

# A Personal Journey through a Healing Story

LORY WIDMER HESS

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*And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (Mark 1:29-31)*

A woman with a fever — It's the shortest of all the individual stories of healing in the Gospels, just two or three sentences sandwiched between longer episodes, easy to quickly pass over or see as an adjunct to some more substantial tale. But when, during a difficult time in my life, I started going through all the healing stories and writing poems from the perspective of each individual person healed by Christ, I found I couldn't see any story, however brief, as unimportant. Each one opened up a whole world of experience, casting light both on the time of the Incarnation of Christ, the turning point of human evolution, and on our own age, with its desperate need for healing.

In pondering this particular story, I first of all had to wonder: *Who on earth is Simon Peter's mother-in-law?* The only relative of a disciple referred to in the healings, in one of the

very few such stories that contains a personal name of any kind, surely she can't merely represent an anonymous, generic housewife, as many commentators seem to think. Without her own name being given, she is linked to a very important person, a "big name." Was Peter's mother-in-law someone who would have been known at the time of the Gospel's composition, but who could only be spoken of obliquely? Perhaps someone of some notoriety, who might even be dangerous to name?

An internet search turned up a story that intrigued me, though it may not represent historical truth. Based on identifying Simon Peter with a man named "Cephas" in another ancient text, the theory is that Peter formerly served in the household of Bernice, wife of Herod the Great's son Aristobolus. Peter married the daughter of Herod's other son, Alexander, which meant his mother-in-law was Glaphys, Alexander's Jewish wife.

This was a notorious family indeed, as Herod had both Alexander and Aristobolus murdered because he feared they were plotting to take his throne. If Peter found fishing in the Sea of Galilee preferable to staying in the dangerous court of the Herods, that would explain how Glaphys ended up as a poor fisherman's relative.

But Glaphys was no mild character herself. She was known for constantly gossiping, complaining, and stirring things

up, probably helping cause the death of her own husband with her meddling and inflammatory words. She had affairs and married again, not just once but several times. In the middle of all this scandal and notoriety, did she really manage to get healed by Jesus in Galilee?

We can never know for sure, yet just considering the possibility gave me an entry point for writing my poem. I imagined a woman surrounded by an atmosphere of fear and distrust, where one had to kill or be killed, and the effect that would have on her inner and outer being. A woman who was proud, jealous of her dignity, raised to wealth and power, now forced into much humbler circumstances. As I wondered what she'd think of the situation she found herself in, living in a fisherman's hut in Capernaum, her voice started to come to me.

*I wasn't born to this, you know:  
this peasant dwelling, stinking of fish,  
and nor was my daughter; she ought to be  
a queen, or wife to some great lord,  
not scraping scales and mending nets  
in a backwater town by the sea...*

I thought about fever as our body's defense against invasion, an alarm bell calling for aid to a beleaguered part. While conventional medicine treats inflammation as an enemy that must be suppressed, if the whole organism is supported in

the right way, it can withstand fever without going to an extreme, and this transformative process can be very important for reaching a new level of health. The rightful role of inflammation is as a temporary state where things that need to change can be loosened up and reorganized. Fever, like many other symptoms, is a protective measure that itself becomes a danger only when the threat persists too long or cannot be resolved. Not infrequently in our intellectual age, this happens when the knowledge of our minds comes into conflict with the wisdom of our bodies.

The time of Herod was undoubtedly an era when a transformative process was needed, when body, mind, and spirit had become disconnected from one another and were clashing in uncomfortable ways. Herod was a Jew, but only due to the forced conversion of his Edomite ancestors in the previous century, Beholden to Rome for his throne, he seemed to be trading spiritual integrity for material power. A story about someone connected to this family suffering from a fever could represent an attempt at defending the heart of humanity against the cruel, aggressive ways that had invaded it, crushing humility, strangling faith. There was hardly any other way to counter the might of a ruler who commanded vast forces of assassins and spies, than for the body to speak the language of illness — especially for a powerless, vulnerable female whose male protectors had been murdered.

I pictured what such a woman, wracked by unquenchable fire, might experience when Jesus entered the room where she lay immobile, as on a bed of death. I imagined her sense of release when a balancing element touched her body and soul, cooling and calming what her human individuality could not handle alone, in its weak, isolated state. But I also imagined that she retained her own impertinent, somewhat rebellious personality. The presence of the Healer would not wipe out her independence, but support it, enabling her to remain herself even in the face of life-threatening power.

Surely, I thought, she would recognize the One who had taken her hand and raised her up, in anticipation of his own rising from death. She would sense in him the mystery of death and birth, through the feminine wisdom that she carried in her body. But she wouldn't speak of it, for at that time, women were not allowed to speak that wisdom.

Her son-in-law would take on the task of recognizing the Healer, through a way fraught with error and failure, and of speaking clearly of him, spreading the Word of life. Yet behind this knowledge would lie the experience of a woman who had been touched, healed, and raised to new life. So, perhaps, could the gulf between feminine and masculine begin also to find healing.

Meanwhile, the healed woman's return to life would not suddenly make her impossibly perfect, but would allow her

to continue making mistakes, meddling and causing trouble, while knowing in the depths of her being that she was held in an embrace of compassion. The fear of falling into deadly extremes would be lifted from her, and she would serve the Being of Love she had encountered, even as she still struggled through her burden of human imperfection. Like the symptoms of illness, our errors and failings can become the servants of a greater whole, when we open our minds to the messages they are bringing us.

As the woman with a fever came to life for me and shared her story, I recalled times when I'd been through a similar process. Times when a self-protective anger flared up in me, feeling like a raging fire, threatening to consume me if I could not somehow find balance. Yet I was powerless to do that all by myself. Only when I recalled the being of Christ, shedding my self-protective pride and humbly calling for help, was I set free from the fire. I was lifted from paralysis as I felt myself released from blaming the other people whose hurtful actions had roused my inner defenses, and able to look calmly upon my own errors. Some power transcending my own placed me in a space of safety, where I could perceive how we all existed in an atmosphere of forgiveness and compassionate care. Not one of us would be allowed to fall to destruction, if only we could find the way to trust in the Love that held us.

Thus, from just a couple of cryptic sentences, this story unfolded to reveal the healing gesture of Christ in my life and in the world. Not just once, but many times, have I been through such a “fever”, generally fearing and resisting it. Now that I have begun to understand its purpose, it can be welcomed as a friend. I am thankful to Peter’s mother-in-law, whoever she might be, for showing me her way of transformation.

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## Fisher of Men

LORY WIDMER HESS

I wasn’t born to this, you know –  
this peasant dwelling, stinking of fish.  
And nor was my daughter; she ought to be  
a queen, I thought, or wife to some lord,  
not scraping scales and mending nets  
in a backwater town by the sea.

He's a good man, I know. Too good for me,  
no doubt, and better than any I'd cause  
to hope for, after what happened to mine.  
The swords, the screams, the spill of blood –  
I can't speak of it.  
You know.

It was afterward that the fevers began.  
My heat would rise, and I'd be a forest  
consumed by flame. I'd shriek and mutter,  
raging against those vipers and wolves,  
till the fire left me a blackened stump  
ready to fall to ash.

I was glad of the heat, for otherwise  
the fear made me so cold.

But it worried my daughter.  
When they wed her off  
to this Simon, this nameless nobody,  
she begged him to take us far away,  
away from that poisoned court.

So here we are, by the great lake shore.  
But the water could not cool my mad heart



or keep me from burning.  
I still shook and flamed  
and collapsed into dark  
till they feared for my life.

He entered the house as a cooling wind,  
laden with rain, soothes summer's heat.  
The sea was still, awaiting his word.  
The very fish were watching.

And his hand was cool, not cold like a fish,  
but cool with a hidden warmth within  
that sought out my heat and released it, diffused it,  
allowed it to enter an endless sky  
and be breathed away.  
The smoke drifted off  
and the air was clear.

He said no word.  
He didn't have to – I knew him.  
This was the one the men chatter about.  
Their teacher, their leader,  
who's called them off  
to leave their nets and become even poorer,  
losing what little they have.

What folly, I'd thought. But now I knew:  
this was the One,  
the healer, the hope,  
the only chance  
for a burning world  
to be saved from ending in ash.

I didn't tell my son-in-law.  
Let him learn for himself.  
Those men think themselves  
so clever, so wise.

Someday they will know  
what women see at once  
but can never say,  
except through our bodies –  
through their flaming, their falling,  
the fiery seeds that float in us,  
cycling through death and rebirth.

I can't say these words;  
they won't listen to me.  
But they will hear him.  
He will speak it.  
He will show it.

He will live it,  
and die it.

So I can wait.  
I'll serve them in silence,  
my flame settled down,  
tamed to a hearth-fire  
that keeps me warm  
and safe from the wolves.

Maybe I'll marry again. I'm still  
a young woman, you know.  
I can leave the fish too,  
the boats and the nets,  
and fish for a man of my own.