

Kathryn J. Hermes, FSP



From the best-selling
author of *Surviving Depression*

Holding on to Hope

The Journey Beyond Darkness

with Healing Exercises by Helene Cote, PM

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Introduction

I'd been there four days. I had left a stretched-too-thin ministry schedule to engage in a weeklong process of healing. Now, in a beautiful spot, in a quiet retreat house along the Atlantic shoreline in lovely Maine, I had waited four days for the healing to begin. "Not ready," my director had pronounced each day when we met. The words seemed like a death sentence as the precious minutes of the retreat ticked quickly by. I was running out of time, but I couldn't do anything more than rock in a swing on the front lawn—endlessly back and forth, my soul held in the icy grip of some inner blizzard, the spiritual icicles refusing to melt in the warmth of the retreat center's gentle seaside rhythm.

"Therapy," my director had told me earlier that year, "is a wonderful resource and gives you tools, insight, experience. But therapy can't heal you. Only God heals." Well, here I am, God, waiting. What is the magical thing called healing that I'm not ready for? Can you do something, anything to help me be another person, eliminate my problems, change my personality, erase my past, fulfill my dreams?

Those of us who have suffered depression, who have been knocked down by grief, stretched through major illness, or shattered by betrayal or failure, often look for more than survival. These realities can keep us locked in a tiny box, restricting the development of our personality, career, friendships, marriage, and spirit. Even if we've begun again to pray; engaged the assistance of a spiritual director; created a regimen of diet, exercise, and, if needed, medicine and alternative health modalities, we feel somehow there must be something more.

This book is about that something more.

Almost ten years have passed since I wrote *Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach*. Readers have stated that what they found most helpful in the book was the connection between faith and their emotional struggles. Somehow, they knew that God was there in the midst of the chaos, but they lacked the eyes to see him and the ears to hear him. *Surviving Depression* offered tools for connecting in faith to God. For a long time I've had this nagging feeling that people needed something more than what they could find in *Surviving Depression*. They were ripe now for some deepening spiritual transformation—but the unfolding of that spiritual path needed to carefully take into account the particular struggles and realities of someone who for a while had lived in intense darkness.

Holding on to Hope is about learning to be receptive to God connecting with us so that God can indeed heal us—heal us, I repeat, not cure us—of depression or erase the sorrows of failure or restore lost loves. One clue to this change of posture is the chapter titles. The chapters of *Surviving Depression* are titles with quotations from people suffering with depression: “I Just Want to Feel Better”; “Why Doesn't God Heal Me?”; “I'm Going Crazy.” The chapter titles for *Holding on to Hope*, on the other hand,

include quotations from God, found in God's great love letter to us, the Scriptures: "Look, I'm making everything new"; "Do you want to get well?"; "Blessed are the pure in heart."

In the last three days of my retreat in Maine—when I was finally pronounced "ready" by my guide—I was put on a transformative path I could never have created on my own. This book hopes to unfold that journey for you, so that you, too, may be healed.

Each Chapter Is a Part of the Journey

Let me explain how Sister Helene and I have set up this book. Each chapter looks at how we as humans are transformed. Each step we take in healing, spirituality, or transformation is made up of elements that complete one another: a rational element, an emotive element, a spiritual element, at times a physiological element, a divine element. We are inspired or moved on many different levels: our mind, our will, our heart—that is, on the level of our thoughts, judgments, desires, ideals, convictions, choices, decisions. In another, more popular, manner of expressing this integration of our growth, we are transformed in our mind, body, soul, and spirit. We begin to feel different, to move in a different interior space, to think differently, to perceive, intuit, and mentally frame situations differently. Our choices in everyday life, preferences, work styles, and play styles change. We find ourselves reacting to situations and persons around us in healthier ways. Emotionally we are in a better place. Our loves have deepened, changed. Our participation in spirituality and the life of God has become a more integrated part of our life. This is what Saint Paul meant by: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by my faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2:20 NRSV).

Thus each chapter of this book includes elements for just such a whole mind-body-soul-spirit experience that supports healing and transformative change.

Images

Stories speak to the heart; they alone are able to steal under the traps of our mental habits and prejudices. They can inspire courage in those hearts that are most afraid or asleep. The stories, or dreams, or images presented in each chapter are narratives that directly recount an interaction with God.

Scripture

Scripture is the divine element of the healing plan. God's word has the capacity to strike us anew in every element of our being, much as lightning strikes. Of course, it doesn't kill us, but it can gradually or immediately "kill the old man" and allow the new person within us to be free and to grow.

Reflection Questions for Personal or Small Group Use

Questions help us explore what the text means for us, what has been prompted within us, what calls or tugs we feel in our heart, what challenges we've faced, what surprises have upset us. You'll find these in the section titled "Exploring" because these evocative questions are not meant as a test or as a review, but as a further exploration. They can be used as a type of personal journey in spiritual direction.

Contemplative Experiences or "Listening"

Each dream or image presented in the chapter can also be a jumping-off point for interaction with God in order to truly listen to the Lord speaking deep within. These images "set the

scene,” so to speak, and leave the rest to the Lord who deals directly with each one of us. They can mentor a deeply prayerful relationship with God and, at the same time, a profound reevaluation and healing of our lives. For the two really go together.

Resting

Besides the contemplation of Scripture that follows the image, three sets of Scripture passages with introductions are provided at the end of each chapter under the heading “Resting.” That may seem like a curious title, but let me explain. After all the “work” of the chapter, you will need to rest. There is no better place to “rest” than in God’s message to us in Scripture. These passages are placed at the end of each chapter on purpose to enable you to slow down and stop before moving on to the next. You will be able to look at the theme of the chapter from different perspectives and angles. The introductions will invite you to compare and contrast different people in the Scriptures who dealt with the issues raised by the topic in the chapter. So take three days or so and continue to contemplate the chapter before reading on. After all, a doctor can’t heal you without performing the surgery required. He or she can’t just talk about it, describe it, or prepare for it. The doctor needs to actually perform it, and the patient needs to undergo it. The “Resting” section could be considered the place for “divine surgery.” Please resist the temptation to skip over it.

Inner Healing Exercises

On the healing retreat mentioned in the introduction, my director, Sister Helene Cote, used many inner healing exercises that were practical tools to get me “unstuck” from my thought-choice-emotion pattern so that I could freely get on with a more

whole and Christ-ed life. The section of each chapter titled “Inner Healing” is written by Sister Helene and offers truly helpful and powerful ways to integrate the topic of the chapter into your everyday life so that spirituality doesn’t become or remain compartmentalized with no influence on your parenting style, business decisions, life choices, and the like.

SISTER KATHRYN HERMES

Before You Begin

I am no stranger to the darkness of depression, and for almost twenty years I fell victim to many self-doubts, judgments, continual fatigue, and self-hatred. It was like wearing a heavy hooded coat that weighed me down and prevented me from seeing clearly, from living life to the full. After years of struggling, I began in 2000 a sabbatical time that led me on a painful and yet incredible journey of self-discovery. My life is very different now. I am truly happy and at peace. Although I am a spiritual director, and not a therapist, my hope is that the tools I share in this book (the “Inner Healing” section of each chapter), which have helped me through the years and which I have used with so many others, will help you reclaim a life filled with hope and joy.

One of the greatest truths about healing is that we cannot heal ourselves. We need God’s grace (as mentioned in the Introduction) and we also need others to journey with us. One of the basic steps in healing is learning to articulate what we are feeling, what we are thinking. Therefore, you may wish to use this book with a spiritual director, a mentor, a friend, or a faith-filled therapist. If you do not have someone to share this journey

with, journaling can be a meaningful way to “speak” your truth aloud.

Before starting any of the inner healing exercises found at the end of every chapter, it is always good to begin with a moment of prayer. Any form of prayer can be used, but guided imagery can be especially helpful because it allows us to use our imagination and to be open to symbols particularly valuable for us. The following can be repeated in each chapter, before the inner healing exercise.

SISTER HELENE COTE

Guided Imagery Contemplative Exercise

Take some time to be quiet. Sit in a comfortable place where you will not be disturbed. If you choose, you can set the atmosphere by playing some soft instrumental music. Close your eyes. Begin by taking some deep breaths, remembering that God's Spirit surrounds you and is within you. Ask God to guide you on this inner journey. For several moments, breathe in God's Spirit and exhale any anxiety or fear or discomfort you might have. Breathe in the Spirit and let go of whatever weighs heavy on your heart.

Imagine yourself in a beautiful place in nature. It can be a real place or an imaginary one, but it is above all a place of beauty and one that is safe for you. Ground yourself in this place by using your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, feel? Savor the beauty and relax. You notice a path and you begin walking, always taking in the beauty. Eventually you see a bench and you sit down. As you sit there you allow the peace and the beauty of this place to hold you. This is your sacred space, and you can

return here as often as you like. Now imagine that you are enveloped in a warm golden light. You are being held in God's loving embrace. Allow yourself to feel the warmth permeate your body. Just sit quietly and ask God for the grace to walk courageously on the path of healing and hope. Stay there as long as you like, and when your personal cloud dissipates you find yourself once again savoring the beauty around you and the encounter you have had. When you are ready, come back to the present time and place by opening your eyes. Notice what is surfacing within you. Journal and begin your inner work.

The Lord says: "Peace, peace, to the far and the near . . . and I will heal them" (Isa 57:19 NRSV).

Chapter One

Three Basic Principles of Healing

“Look, I’m making everything new”

—☺— IMAGING —☺—

The night cloaked my room with a darkness that was penetratingly cold. The alarm clock pierced the silence with its loud, unwanted announcement of the coming sunrise. I fumbled quickly through my desk for a paper and pen to write down a dream I had had. I never remember my dreams, but this one had been too vivid to allow it to slip back into the mists of my subconscious. In my dream, I was in a room with a friend and had made it clear to her that we were not permitted under any conditions or for any reason to rearrange the furniture. While I was getting my coat in another part of the house, my friend had begun to move the furniture around with no particular attention to where the furniture landed. An immediate panic seized me when I realized my friend had not only changed the position of the bed, table, and chairs, she had created an interior decorator’s nightmare.

I jotted down the seemingly simple symbols and the following week shared them with my spiritual director, who encouraged me to bring the symbol of the furniture to prayer. “The Spirit often speaks to us through dreams, especially those that are so vivid.”

In our conversation we decided the panic at the moving of the furniture definitely symbolized feeling out of control as my friend challenged my stodgy life decisions. I’ve got everything figured out and nailed down and don’t need anything new to upset things, thank you.

A tiny flicker of freedom lit up the otherwise foreboding panic of change that was symbolized by the furniture now lying helter-skelter around the room in a disorganized maze.

Through the next weeks, as I prayed, the dream image developed in my prayer and I realized that the room was flying—a symbol of transcendence—and that the door was open, that my friend in the room was actually God, that God was now pushing the furniture out the open door, and, to my horror, that God was actually trying to push me out the door. “Ah,” said my spiritual director, “so God is not afraid to push the old man out the door. . . .” I ignored the comment.

Grasping the meaning of the furniture became a contemplative odyssey. The symbol had layers of meaning. One transformative discovery I made was that the furniture symbolized my self-concept, my judgments of myself, the labels I gave myself or allowed others to give me, my self-analysis. It’s the mind’s job to make judgments. After everything we say or do, our mind says, “That was smart!” “Why did I say that?” “What is she going to think about me now?” God was saying, “Out the door with it all. I have no use for it. It has no real meaning. It is confining both of us in a box. It is prohibiting our relationship from developing.”

Since I didn’t trust God enough to let him do it, I had managed to keep him from throwing me out the door. So with the

furniture gone, the room was empty. Only God and I were left in the room, and I bowed before him. We were no longer separated by my mental constructs and judgments. As I remained in God's presence, I kept dropping my analyses and thoughts as they emerged, returning to a simple, receptive awareness.

—— CONTEMPLATION ——

“Look, I’m making everything new” (Rev 21:5 MSG)

The author of the Book of Revelation, believed to be John the Apostle, calls himself a prophet. At the island of Patmos he is given a series of visions that enable him to offer hope to his brothers and sisters suffering persecution in Asia Minor. The seven churches listed in the first three chapters of this book were seven cities on a single road. The book would easily have been passed from congregation to congregation and been read aloud to the Christians who needed encouragement in their suffering.

The author recounts for his fellow persecuted Christians a vision similar to those recounted in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel. When he sees the vision of the seven lamp stands and a man holding seven stars walking among them, he falls at the man's feet. The author, who had lived through the personal, spiritual, and psychological hell of persecution and had refused to worship before the images of the emperor, now falls as if dead before this man whose hair is white as snow and whose eyes burn like flames. The man touches John with his right hand and says “Don't fear. I'm First, I'm Last, I'm Alive. I died, but I came to life, and my life is now forever” (Rev 1:17 MSG).

John, in this vision, teaches us three basic principles of healing: worship, listen, see. These three basic principles are the

initial “movement of the furniture,” so to speak, that begin our healing.

Worship

First, God breaks through our self-concepts, in sometimes unsettling ways, in order to reveal himself to us. God acts firmly, taking things into his own hands (and out of ours). We may cry in these first stages. One day, however, he will wipe away our tears. God is not afraid “to push the old man out the door,” to mess up the organization of our lives—what we think we are capable of doing, our plans that keep our fears at bay, the control we have asserted over others for our own self-protection.

The response God waits for is worship, because ultimately it is not we who make new lives for ourselves. It is God, who just as he will create new heavens and a new earth, makes us new.

So long as our response to having our life shaken up remains anger—a perfectly understandable human reaction—healing can’t commence. Therapy can help us with the anger. A spiritual director can explore with us our image of God. But eventually we ourselves need to decide to worship.

Listen

Second, when we take the risk to worship, we listen to Jesus’ voice saying, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here. I control everything. I am the Beginning and the End. I died and am now alive for ever and ever.” For the persecuted Christians, threatened with execution for refusing to worship the Roman emperor, to hear the voice of One who died saying that now he controls the passage-ways of death, was to hear hope. Now he lives. Death is not forever. Death has been overcome. Their death also has been overcome. They are held gently in their sufferings and borne into eternal life.

Depression, betrayal, illness, failure are deaths in so many ways. Many lose their name, their marriage, their families, their friends, their careers, their self-esteem, their confidence in life. To them and to us Jesus says, “Fear is useless. I’m here. I died, too. I am now alive forever and ever.”

See

Third, Jesus invites us to look up and see the One who is saying to us, “I Am.” We need to stop looking at ourselves—the labels we put on ourselves, our self-analysis, our judgments—and begin looking instead at the One who says: I am the First. I am the Last. I am Alpha. I am Omega. I am Forever. There is something larger than your illness. I have a greater part to play in your life than what you are suffering. I know all about you. I have designs for your life, and illness or disaster will not stop me from making of you something beautiful and meaningful.

Truly the only labels I am allowed to have about myself or others, even about the Church, are those of God. I see myself accurately only when I see myself or others through God’s eyes.

It is important to move beyond a vague concept of God to a more concrete understanding of God-With-Us in the person of Jesus Christ. Just as the Church was in the first century, we too are grasped by the powerful hand of the Risen Christ who walks in our midst as the conqueror of death.

—❧— EXPLORING —❧—

❧ Not all dreams are messages of God; some are just dreams, or nightmares. However, some dreams can be signposts for important shifts in our life. Have you ever had a significant

dream? Can you recall any details? Have you prayed with this image, or could you do so now? Have dreams ever been moments of self-discovery? In what way?

- Has a broken relationship, misunderstanding, personal betrayal, disaster, or emotional disorder affected your self-image? In what way? Can you identify self-concepts that may be preventing joy or hindering growth? In what ways, if any, have these been a death for you? What would happen if you “pushed them out the door”?
- Could you practice contemplative wonder? What would happen if you became aware of your judgments and analyses, gently discarding them as they arise? Try to stay present to the now, receiving each breath, each moment, enjoying it while you have it, and letting it go. What difference does this practice make in your attitude?
- Was there a time when God was working in your life and it made you cry? What was that like? Were your tears wiped away? Transformed? What were the circumstances of this goodness on God’s part?
- On a scale of one to ten, how much do you control your life, other’s lives? How do you exercise this control of yourself, situations, others? What benefits do you receive from keeping things under control? What would happen if you let go? What would be the worst thing that would happen if you did? What are possible positive consequences of letting go?
- In what area of your life might God be asking you to relinquish control? How does this make you feel? What is your first reaction? Why? What would it take for you to be able to worship God who is making something new of your life?

 LISTENING 

When you have an extended time to go deep within your heart, either imagine yourself with John on Patmos or in some other quiet place where you can meet God—a favorite secluded spot in nature, a vacation spot, a sacred place in a church or monastery. Imagine that Jesus comes to you. Angels surround you with song, and they bow at his feet, covering their faces. Take the risk to bow also. Feel what it is to bow before him, to remain at his feet in adoration and trust. Tell Jesus what you are feeling. “Jesus, this is so. . . .” Or, “Jesus, I feel like. . . .” When you are finished, stand up, look into his eyes, and wait for him to speak to you.

 RESTING 

Resting with the following passages of Scripture can deepen your healing. To prepare your heart to rest where this deep healing can truly take place, repeat the above listening prayer experience before using any of these Scripture passages. Then choose a passage and place yourself into the scene it describes. Each time tell Jesus what you see and what you feel, and wait for him to say something to you.

Dreams

Genesis 28:10–22

Matthew 1:18–25

Two famous dreamers in Scripture are Jacob (in the Old Testament) and Joseph (in the New Testament). Both Jacob and Joseph found themselves in a mess that could have led to deep

depression. Jacob had deceived his father and stolen his brother's birthright. Now alone, he is fleeing his brother, leaving family and homeland, and God gives him a dream assuring him of his future (cf. Gen 28:10–22). Joseph was espoused to Mary, and suddenly found out that she was going to have a baby. The Law said she should be stoned. He loved her and didn't want to see her put to death. He was trapped between his love for God and his love for his wife-to-be. God intervened one night in a dream and explained to him the new direction his life was to take (cf. Mt 1:18–25).

Jacob's dream:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (Gen 28:15 NRSV)

Joseph's dream:

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Mt 1:20–21 NRSV)

Control

Genesis 12:1–9

Exodus 3:7–10

Both Abraham and Moses had their lives interrupted. Abraham amassed a fortune and had settled down comfortably for the rest of his life (cf. Gen 12:1–9). Moses tried to take control over the destiny of his people by murdering one of their oppressors, then fled to the desert to escape capital punishment (cf. Ex 2:11–3:10).

To both of these men God said, “I am going to do something new in the world, and guess who is going to help me!”

Abraham:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:1–3 NRSV)

Moses:

“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Ex 3:10 NRSV)

Worship, Listen, See

John 8:2–11

John 20:11–18

Those who came in contact with Jesus often had their lives disrupted. The so-named “woman caught in adultery” is brought before Jesus with a humiliating accusation. The labels applied to her melt away in the presence of Love Incarnate. She has to begin to know herself in new ways. She has to look into the eyes of Jesus who challenges her to become who she is in his eyes (cf. Jn 8:2–11). Mary Magdalene, in the garden after the resurrection, finding the tomb empty, is another woman who faces the most terrifying experience of letting go of control. Not only does she have to let go of any hope of protecting someone she loves from danger, she sees the hope of the Messiah’s promises disintegrate around her. The group of disciples who had been close as they followed the Master is now gone. She has no control over the

future of her own life. It seems that everything is gone (cf. Jn 20:11–18).

The woman caught in adultery:

Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (Jn 8:10–11 NRSV)

Mary in the garden of the resurrection:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. . . . They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” (Jn 20:11–13 NRSV)

—❧— INNER HEALING —❧—

Before beginning this section you may wish to pray with the guided imagery contemplation found on page 9.

Almost everyone at some point in life struggles with insurmountable problems that could lead to discouragement, frustration, and even depression. In whatever way these situations appear, self-doubts, judgments, and self-hatred often become part and parcel of life. Most of the judgments we make about ourselves and others are rooted in words and experiences from our childhood. Our parents, grandparents, teachers, and other significant adults play a great role in shaping the thoughts we have about ourselves and the way we think the world “should be.” Some of our beliefs come from statements we heard such as “You’re always in the way,” or “You’ll never amount to anything.” Sometimes the thoughts come from the way we interpreted

events from a child's perspective. For example, if adults were so busy working that they never had time for us, despite the fact that they loved us, we may have inferred that "I am not important." If no one ever stopped to listen to what we had to say, we may believe "My opinion or my voice doesn't count." If we were raised in a dysfunctional environment, the message we got was probably "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel."

I call these thoughts "the committee." Some of these thoughts are helpful and lead us to be cautious, to learn from past mistakes, to run from danger, and to protect ourselves. Some, however, are negative thoughts we have believed our whole life, and they need to be reevaluated and reframed in order to be more in line with the truth. It is helpful to share with someone while we are reframing our thoughts, someone trustworthy and who can help us look at statements that come from "the committee."

When you are upset or discouraged, what are some negative statements you tell yourself? Make a list of these. Next, write beside each thought, when you first began to think this way about yourself, whom these thoughts come from or what situation led you to think this about yourself. How could you reframe that statement to be more in line with the truth? Write the reframed statement. For example, the thought "Everything I do is wrong" can be reframed as "Sometimes I make mistakes, but often what I do comes out well." Work with one or two statements at a time, perhaps starting with those you repeat most often. When you catch yourself thinking one of these negative statements, STOP! Replace it immediately with a new, more positive statement.

Everything begins with the thoughts we believe about ourselves. These thoughts shape our feelings, and the feelings impact the way we will act or react to situations. To change or heal our lives, we must begin by revisiting some of our beliefs about ourselves and about the way things "should" be.