

A "REEL" EPIPHANY

6) "Patch Adams: Holy Laughter"

Rev. Ron Dunn

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Did you hear the one about the two antennas that met on a roof?
They fell in love and got married.
The ceremony wasn't much, but the reception was excellent.

A jumper cable walks into a bar.

The bartender says, "I'll serve you, but don't start anything."

A man walks into a bar with a slab of asphalt under his arm, and says:
"A beer please, and one for the road."

An invisible man marries an invisible woman.

The kids were nothing to look at either.

What do you get when you throw a piano down a mine shaft? A Flat Minor.

It is good, is it not, to laugh? It's even good to groan over puns that may seem so pointless. Yet, upon further review, there is indeed a point—the point is the healing power of laughter itself. Laughter is one of the great gifts that God has given to us as human beings. Victor Borge is exactly right: **Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.** It breaks down barriers and enables a deeper sense of community and connection. Not only that, but it also is also good for you as well.

We've often hear it said that laughter is the best medicine. In some cases, that has proven to be literally true. In 1964, Norman Cousins, the editor of the Saturday Review was stricken with a rare, life threatening illness that affected his connective tissue. He became partially paralyzed and his doctor told him that his prognosis was not good. With little left to lose, Cousins was inspired to become an active participant in his own healing process—a process that included unheard of doses of Vitamin C and lots of laughter—not gentle, suppressed laughter, but the big, booming belly laughter that would shake his body.

Where he had been taking numerous pain killing drugs—including up to 36 aspirin a day—ten minutes of deep laughter was enough to allow him to sleep soundly without any drugs for two hours. So it was that in order to get through the night, Cousins would watch old reruns of Candid Camera and certain classic comedy routines. His laughter would relax him into sleep. He would then repeat the process as needed.

Cousins would write the best-selling book, "**The Anatomy of an Illness,**" a book that would share his laughter based theory of healing humor with the world. In his case, laughter was indeed, the best medicine.

Our film feature this morning is one that underscores this premise. Patch Adams, as you may know, is based on the real life story of aspiring doctor whose unconventional conviction about the true nature of the healing process was one that created quite a stir within the medical community. The role of Patch Adams is played by Robin Williams who seemed, in many ways, to be perfectly suited for the part.

Patch Adams is a film that the critics panned, but that didn't seem to stop it from being a box office success. While the story line, in my opinion, is a bit predictable, it does an effective job of illustrating the tension that sometimes exists between those who understand medicine only as rigid science and those who understand it as a healing art.

The film begins with Patch Adams, as a young man with suicidal thoughts, committing himself to a mental institution. There, he learns first hand of the indifference and inability of the system to provide healing care for the patients. He discovers, through his own unique and wacky gift of humor, that there is a way to touch and help these tormented individuals. It is a revelation that leads him to a calling—a calling to practice medicine by relying not only upon science and technology, but also upon love and laughter. The two, he believes, should not be separated.

This calling leads him to medical school where he reminded of just how threatening his approach can be to those who are a part of the medical establishment. He finds himself locked in something of a battle with Dean Walcott who believes that doctors should not allow themselves to become emotionally involved with patients. They are not there to bond with their patients, he insists, but to treat them. Patch disagrees and the stage is set for ongoing skirmishes throughout the film.

In the first scene we are about to see, Patch defies the established rule that medical students should have no contact with patients until their third year of schooling. Let's watch...

(Scene 1 Patch and the Children / Red Nose Fun)

Dean Walcott is not amused with the reports that he begins to hear about Patch and his defiance of the rules—not to mention his crazy and comic efforts to entertain the patients. The building tension comes to a head in this next brief scene that we will see. Let's watch...

(Scene 11 Dean Walcott / Patch Adams)

As the story unfolds, Patch falls in love with a woman by the name of Carin whom he finally convinces to fall in love with him and his crazy dream of building a clinic that will specialize in treating patients with large doses of compassion and humor—even those without medical insurance. With the help of a wealthy benefactor that he had met in the mental hospital, Patch purchases over 100 acres of land in order to build the Gesundheit Institute.

Just as Patch's dream is beginning to take shape, tragedy strikes. Carin is killed by one of the patients who has had a history of mental illness. His world in shambles, Patch is brought to the very edge as he contemplate the possibility of suicide while venting his anger at God. As background information for this next scene that we will see, keep in mind that when Carin had told Patch that in confronting her own pain and the pain of others, she

often wished that she could be a caterpillar that could one day, transform itself and fly away. Let's watch... **(Scene 111 Patch on the Edge of the Cliff)**

The great irony and tragedy in this particular scene lies, of course, in the fact that Robin Williams would eventually take his own life.

It is in this moment of epiphany that Patch Adams finds the energy and the passion to reclaim the vision that he and Carin had shared together. But it would not be easy. He is expelled from medical school for running a clinic and practicing medicine without a license. He proceeds to file a grievance with the state medical board. His appearance before the board is the "make or break moment" of his medical career. If they rule against him, it is quite clear that he will not be allowed to graduate and his dream will be dashed.

In the concluding scene that we will see, Patch Adams offers his defense for his approach to medicine and the art of healing other human beings. Let's watch...

(Scene 1V Patch Appears Before the State Medical Board)

In the end, Patch Adams does indeed graduate with his dream still intact. Patch Adams, the viewer is informed, goes on to dedicate his life to his own unique and humorous brand of holistic medicine.

Regardless of how one evaluates this film on its technical merits, it invites the viewer to think more deeply about our own theoretical and yes, theological views of medicine. Just what does the practice of healing involve, anyway?

Jesus, of course, had a reputation for being a healer. The Gospel record, including our lesson from Mark this morning, is filled with the stories of Jesus' healing. There are some 727 verses in the gospels that give witness to the healing power of Jesus—no small amount. Yet, I often wonder, what was it that enabled Jesus to heal those who came to him? Was it some magical power bestowed upon him by God? A secret formula that he could call upon to chase away the demons and allow the lame to walk?

Or, was it something more than that—a way of understanding people, a way of being present to them, of listening to them and entering into their circumstance and situation? It is, of course, impossible to know the answer to these questions, but I believe that it is important to ask them.

Our Gospel lesson from Mark, this morning, provides us, I believe, with a not so subtle clue as the nature of the healing process. It begins with Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, approaching Jesus with an urgent request. His daughter is near the point of death and he pleads with Jesus to lay his hands upon her so that she might be made well.

Jesus agrees to go with Jairus, but on his way, he notices that someone has touched him and he immediately stops to ask who it is that has touched his clothes. His disciples are astonished that he would ask such a thing in the midst of a crowd of people all around him, pushing and shoving. Yet, Jesus had clearly felt the touch—or perhaps the grasp—of

someone in need. At this point, a woman who had suffered from severe bleeding for 12 years timidly step forward, prostrated herself before him and told him the truth. She confessed that she was the one who had touched him.

Jesus, moved by the woman's bold faith in him, responds by saying: **"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease."** (Mark 5: 34)

Notice, if you will, that while the woman was, in fact, healed of her disease, it wasn't Jesus who performed some magical act of healing. In fact, Jesus was what you might call, a passive participant in the woman's healing. She was the one who took the initiative. She was the one who took the risk of reaching out to touch Jesus. Jesus' response is most revealing: "Daughter, **your faith** has made you well."

As Norman Cousins discovered, healing is more likely to happen when we become active participants in the process—both in our own lives and in the lives of others. It happens when we are willing share the gifts of our humanity with others—to laugh with them, cry with them, hope with them and dream with them and sometimes even grieve with them. Yes, as ironic as it may sound, there is even healing in the experience of dying.

As Patch Adams would remind us, we are all doctors in the sense that we all have the responsibility of caring for others—and we are all patients in the sense that we have the opportunity of allowing others to care for us. And without question, the greatest disease we face is, as he suggested, the disease of indifference.

By the grace of God we have the right medicine—indeed, the BEST medicine--with which to combat this ugly and deadly disease. We have the medicine of laughter and love, of compassion and caring, of presence and touch.

And as Patch Adams suggests, if you use this medicine in the service of others, if you choose to treat people as people, you will win every time—regardless of the outcome.

I believe that he was right. For it is possible to be healed emotionally, if not physically, to be healed in spirit even if not in body.

Amen!