

**“DO YOU WANT TO BE HEALED?”**

**John 5:1-9**

**May 13, 2007**

**Leah McCullough**

Dear Sir,

I apologize for the impersonal greeting. It's just that I wanted to write you this letter and I don't know your name. The author of the Gospel of John, where I read your story, doesn't tell us your name. Perhaps he didn't know it either. But he did think your story was important enough to be written down. How do you like that? One day you are just lying ill by the pool, minding your own business, then out of the blue, a brief encounter with Jesus changes your life, and now your story has been heard by millions for the past two thousand years?

Even with scant details your story has survived. The text describes you only as “a man who had been ill for 38 years.” It says that you were lying with other invalids—the blind, lame and paralyzed—by the pool in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate. I understand that myth had it that at certain times of the year an angel of the Lord would come down and stir the waters. At that time, the first person to step into the pool would be made well.

I find myself wondering about you: What was your ailment? Why were you there for so long? Why had you never made it into the pool? Had you tried very hard, or even at all, to get into the pool when the waters were stirred? Did you even believe it would work? What were you getting out of lying around the pool for 38 years? What was your payoff? Were you after attention, sympathy or pity? Or, were you just happy to lie by the pool, enjoying the sunshine?

Your healing is a bit unique in that Jesus sought you out. In many other healing stories recorded in our Scripture, people sought Jesus out for their own healing or on behalf of someone they loved. So I'm curious, what was so special about you? Did you ever wonder why Jesus chose you from among all those by the pool that day? And, when he talked to you, he gave you a choice about being healed. He didn't impose his will on you. He asked, “Do you want to be made well?” What was it like to hear those words after lying on your mat for all those years? Were you skeptical? What went through your mind? Did you feel your blood pulse or your heart skip a beat? Did you feel hope that you might be set free from your bondage? Or did that glimpse of freedom send a shiver of fear and anxiety coursing through your body?

Though I've never met Jesus face to face, I know that God asks me that question over and over in my own journey. At times, I've even described that question as “haunting”—perhaps, because it penetrates right to my soul, and calls me to recognize my own need of healing. No, I'm not physically ill. It's that sometimes I make choices to live outwardly differently from what my heart and soul are telling me. I'm living an incongruent life, separated from my own inner truth and from God's desire for me. And I know I need to be made well.

That question certainly requires thoughtful consideration—for the answer has serious consequences. “Do I want to be healed?” “Do I want to be made whole?” “Do I want to stop living a fragmented life and live into the fullness that God intends for me?” Though it seems like such an easy answer, “Of course, I want to be healed”—a definitive “YES”—YOU didn’t answer immediately and enthusiastically. Neither do I. I, too, often fail to answer the question in a way that would put me on the path toward wholeness. Sometimes it’s just easier to remain broken, wounded and fragmented. No, I don’t want to make amends with my family. No, I don’t want to consider how my lifestyle is impacting the planet. No, I don’t want to work through that unresolved pain or grief. No, I don’t want to live with less, so the poor can have more. No, I don’t want to set boundaries on my time at work so that I can have more quality time with my family. “No” is seemingly easier and requires less energy on my part.

Now, I’d like to get back to some more questions. Was your mat—and life by the pool—that comfortable? After all, you chose to remain there for all those years. Why did you stay? Why did you never ask for help? What were you afraid of? Unfortunately, you’ll never be able to answer my questions. I can only imagine how you might respond. I can reflect on my own experiences of choosing the comfortable and familiar, and wonder if my responses would somehow resonate with you. I think that many of us living in the 21st century relate to your dilemma. We still have similar fears that keep us in bondage.

I—like you—I imagine, am afraid of the unknown. Though my current situation—with my vocation, and relationships with family and friends—may not be as life-giving as I suspect God desires, at least it is familiar. At least, like you on the mat, I know what to expect.

I am afraid of losing control. Saying “yes” to a new way of living—getting up off the mat—means that I will have to surrender to the guidance of the spirit of God, which we know will blow where she wills. At least on the mat, I know what is coming: more time on the mat.

I am afraid of living without guarantees. Will I succeed or fail? Will others accept or reject the new me? Will others have different expectations of me, and will I be able to live into those expectations? Life on the mat feels more secure and less demanding.

I am afraid of being lonely. Keeping company with others, even if they are a miserable lot of sick and dying people, is better than being alone. In life on the mat, I am immersed in community.

I am afraid I might appear foolish or strange even to those who are closest to me. People won’t get me! They’ll think I’m nuts. Choosing wholeness, being transformed, living less fragmented, heeding God’s call will make me counter-cultural, a weirdo. Staying on the mat, I’ll blend in more easily.

I am afraid I will have to listen, own, and live into my own truth. I will no longer be able to make excuses for myself and my actions.

After naming all these fears I can better understand why you stayed on your mat by the pool for all those years. Yet, did you ever find yourself dreaming of what it might be like to stand up and live life differently? Did you ever consider that just as there were costs to getting up, there were also costs to staying on the mat? What price did you pay to stay where you were? I imagine that saying “No” to

freedom, refusing to follow Jesus' invitation of the heart, had its own consequences.

Assuming that picking up the mat and walking toward wholeness brings about LIFE, then staying on the mat must bring about DEATH. The choice for each of us is more life or more death. When we resist that call from God to be and do that which is ours, we end up feeling alienated. We numb our pain and hold onto addictions that leave us bitter, resentful and angry, which we turn in upon ourselves or outward toward others. Did you know that you were dying physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually a little each day?

Thomas Moore wrote, "Repression of the life force is the most common reason people go into therapy." By ignoring Jesus' call to our true selves, our passions, our deeper stirrings, our calls, we dam up our energies and cut ourselves off from the creativity and the new that is waiting to be born. When we spend our life energies on that which is not ours to be about, our bodies react. We must learn to listen to our bodies – both to that which energizes and that which drains us; to that which brings tension and that which relaxes and flows. Was your ailment a result of your body trying to tell you something?

Staying on the mat and not living fully into who we are called to be denies the world of our gifts. That may sound grandiose. But, I believe that each one of us is called to do something to better our world. Playing small is not an option. We each play a part in bringing about the reign of God. To not give the world our gift has serious consequences for the world. What was your gift to the world?

I want to return for a moment to your response to Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" When you answered him you said, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps in ahead of me." You didn't really answer the question. Your first instinct was to offer an excuse. Instead of taking responsibility for yourself, you blamed others. I'm curious; did you ever really ask anyone to help you? I'm not saying that you don't need help from others. Quite the contrary. If any of us are to be on an authentic journey into freedom and transformation we will need the companionship of others along the way. We cannot do this work alone. When we get off our mats we will need a support system, an accountability system. We need people to ask the tough questions, to love us when we are down, to cheer us on, to offer words of caution, to ground us when we are flying, and to encourage us to fly when we are grounded. God never intended that we embark on these journeys into freedom alone.

As I previously mentioned, there is definitely a price to be paid for either staying on the mat, or for standing, picking it up and walking. We have the opportunity to learn from all the times we've said "yes" and all the times we've said "no." Here are some of the things I've learned. I wonder if you've experienced any of these:

- 1.) There comes a time when we just have to stop analyzing, questioning, and thinking and just get up off the mat and start DOING. The journey from the mat to the pool is a process, not an event. I like that: "a process, not an event." We must choose to begin the process and then choose to take the next step, and the next step, and the next step.
- 2.) Each of us must remember that our journey is ours. We will only do harm if we compare and judge

our calls by someone else's. We are not called to be Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Teresa. We are called to be who we are.

3.) Setbacks happen. A setback is not the same as a failure. Setbacks can be life-enhancing lessons and opportunities. Asking a setback what it is trying to teach us can be helpful.

4.) We must celebrate the small baby steps! Any movement toward living more authentically into who we are called to be should be celebrated joyfully. (#1-4 from *Journey Into Freedom Newsletter* by *Esther Armstrong and Dale Stitt. Used with permission.*)

It's about time for me to go. In closing I'd like to say thank you for being real, for being honest in your interaction with Jesus, and for ultimately choosing wholeness. When Jesus set before you life and death, you chose life. It was truly an act of courage for you to decide to act: to stand up, take up your mat, and start walking. On that day you said "yes" to a life different from the one you had been living. Unfortunately, we have no further account of your life. We don't know the results of your choice or if the decision paid off for you. We do know that your story serves as an example to anyone who has heard God's call to get up off the mat and start living in a new and different way. Every day your story is a reminder of God's on-going call, "Do you want to live into the fullness that God intends for us? Do you want to be made well?" Like you, I and every person on the spiritual path, must continually answer that question for ourselves.

Sincerely,

Leah McCullough