

Some things take a long time to heal

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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We were talking about health and mental health the other day in staff meeting, and I asked why mental health issues couldn't just be called health issues. After all, many of the diseases that affect one's emotional life are caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, a physical thing. And then I commented that physical health issues take their mental toll too, and confessed, I think for the first time, that I have been in pain every day for the last year. That takes a toll. I get down about it, I get frustrated and angry and discouraged.

We were talking about health because a member of our congregation—a beloved, vivacious woman—completed suicide a few weeks ago, and we are all pretty wrecked about it. She lived for years with a bipolar disorder that she chose to hide from many who knew her, and so her choice to end her life came as a shock to most of the congregation.

To say she was vivacious only begins to describe her: vivacious, hilarious, organized, fun, friendly, kind, thoughtful of so many. That was what she chose to show the world, and that was her authentic self. But I want to honor the fullness of who she was, and say that the withdrawn, sad parts were her authentic self too, but a part that she chose not to show most of the world. When she went into the valley of the shadow, she stayed home and hunkered down. A few of us knew that, and tried to support her as best we could. She left a note—organized person that she was, of course she left a note—and her sister read part of it at the memorial service. She assured us that there was nothing any of us could have done to stop her, that her decision had been made, that she knew how much we loved her and how much her death would hurt us.

Some things take a long time to heal. I still have moments of utter disbelief that she is gone, that next year on July 3 we won't celebrate our birthdays which were exactly two weeks apart. I keep expecting to walk into the office and hear her ask what we have for her to organize. But deeper, I am still so very bereaved that she took her own life. I do wonder what I could have done. I do doubt that I told her often

enough how much I loved her. There is a hurt there, a wound of sorrow and guilt and profound loss, and the scar that is left some day will not be subtle.

Sometime about 18 months ago, I tore the labrum tissue in my right hip—it's the tissue that lines the hip and is like the meniscus of the hip. It's been 18 months of pain, X-rays, an MRI (aided by lots of Valium), conversations with surgeons who tell me surgery is not an option for me, physical therapy, chiropractic help, and exercises. I limp and I cannot hide the limp. On Sunday mornings when I walk down the aisle, everyone sees me limp. They comment that I'm still limping, a year later, and I say, Yes, I am. They ask if it's getting better, and I say yes, it is healing and it is healing slowly.

People like to hear that I'm healing, but they don't like the slowly part. Maybe it's hard for them to see me in pain, although I try to hide it. Maybe it reminds them that their pastor is not a spry 30-year-old. Maybe they're being empathetic, because I'm not the only one around church who walks with a little wobble.

It has been an interesting journey these last 18 months, one of the body-mind-soul journeys that contains lessons about patience and honesty and good humor, about frustration and hope, about pain and tiredness. In the last two months I have made peace with the fact that this will take a long time to heal, that some wounds—however invisible to the naked eye—are not easily mended.

Broken hearts and spirits don't mend easily or quickly. It is possible that some never mend. But some will, over time, over months and years and decades.

May we be patient with each other in the mending.

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