

## RING THEORY

A meditation by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls NYC  
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One of the most striking aspects of the coronavirus pandemic has been the bafflingly wide array of symptoms experienced by people who have been infected. Some experience no symptoms at all, while others are dead in a day or two. Some lose their sense of smell, or spike a high fever, or develop a cough, or experience lethargy — or all of these. Sometimes a drop in oxygen saturation levels is accompanied by the classic symptoms of shortness of breath and difficulty speaking, while at other times not. Some coronavirus-related deaths are caused by fluid in the lungs, but others are caused by clotting problems or heart problems. What in the world is going on here?

This constellation of medical conundrums brings to mind a book titled *God's Hotel* by Dr. Victoria Sweet. It's about her work at San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital, the nation's last surviving almshouse. Laguna Honda 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.

In her work at Laguna Honda, Dr. Sweet was regularly confronted with complex cases that the usual approaches to medicine had failed to resolve. When she ran out of options, Dr. Sweet would often ask 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, composer, theologian, and physician Hildegard of Bingen.

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.

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 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.

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

If this interplay between medieval and modern approaches to medicine sounds contrived or sentimental, I assure you that it's not. The story of Dr. Sweet and Laguna Honda unfolds in a fascinating way. You'll need to read the book to find out how.

To be sure, the obstructions to healing proved insurmountable in some cases, as they are proving in some people infected by the coronavirus. But the lesson worth taking from the story of Hildegard and Dr. Sweet is that the physical and spiritual aspects of healing are interrelated. Indeed, even if people recover from the physical consequences of the coronavirus, they will also need to recover from its emotional and spiritual effects. The same is true when people suffer economic harm, or verbal or physical abuse, or loneliness, or depression. Our need for spiritual healing can be just as profound as our need for physical healing — and often persists even longer.

As a spiritual community, the work of spiritual healing is our work. My question for us this morning is this: what would Hildegard do? How can we remove the obstructions that impede the flow of the life force — the divine energy — that surrounds and suffuses our lives and our world?

About a week ago, Dorothy Novick, a pediatrician from Philadelphia, wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* about how she interacts with people who are worried or frightened — for themselves, for their families, and for her, as a frontline caregiver in this coronavirus pandemic. She points out that when her friends and family express their anxiety about the risks she faces as a physician, she becomes anxious too — even terrified. This heightened level of fear, she says, makes it harder for her to focus on staying safe and doing her job.

Novick then describes an approach developed by Susan Silk and Barry Goldman known as Ring Theory. Imagine a person who is suffering sitting in the center of a series of ever-larger concentric rings. Her dearest relatives sit in the smallest circle around her. Best friends sit in the next larger circle. More friends and perhaps work colleagues occupy the next larger circle. And so on.

According to Ring Theory, Novick says, people in any given circle should send love and compassion inward, toward the ones in the center who are suffering most, and they should process their personal fears, anxieties, and even grief outward to those in larger circles, who are less affected. Send love and comfort inward; deal with fear and anxiety outward.

Novick describes a friend of hers named Margie whose husband was killed in a car accident. When the two of them were alone, Novick expressed horror at Margie's loss. She asked Margie what had happened at the accident scene. She expressed anxiety for Margie's future — raising her children without their father. Novick says, "Everything I said seemed to worsen her agony."

In retrospect, Novick says, "I should have said to Margie, 'I love you, and I'll do everything I can to support you.' And only when talking to others should I have said, 'Her suffering feels impossible to bear.'"

Concerning the coronavirus pandemic, Novick adds that if you feel concern for a particular healthcare worker on the front lines of this crisis, you should imagine the circles around that person and decide where you land. "Then send your love in. Tell us you're proud and you believe in our mission. It's fine to say you are worried. We feel loved when you ask about our days and remind us to be careful. But if you are having a dark moment full of doomsday predictions, if you are crying for fear we will die, please know this increases our anxieties. Please process your worst nightmares with others. And please, don't forget to call us once you feel better."

What would Hildegard do in the face of the coronavirus epidemic? She would look for people who are suffering, or fearful, or anxious, or depressed. She would focus on the life force — the invisible energy that enlivens and sustains everything, and binds everything together. Then she would send love in to those who are desperately in need of it. She would become a source of comfort and hope.

She would also set herself to the task of removing the obstacles to the life force. Is self-serving political leadership, or lack of access to medical care or financial support, or scarcity of food and other household necessities interfering with the life force? These policy issues need to be addressed — with policymakers, not with people who are suffering. Is poverty, oppression, or injustice interfering with the life force? These need to be removed — by advocates and activists, not by people most burdened by structural violence.

Send love and support inward to people who are suffering; deal with the sources of fear and anxiety, along with the obstacles to healing and wholeness, outward with those who can help you make a difference.

Eight hundred years ago, Hildegard declared the timeless truth about the interconnected nature of everyone and everything. She was a prophet of possibility — for her time as well as ours. Our calling is to invoke the divine life force that brings healing and wholeness to everyone. Our mission is to remove obstacles to well-being everywhere.