

Unfolding Hope

Janeen Bertsche Johnson

On October 14, 2019, I received a call from a kidney specialist telling me that I had AL amyloidosis, a very rare bone marrow disease with no cure. Protein antibodies that were supposed to be fighting diseases were instead folding over on themselves so that they could not be dissolved. These folded proteins were then forming chains and stacking up in my kidneys and liver, causing internal damage with very few outward signs of trouble.

The diagnosis initiated a dizzying sequence of medical tests and consultations, five months of weekly chemotherapy treatments, and a stem cell transplant just six weeks after COVID-19 shut down life as we knew it. This was the treatment regimen that offered me the best chance for several years in remission.

The diagnosis also initiated a spiritual journey, with the guiding question, *What does healing and hope look like when you face a disease with no cure?*

“In the pain and joy beholding how your grace is still unfolding”¹

Two days after my diagnosis, I met with my spiritual director. She opened with a poem from Rilke and a paraphrase of Psalm 7. Two words stood out to me in what she read: “unfold” and “enfold.” I asked her if she knew about the folded-over protein antibodies of amyloidosis. She did not. The Spirit had led her to this poem: “I want to unfold. / Let no place in me hold itself closed.”² And also to this psalm paraphrase: “O my Beloved, to You do I draw close; when all my inner fears well up, enfold me.”³

Right then I knew that *unfolding* would be the image that would guide my healing journey. I would be praying for the proteins to unfold. I would be praying for my soul to unfold and be open to whatever was ahead of

1 “Healer of Our Every Ill,” text by Marty Haugen, in *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020), #644.

2 Rainer Maria Rilke, “Ich bin auf der Welt zu allein und doch nicht allein genug,” *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 59–60.

3 Nan C. Merrill, “Psalm 7,” *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 8–9.

me. And paired with that, I would be praying for God's healing love to unfold me.

Unfolding implies a process, rather than something instantaneous. Time and patience are required because sometimes the steps toward healing seem tiny or halting. But in spite of the frustration of waiting to see what will happen, the unfolding process holds its own mystery and beauty.

"How can I keep from singing?"⁴

After my pastor sent me a recording of a favorite choral piece as a prayer for me, I realized that what I most wanted to accompany me on this journey were songs. I asked my friends to send me songs that gave them hope. Over one hundred suggestions were sent to me—some familiar favorites, and others I had never heard. Each was a gift for my journey. Almost every day, I listened to the playlists I had made,⁵ and the songs etched themselves deeper into my heart.

Several times, I have pondered Psalm 137:4: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" For me, intentionally deciding to sing songs of hope in the face of a devastating disease was an act of protest as well as faith. Even though my journey was taking me through new territory, "a strange land," I would carry with me words, melodies, harmonies, and accompaniments that reminded me of God's presence and power.

"Hearts unfold like flowers before thee"⁶

Another spiritual discipline during my illness and treatment has been making and marking beauty. The slower pace of life during the pandemic and my recovery from the stem cell transplant allowed me more time than usual to be creative. I created art out of my song collections and the colorful gauze pieces that wrapped my arm each time I had blood drawn. I made flower arrangements and pressed the colorful leaves of autumn. I kept a journal, recorded an original poem, and took pictures.

I also paid more attention to the beauty of the world around me and more intentionally observed the cycles of creation. Confined to home except for walks outside, I learned to cherish the streets of my neighborhood

4 "My Life Flows On," text by Pauline T., in *Voices Together*, #605.

5 Some of my favorites are on this playlist: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNaA97o6cqoXvJNC3LcdWku9GSC5ko4T>.

6 "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," text by Henry van Dyke, in *Voices Together*, #105.

and the pathways through our woods. Nature looks much different at a walking pace than if you pass it a mile a minute.

Spending time immersed in creation deepened my trust in the regenerating work of our Creator, who recycles the material of death to nourish new life.

“Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears”⁷

And yet, the reality of illness—whether a disease faced by an individual or a pandemic faced by the world—is that it brings us face to face with our limitations. We are vulnerable. We cannot always control what happens in our bodies. When we face illness, we do not get to continue life as normal. We are mortal.

Recognizing and accepting our limitations is difficult and deeply spiritual work. I believe that is why so many of the Psalms are laments: “With my voice I cry to the Lord; with my voice I make supplication to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before God; I tell my trouble before God” (Psalm 142:1–2). Laments let us honestly voice our disappointments, our fears,

and our anger about what is happening to us. And yet, they also name the trust that God understands our pain and accompanies us in it: “When my spirit is faint, you know my way” (Psalm 142:3).

At a point in my illness when I was deeply discouraged, an essay written by my oncologist gave me a new lens for my experience. He compared the suffering that all of us face at some time in our

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lives to the shadows of a painting that make it more realistic. The artistic technique of chiaroscuro uses brightness and darkness to give paintings perspective and depth. He concludes, “The shadows and light of suffering offer us a chance to see ourselves as we truly are—frail, needy, too often consumed with things we own or do. Suffering may reveal life’s most profound meaning. . . . From such suffering, we learn that human beings discover their identity and dignity by loving unconditionally and experiencing unconditional love in return.”⁸

7 “Shepherd Me, O God,” text by Marty Haugen, in *Voices Together*, #744.

8 Jose A. Bufill, “An Assisted Suicide Kills More Than One Victim,” *USA Today*, June 4, 2002. <http://brasstack.blogspot.com/search/label/The%20many%20victims%20of%20assisted%20suicide>.

My illness as well as the coronavirus pandemic have helped me come to terms with my frailty and my mortality. They have prodded me to acknowledge that I too often define my identity by what I do or accomplish. They have opened my eyes to the importance of the unconditional love and support of others. They have made me realize how deep my dependence on God is, and that God can guide me “beyond my wants, beyond my fears,” if I am open to that deeper journey.

“Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?”⁹

One of the biggest adjustments of my experience was receiving the care of others, rather than being the caregiver. I received the powerful prayers of AMBS students, colleagues, and alumni, several congregations where I have connections, friends from all parts of the world, and even strangers. I was given prayer shawls and a comforter with song phrases on it as expressions of support. People who have gone through their own health crises offered me encouragement.

All these expressions of care—all of my experiences of God’s presence through the presence of my faith communities—have lessened my fear and sustained my hope.

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I also experienced the gift of having my ministry returned to me in a very tangible way. A month after sharing the news of my diagnosis, I received a letter from a doctor in Kansas whom I had pastored at the beginning of my ministry. With his letter, he sent thirteen hand-written notecards with encouraging scriptures written on them, copied

from cards I had given him more than twenty-five years ago when he was facing a difficult time. He told me he had kept my cards in his desk drawer at work, treasuring them as an ongoing source of comfort and encouragement.

I had no memory of writing these cards for my former church member, but receiving them back for my own time of struggle was such a profound gift. Those texts have helped to frame my own prayers during this journey, especially Psalm 86:1-4, 7: “Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. Gladden the soul of your servant,

⁹ “Will You Let Me Be Your Servant,” text by Richard Gillard, in *Voices Together*, #778.

for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. In the day of trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.”

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“So that God’s healing and hope flow through us”

Thirty years ago, just a few months after my ordination, I was asked to join the Vision and Goals Committee, a joint committee of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. Over the next several years, our small group of twelve (six from each denomination) prayed, discerned, and articulated our dreams for the church. For me personally,

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the process embraced the years of my congregational ministry and the birth of both of my children.

It has now been twenty-five years since *Vision: Healing and Hope* was adopted by delegates at Wichita ’95. I feel some regret that the priorities adopted in 1995 were no longer promoted after the denominational merger happened a few years later. But the core vision statement continues as the aspiration of

Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA: “God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.”¹⁰

In the time since *Vision: Healing and Hope* was adopted, I have seen it primarily through my conference and denominational roles, as a statement that encourages us to express our core values of discipleship, community, and peacemaking.¹¹ The statement has called us to “practice love, forgiveness, and hospitality that affirm our diversity and heal our broken-

¹⁰ [https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Vision:_Healing_and_Hope_\(Mennonite_Church,_General_Conference_Mennonite_Church_,_1995\)](https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Vision:_Healing_and_Hope_(Mennonite_Church,_General_Conference_Mennonite_Church_,_1995)). See also *Voices Together*, #394.

¹¹ The *Vision: Healing and Hope* statement reframes the core distinctives of Anabaptism as outlined by Harold S. Bender in “The Anabaptist Vision.” https://gameo.org/index.php?title=The_Anabaptist_Vision.

ness.”¹² It has been one of the most unifying aspects of our denomination through fracturing disagreements about polity and sexuality.

But now, after the experiences of the past year—the health issues I have faced and the coronavirus pandemic that all of us have faced—I see the vision statement as a reminder that every experience is an opportunity to be a channel of God’s healing and hope. Whenever we are broken and are offered grace, we can pass along grace to others. Whenever we face despair and yet find glimpses of joy, we can find ways to bring joy to others. Whenever we mourn a loss and are comforted with a sense of peace, we can share peace with others.

I am reminded of the powerful statement of 2 Corinthians 1:4, that God consoles us so that we may be able to pass along that consolation to others. Whatever my future holds, I want to live so that God’s healing and hope flow through me to others and to the world.

About the author

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¹² This was the fourth priority of the *Vision: Healing and Hope* statement as adopted in 1995.