

A Healing Presence

by Ian Watson

I have been involved in healing work since I was sixteen years old, when I bought myself a set of Bach flower remedies and began prescribing for myself and others. I have always been drawn to herbs and trees, and have been blessed with a faith and trust in the healing power of nature.

For a number of years I worked alongside dowzers and spiritual healers, then I trained as a reflexologist and began to gain more of an holistic understanding of health and disease. At the age of twenty I gave up my day job and began to learn homeopathy, a subject which became my passion during the following ten years. I wrote books, lectured widely, co-founded a college and felt sure that I had found my vocation in life.

As my work progressed, I began to realise that healing is a mysterious process, involving a multitude of different factors, and yet almost always there is at the heart of every healing process a relationship between two human beings. I found myself becoming increasingly interested in that magical interaction that occurs between practitioner and patient, and I came to understand how crucial the healing relationship is to the whole process.

The radical psychiatrist R.D. Laing said that "*The treatment is how you treat someone*", a comment that struck a deep chord with me when I first heard it. The great psychologist Carl Jung once remarked to a student: "*It is what you are that heals, not what you do.*" These two prominent therapists had both come to appreciate that there is a crucial difference between what a healer *does*, and who he or she *is*. Whilst techniques and procedures may be necessary and helpful, the quality of presence, the state of beingness that the healer brings is perhaps the most important factor of all.

One day, during a teaching trip to Egypt, I was asked to prescribe for a sheikh, or holy man. He was considered to be a sufi master, and I was taken to visit him by one of his disciples, who was a doctor and Chinese medicine practitioner. We drove together from Cairo for what seemed like hours, eventually arriving at a dusty little village. The sheikh greeted us and we went inside his house to conduct the consultation.

He was an old man, in his eighties, and he suffered with cataracts and arthritis, among other things. I asked questions in English, he responded in Arabic, and the doctor did his best to translate in both directions. It took a while to gather the information, but eventually I was satisfied I had enough to go on, and told him so. He looked at me piercingly, and I was aware of the power of his gaze even through his diseased lenses.

He waited until I stopped writing, and said that he would like to ask me a few questions now – if I had no objections. Of course, I replied, please ask anything at all.

How do you decide which medicine to give?, he asked.

Well, I note down all your symptoms, then try to find the remedy that matches those symptoms the best, I answered.

Does it sometimes happen that you can't find one?
Yes, I laughed – that often happens!

I became aware that despite his frail appearance, the Sheikh had a gentle and yet powerful presence, and there was a relentless quality in the way he looked at me.

And then what do you do?, he asked.

Well, I look things up in the books we have. All of the remedies we use are well-documented, I explained.

And what if you still don't know what to do?, he persisted.

I was getting more than a little hot under the collar by this point.

I paused and reflected. How did I proceed when I was unsure what to do?

I pray, I told him, which was the truth. I ask for help, for guidance.

He scrutinised my face for what seemed like an eternity.

Tell me, he said. To whom do you pray?

All I remember at this point is that 'something happened'. I found myself struggling to say anything at all, my mind was racing and at the same time I felt what can only be described as a peaceful presence in the room. It seemed to fill up my chest, and then the whole room, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry – they both felt somehow appropriate. The best way I can describe how I felt is that I was full of love.

The old man sat back in his chair and just nodded gently. He had no further questions. I had experienced what it feels like to be in the company of someone who is fully present.

During the months and years following this encounter, and other encounters with remarkable individuals who taught me the same simple truth in a variety of different ways, the emphasis of my work gradually began to change. On the surface I was doing mostly the same things as before, but I slowly began to realise that healing is, in essence, very simple. No matter what kind of therapy is being practised on the outside, the key to accessing that healing potential that exists within all of us is to allow ourselves to open up to that internal presence which is our own true nature.

I've come to appreciate that to heal is to become aware of who we really are, and that the most valuable work a therapist can do is to help us identify and let go of that which is false, that which obscures our awareness like clouds hiding the sun. Our resistance to being true to our Self causes us to suffer. When we stop resisting and let go, a deep and profound healing occurs quite naturally, all by itself.

What I became increasingly interested in over the past few years was this single question: what happens when we really stop? If we take some time out and we manage to interrupt the continuity of all our daily habits and distractions and roles and things-to-do, even for just a few moments, what is it that takes place?

My experience has been that the truth of who we really are will begin to reveal itself in that tiny space. And, strangely enough, coming close to that revelation is one of the most terrifying things that can happen to any of us. As we approach that inner truth, it tends to feel like our very existence is under threat, as if we might die, or go mad, or simply dissolve and cease to exist as an individual entity. The ego, it has been said, does not go to its own funeral willingly! Consequently, most of us will spend any amount of time and energy looking in every direction except the one and only place where that inner peace and freedom from suffering that we all long for

can be found.

There is a peculiar paradox at work here, which St. John of the Cross expressed succinctly: What you are looking for is who is looking.

Strange, yet true, it seems. That which we most fear is in fact the gateway to the awareness of our own true Self, which of course is what we are driven to seek. That seeking can take the form of a restlessness, of not feeling at home anywhere, of yearning for the ideal mate, or longing for peace of mind, or looking for something without even knowing what it is that we're looking for. And all the while, that which is being sought is really just the seeker itself. Our deepest yearning, the only desire that remains when all other desires have been satisfied, is simply to be as we already are. And the essence of who we are is love itself.

I don't know why it is, but it appears to be the case that we often need to go away in order to come home to our Self. This, to me, is the wonder and the magic of going away on retreat, and I'm truly grateful that a place such as La Serrania exists. When our group departed having spent a week of profound healing and intimacy together in May this year, we were all a little more at home with our Selves. We had been touched by that presence, and it wasn't anything that we did that moved us all so deeply. It was who we were in relation to each other, and to ourselves.

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This article first appeared in *Odysseys*, a series of essays published on the website of [La Serrania](#), a beautiful villa in Mallorca where Ian has held numerous self-healing retreats.

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