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The best way to find healing when overcome with despair

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

That's the advice of Howard Zinn and the insight of a helpful new book, *Healing the Future: Personal Recovery from Societal Wounding* by Dennis Linn, Sheila Faricant Linn and Jesuit Fr. Matthew Linn (Paulist Press, June 2012). The Linns have long taught that we are all wounded in our personal lives by our parents, families and childhood, but now the entire toxic culture of violence is poisoning each one of us.

Using psychology, biology, spirituality and current affairs, the Linns propose simple healing processes so we might not be overwhelmed by our toxic environment and can face the future with confidence and hope.

Dennis, Sheila and Matt Linn have spent decades teaching processes for healing from personal brokenness in more than 60 countries. Their 22 books have sold more than a million copies in English and have been translated into more than 20 languages. For the last few years, however, as they faced their own despair over the world, they began to make the connection between our personal wounds and the wounds we all suffer from this toxic culture.

Healing the Future takes their work in a new direction and suggests that healing ourselves individually includes facing the illness of our culture and being part of healing our entire society so that the cycle of violence and wounding will not continue into the future. These last few years of war, terrorism, corporate greed and climate change have hurt us more than we realize. The Linns invite us to integrate spirituality, emotional healing work, social awareness and a new understanding of the universe itself to help us recover our peaceable humanity in a more intentional, conscious way.

The Linns' new book is the fruit of retreats and workshops to thousands of people in the last few years. People everywhere have told them -- and me, too -- that they feel overwhelmed and paralyzed by the state of the nation and the world. The Linns want us to learn how to stay healthy and open and not be overwhelmed by fear and despair so we can go forward and do the work that needs to be done to create a more peaceful, nonviolent world for ourselves and our children.

One of the most helpful suggestions I found was their advice to use the Ignatian method of "noticing what helps," finding what consoles you, returning to that moment of consolation, and trying to live our day-to-day lives out of that moment of spiritual consolation. This is good, simple, practical advice that every activist, every church worker, every peacemaker, needs to learn. They write:

Our ability to imagine a positive future is related neurologically to our ability to recall positive memories of the past. Emotionally and spiritually, memories of love create a safe space in which we can face pain and uncertainty with hope and without becoming overwhelmed. When we remember that we have been loved in the past, we feel empowered to take the next step in our own growth and healing. We remember that the universe is fundamentally on our side and that we'll be given what we need. When we are in touch with what is right, it's easier to face what is wrong. Returning to positive memories is both a source of support in the moment, if the moment is difficult, and also a way of life that can help us create a new future.

The next step they suggest is consciously moving beyond competition to freely sharing our resources and talents with one another and those in need. So many people I know who have lived among the world's poorest in Latin America, Africa, India and Asia remark about the terrible misery they have witnessed but the striking willingness to share what little they have and the love and joy that brings. In contrast, we in our culture have so much, but we share so little with one another. Upon returning to the U.S., many notice how little love and joy there is among people in the United States. Practice sharing, giving and cooperation, the Linns suggest, and we will begin a new healing journey as well as model the global transformation we seek.

In their reflections on punishment, violence, war and killing, they note that "we are hard wired for empathy" and urge us to cultivate empathy for other human beings, especially those targeted by our nation. Facing our grief, grieving over the world, and letting go of our despair are also necessary exercises for activists and church workers who get overwhelmed by the culture, the media and the world. Meditation, appreciation and gratitude also help us remain positive and hopeful, even as we face what's negative and despairing. I would add the need for good, supportive friends and a local peace community.

"Jesus was up against the same thing as many of us are today," the authors write. The Gospels, they say, offer teachings and examples of how to resist the domination system while trying to remain healthy, whole, loving and peaceful in the process.

Healing the Future is packed with scientific research, practical suggestions, reflection questions, group work, and meditation exercises, as well as stories from the authors' own journeys.

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Toward the end, they share how in dark times over the last few years, when they felt overwhelmed and hopeless, they used the Ignatian practice of "the examen" to reflect, at the end of their day, about their experience of desolation and consolation. When they actively tried to stay with what consoled them, they

felt better and more energized to go forward with their social change work. They write:

When our desolation took the form of a sense of heaviness and darkness, we needed to recall our light and go back to positive memories of love. When we wondered if we were failures in some way because we were questioning consensual reality and feared we might even be punished for it, we need to grow in freedom from competition, punishment and rewards. When we felt dazed by it all, and struggling to hold on to reality, we needed to remind ourselves that much of what is presented us as reality in this culture is not real at all. When our desolation expressed itself as sadness, we needed to grieve for the loss of our image of America and find new ways to feel proud of our country. When we felt alone, we needed the companionship of our friend Jesus, who was up against the same thing. When our desolation expressed itself as feeling small and helpless, we need to experience our true size as human beings. When we feared talking to people who might strongly disagree with us and felt at a loss for words, we needed to learn nonviolent communication. And when our desolation whispered to us that we were powerless to do anything, we need the comfort we find in the words of Walter Wink, "There is no such thing as objective powerlessness. Our belief that we are powerless is a sure sign that we have been duped."

As they listened to their desolation and moved toward consolation, their energy returned and they felt "in touch with life and hope." Their story reminds me that we need not be stuck in the desolation of despair, darkness, violence and powerlessness. We can remember our consolations and move back into consolation each day for the strength to go forward and do what we can for a more just and peaceful world.

"Recalling moments when we knew our light, when we knew who we are," the Linns conclude, "connects us with the evolutionary impulse within us that creates what we need in every present moment to heal the future."

I found this little book practical, useful and encouraging. It affirmed the simple ways I have tried over the difficult last few years not to be overwhelmed by the culture, the media, the wars, the church, and the depressing realities of the world. I recommend it for all those struggling with powerlessness and hopelessness as a way to reclaim "life and hope" and to retain the energy to do our part for the healing of the world and the coming of a new future of peace.

John Dear will speak June 22 and 23 at the Wildgoose Festival in Chapel Hill, N.C. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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