

BRIDGE TO HEALING: FINDING STRENGTH TO COPE WITH ILLNESS

By Israela Meyerstein. 200 pp. Jacksonville, FL: Mazo Publishers, 2014. Paperback, ISBN 978-1-936778-48-5

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Israela Meyerstein is a social worker and mental health professional and a co-founder of the Baltimore Jewish Healing Network. She has spent decades guiding clients through life crises and challenges, working with them to better draw upon and integrate spiritual resources in their struggles, including with medical illness. A well-known family therapist with a lengthy list of publications in professional journals, if anyone were well equipped to deal with a life-changing health crisis, presumably, it would be her. Perhaps that is what we all believe, until, as Meyerstein puts it, “stuff happens.”

In 2006, stuff happened to her. After a series of events, including family illness and death, Meyerstein notes that it was “my turn.” Troubling gynecological symptoms led to a cancer diagnosis and then to a hysterectomy and radiation and chemotherapy. This sequence all happened so quickly and unexpectedly—as it always does for everyone—that she was confronted with an overwhelming flood of emotions that brought disruption and chaos to her life. At the same time, it provided her an opportunity to put into practice everything that she knew—as a therapist and an observant Jew—to draw on deep wellsprings of strength and hope in meeting this challenge.

Meyerstein’s *Bridge to Healing* is the narrative account of her illness and what she was able to do to meet this challenge head on. But, really, it is two books in one: her personal story, and also a very smart self-help guide for others going through similar challenges. She notes, rightly, “My illness journey was unlike all others because it was mine. Each illness happens to a different and unique individual.” True. At the same time, what she experienced, emotionally and spiritually, is what so many of us would experience, and what she was able to do to help herself through her illness included things that any of us could apply.

The book is written in five parts. The first section outlines Meyerstein’s professional and theoretical perspective, which she refers to as “practical spirituality.” She reviews the literature on spirituality and health and lays out her M.A.P.S. model, which stands for Meaning or purpose, Agency or self-advocacy and self-empowerment, Practical coping tools, and Spiritual connections.

The second section is the narrative account of Meyerstein’s cancer diagnosis, treatment, and overall experience. It is, at times, harrowing, heartbreaking, and inspiring. She takes us on almost a day-by-day journey through what she calls “the emotional landscape of patienthood.” The reader is also given a very clear picture of how Meyerstein’s Jewish faith carried her along this journey, sustaining her and giving meaning to her experiences.

I have read many other books providing accounts of people’s personal journeys of healing, including from cancer, and have enjoyed them all. I have read even more books on what

research tells us “works” in shepherding people through the challenges of chronic disease. In most of these, I find at least something of value.

But what makes *Bridge to Healing* distinct is that the author is both therapist and patient. Moreover, she is ruthlessly honest and open about her experiences, sharing her doubts, anxieties, and fears and also sharing the poems and journal entries and spiritual experiences, and more, that provided her “bridge to healing.” Meyerstein invites the reader into her narrative, in an intimate and at times painful way. She is skilled enough as a writer that we feel what she is feeling and experience the blessings and relief that she experiences from her Judaism and other spiritual and psychosocial tools and practices.

Accordingly, the remaining three sections of the book contain a variety of very helpful resources for people who need to travel their own journey to healing. These include practical spiritual coping tools, such as alternative therapies, creative expression, meditation, and massage, and specifically spiritual tools, mostly Jewish in origin, such as particular prayers (*Hashkivenu, Mi sheberach*), sacred writings (*Tehillim*), and actions (*tikkun olam*). These are supplemented by helpful guided exercises, and a list of references and a spiritual glossary, both especially comprehensive for a self-help book. Each chapter also concludes with a list of “Things To Think About And Do,” or with some other personal exercise.

One of my favorite features in the book was a succinct list of “Seven Tips And Healing Practices For Patients To Adopt.” These seven lessons included “Take personal responsibility,” “Listen and learn from your heart,” “Express yourself with new authentic self-talk,” “Learn to be flexible,” “What you do does make a difference,” “Don’t go it alone,” and, “Accept what the universe presents.” Her discussion of these tips or lessons was excellent and spot on, and if I have any disappointment to share, it is that this brief section was not lengthier and featured more prominently. There was enough wisdom in these few pages that it could probably make for the outline of its own book.

Bridge to Healing is a beautiful, heartfelt piece of writing. The author’s earnestness and deep spirituality are apparent on every page, and her reliance on her Jewish faith is a model for any of us, Jew or gentile. Indeed, while deeply infused with Jewish spirituality, *Bridge to Healing* is not just for Jewish readership. So much of the wisdom contained in the book, rooted as it is in Jewish teachings and biblical principles, is equally applicable to people of other faiths, especially the other Abrahamic traditions. This book would make a lovely gift for anyone experiencing a health crisis and belongs on the shelf of every pastoral care professional, Jewish or Christian, who is looking for a concise and very personal account of how and why the things that they do with and for clients really do matter.

I strongly recommend *Bridge to Healing*. Israela Meyerstein’s professional background coupled with her courageous openness and honesty lends the book an immediacy and an impact that are striking, even jarring, and also lends confidence in the objectivity of the author’s insights. This book also reveals, starkly, that even someone who in large part knows what to expect and knows about how the human psyche typically responds to a life-rendering challenge is herself not immune to needing to rely on God and faith to traverse the wilderness of illness until crossing her own bridge to healing.

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