said, "...we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ,...that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins." (2 Nephi 25:26) May we who are professionally trained continue to develop our technical skills and feel a responsibility to keep current with developments in our individual disciplines and may we at the same time submit ourselves to him who presides over us all that we may truly be gospel centered therapists I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES
3 Ibid., p. 149.
7 Ibid., p. 153.