

Healing in a Thousand Ways

Usha R. Balakrishnan

The scar that shows on your wrist
Was not there as you were birthed

Life's journey
Cracks our hearts
In unknown spots
Leaving us to stumble along
Warmed alloys of memory across time.

Poetry
in public

Sponsored by Iowa City Public Art Program



Personal context for writing poem titled “Healing in a thousand ways”

I write a particular type of autobiographical poem. All my poems are usually written within 15 minutes. They usually include a personal circumstance blended in with a story from my professional work relating to academic innovation management and humanitarian impacts.

I wrote Healing in a Thousand Ways based on the fact of my 20-year-old son Vasu having a wrist fracture when he fell while playing soccer in Pittsburgh in 2009. Even today, it hurts so much for me as a mother to see that 3-inch scar along his left wrist. Of course, under the expert hands of a highly-trained surgeon at an academic medical center, and with proper medical follow-up care, my son’s wrist fracture was completely fixed. Especially because I used to manage university-based inventions, I keenly recognize--and I am always grateful for--the extent of toil and sacrifice made by so many over decades and centuries to have medical knowledge be turned amazingly into reality for so many patients needing timely assistance.

My son’s wrist fracture healed thoroughly. However, my heart had already cracked in many spots. For sure, there was no surgeon available to treat my particular problem which arose from my immediate and lingering feelings of empathy. The ups and downs, joys and sorrows, of the journey we refer to as “life” lead to so many different types of cracks in our heart-spaces. No specialty “doctor” can effectively resolve such cracks arising out of my daily existence.

So, all I can do is to simply stumble along through life. Unless, of course, I can be a bit more imaginative about how I seek out the possibilities of self-healing based on the stories from my own life-experiences.

The last line of my poem: “Warmed alloys of memory across time” is where I blend in a story from my professional experience in the early 1990s managing a patent relating to the orthodontic use of a nickel-titanium alloy called nitinol. This invention was made by the late George Andreasen, a professor of dentistry and engineering at the University of Iowa. In teeth braces, nitinol worked excellently because of its unique “memory” property which could be triggered by warming the alloy. A dentist could set the wire’s shape based on jaw-size; then, manipulate the wire to fit it into the patient’s mouth; and then have the warmth of the patient’s own mouth cavity bring back the wire to its originally-set shape.

More than anything else, through my poems, I keep myself focused on the healthfulness of what I do, and can do, in my everyday relationships with others. For me, those relationships help tune my memory-alloys. Poetry-writing thus serves as a stress-release mechanism which in turn allows my heart-spaces to be reset proportionally to calm and reflective reservoirs of gratitude.

Healing of this kind can of course happen in a thousand ways that are complementary to whatever interventions medical professionals may undertake for maintaining good health.