

VITAL SIGNS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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When Dr. Victoria Sweet walked into an examining room at San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital to examine Terry Becker, she knew what to expect. Laguna Honda, the nation's last surviving almshouse, served as a chronic care facility of last resort for the city's destitute and desperately ill. It was the next-to-final resting place for patients whom modern medicine had mostly given up on.

This was Terry Becker's third admission to Laguna Honda over several years, interspersed with 30 emergency room visits to various other city hospitals. Addicted to alcohol and heroin, Terry lived on the street with her boyfriend — except when he beat her up and robbed her. A spinal cord injury and subsequent infection had left her partially paralyzed and in a wheelchair, where she developed a massive bedsore that ate through the skin, fat and muscle of her buttocks, exposing the bones of her spine. The bedsore, Dr. Sweet recounts in her book titled *God's Hotel*, was the worst she had ever seen — huge, enormous, and deep.

The scary thing about the bedsore, Dr. Sweet goes on to say, was that it left Terry without any protection. "Everything delicate and crucial in her body — bones, kidneys, spinal cord — was exposed and vulnerable to an environment full of danger, full of germs — to bacteria of all sorts and from every source." Antibiotics wouldn't protect Terry for long, because germs would rapidly become resistant to them, and the bedsore was far too big for a skin graft.

After examining Terry, Dr. Sweet walked back to her office and sat down at her desk. She realized that the bedsore was a catastrophe for Terry and could soon end her life. Confronted with a case that modern medicine had judged hopeless, Dr. Sweet asked herself: what would Hildegard do?

As it happened, on the days she was not treating patients at Laguna Honda, Dr. Sweet was studying for her Ph.D. in the history of medicine. Her research focused on the life and work of the remarkable 12th-century poet, mystic, composer, theologian, and physician Hildegard of Bingen.

Born in the year 1098, Hildegard was the tenth child born to a minor aristocratic family living along the Rhein River in western Germany. When she was eight years old, Hildegard's parents took to her to a Benedictine monastery and donated her to the church: a tithe of their tenth child. If things had taken their usual course, Hildegard would have spent the rest of her life among the nuns in the cloister, sequestered away for a life of devotion and prayer.

Hildegard turned out to be uncloisterable. Possessed of a keen mind and a fertile imagination, Hildegard became a voraciously polymath student, an attentive observer of the cosmos and its creatures, a visionary composer of music, and a prolific writer and painter. Dismissive of constraints on her status as a nun and her role as a woman, she began to travel widely and preach boldly. Her sermons and writings attracted considerable attention. People from all walks of life began to seek her counsel, which was always sage and sometimes scathing. Hildegard wrote nearly 400 letters during her lifetime — to popes and emperors, abbots and abbesses, as well as priests, nuns, and lay people. The Pope himself was reported to fear her capacious intellect and sharp tongue.

Hildegard was one of the most prolific of all medieval composers, with some seventy compositions to her credit, including a 16-voice musical morality play called *Play of the Virtues*. She wrote two books on medicine and natural history that remained influential for more than 500 years, *Book of Simple Medicine* and *Book of Composed Medicine*. She also wrote three substantial volumes of mystical theology.

Despite her renown and influence, when Hildegard announced her desire to move away from her home monastery to start a cloister of her own, the local bishop refused to grant permission. Convents for nuns had to be associated with monasteries for monks, he said. Hildegard moved anyway and built a convent, followed five years later by a second convent. Her spirit was as feisty as her theology was visionary. In the words of Christopher Page, whose 1981 recording of Hildegard's music climbed to the top of Billboard's classical charts and sparked a modern renaissance of interest in her music, Hildegard was "a remarkable woman in an age of remarkable men."

Throughout her life, Hildegard's work was animated by her vision of a world filled with song and suffused with divine energy. In her view, everything that exists flows from the divine energy — the *viriditas*, the life force — that surrounds and suffuses the world. In addition to her books and music, she conveyed her vision through her paintings, one of which is titled "Cultivating the Cosmic Tree." She depicts the earth at the center of this painting, surrounded by the sphere of air where seeds become trees and bear fruit, which is surrounded in turn by the sphere of moisture and finally by the sphere of divine fire. All four of the cosmic elements of generation and regeneration are present in Hildegard's vision: earth, water, air, and fire. These elements are connected and intertwined — with each other and with Hildegard herself. She's depicted in the painting as well, exhilarated and astonished by all she sees.

In Dr. Sweet's book *God's Hotel*, she explains that premodern medicine, as codified by Hildegard, was based on the four elements that were understood to make up the cosmos — earth, water, air, and fire. "Each of the four elements, in turn, was made up of four qualities — hot and cold, and wet and dry. Thus earth was cold and dry; water cold and wet; air was hot and wet; fire, hot and dry. Everything in the universe was made up of a mixture of these four elements and four qualities, but in various proportions, and this included the building blocks of the body, which were the four humors — blood, bile, phlegm, and melancholia."

Health, in this premodern understanding, was thought to be the proper balance, and disease the improper balance, of these four bodily humors. The job of the physician a millennium ago, Dr. Sweet says, was to diagnose the patient's humoral imbalance and correct it by prescribing a regime, made up of diet, herbal medicines, bleeding, and bathing, as well as prescriptions for changes of climate, sexual activity, rest, sleep, and exercise.

What would Hildegard do about Terry Becker? As she pondered the question, Dr. Sweet found herself staring at a green plant in her office and thinking about the *veriditas* — the life force — that was flowing in the plant, even as it was ebbing in Terry's body. What Hildegard would do, Dr. Sweet suddenly realized, was remove obstructions to Terry's natural ability to heal. If nothing was in its way, then *veriditas* would heal Terry's wound as surely as a plant will grow green.

What was in the way of the life force in Terry's body, Dr. Sweet asked herself? "The mass of dead tissue was in its way, and every bit of it had to be removed. Any pressure on Terry's body, from wrinkled bed-clothes to hard mattresses, was also in its way and had to be removed. Anything that interfered with the circulation of her blood — nicotine, for instance — was in the way of the life force. Dirt, unkemptness, stale clothes. Unnecessary medications. Fear, depression, hopelessness. All were in its way." Dr. Sweet added: "My first job, therefore, as gardener-doctor, was not to make a brilliant diagnosis or give any magical medication, but to remove obstructions to Terry's own *viriditas*."

In one of her visionary texts, Hildegard writes:

I am the fiery life of divine substance. I blaze above the beauty of the fields, I shine in the waters, and I burn in sun, moon, and stars. And I awaken all to life with every wind of the air, as with invisible life that sustains everything... Thus I am concealed in things as fiery energy. They are ablaze through me, like the breath that ceaselessly enlivens the human being, or like the wind-tossed flame in a fire. All these things live in their essence, and there is no death in them, for I am life. I also am rationality, who holds the breath of the resonant word by which the whole of creation was created; and I have breathed life into everything, so that nothing by its nature may be mortal, for I am life.

In my own view, the power of Hildegard's life and the source of her influence derive from her mystical experience of being extensively connected to everything — to the life force at its most pervasive and most powerful. Her life's work, as she understood it, was to remove the obstructions — whether religious or political, whether physical or psychological — that impeded the flow of the life force. To be sure, much of Hildegard's thinking and writing — whether theological, musical, or scientific — reflects the

conventions of her day. But the experience of being enlivened by everything around her helped Hildegard break through barriers of convention and tradition. She was a prophet of possibility.

The experience of being extensively connected to the life force around us, and passionately enlivened by it within us, is an essential element of a fulfilling life — not only for Hildegard, but for us as well. It provides a foundation for the experience I refer to when I use the word God. God is the experience of being connected to all that is — all that is present, as well as all that is past and all that is possible. It's the experience of being connected deeply and directly to the life force. It's the experience of breaking through barriers that keep us and those around us from being healthy and whole.

Within a few weeks after Dr. Sweet began to treat Terry Becker using Hildegard's approach, faint signs of healing began to appear deep within Terry's wound. When Terry's boyfriend showed up, she threw him out and told him never to come back. She stopped smoking, and her appetite began to improve. Slowly, almost infinitesimally, the bedsores became shallower and shallower.

Two-and-a-half years later, her wound fully healed, Terry boarded a plane bound for Arkansas, where she moved in with her brother and his wife and their two children. "With Terry," Dr. Sweet says, "I witnessed healing from the inside out." She goes on to say that it transformed the way she practices medicine. She says, "Forever after, instead of focusing on my patients vaguely surrounded by their environment, I also did the opposite — I stepped back and focused on the environment surrounding my patients. And asked myself: is anything interfering with viriditas? What can I do to remove it?"

That's the question for us as well. Is anything impeding the full flow of life within us and around us? Is fear, depression, or hopelessness interfering with the life force? It needs to be removed. Is a bad habit, poor environment, or unhelpful friendship interfering with the life force? It needs to be sent away. Is poverty, oppression, or injustice interfering with the life force? It needs to be removed.

Eight hundred years ago, Hildegard declared the timeless truth about the interconnected nature of everyone and everything. She depicted the sublime beauty of human dignity and human opportunity. And she voiced fervent hope that the divine life force would overcome obstacles in order to create balance and well-being everywhere. She was a prophet of possibility — for her time and for ours as well.