

The Reverend
Natalia Vonnegut Beck
is an ordained
Episcopal priest.

Can her touch save your life?


by Ellen Michaud
photography by Burk Uzzle

It's been a long day.

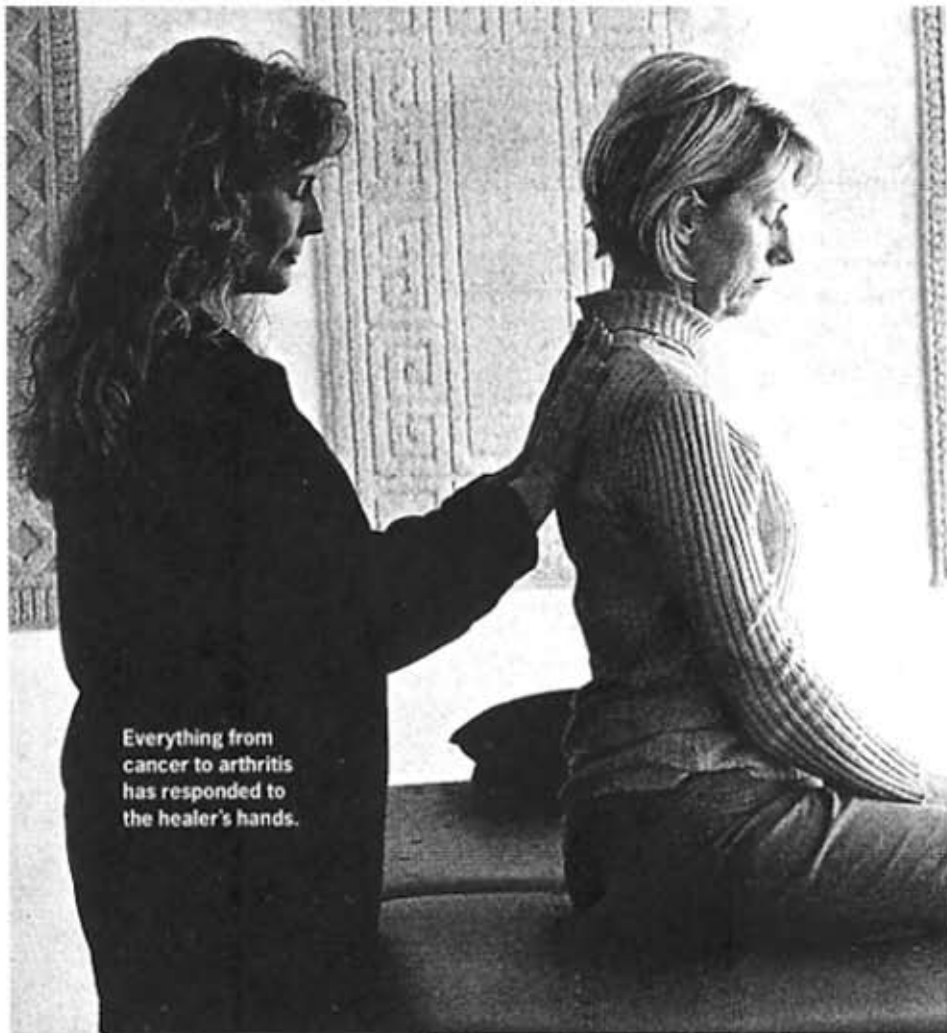
Yet the 67-year-old Episcopal priest—tanned, freckled, and lithe from daily workouts with her two shelties—is still electric with energy. She's talking about how the priestly mandate to heal those who knelt before her at the altar rail of this simple church some 6 years ago led her to reinterpret the ancient ritual called "laying on of hands."

She is not timid, this priest. When women in Indianapolis were being battered in unprecedented numbers, she organized one of the first battered-women's shelters in the US. When those who opposed the ordination of women threatened her life back in the '70s, she donned a bulletproof vest, quieted her knocking knees with prayer, and became the second woman ever ordained in the Episcopal church.

And when those in the tiny parish church where we now stand came to her in pain and misery, she showed the same kind of get-the-job-done courage. She gathered them together on Wednesday nights to pray and celebrate



"It's not only the priest
that can heal," says
the Rev. Beck.



Everything from cancer to arthritis has responded to the healer's hands.

the goodness of God, then threw open the doors of an unused room in the church's education building, hauled in a massage table, and told those who hurt to come forward and receive God's blessings.

They did. There was the woman with breast cancer who is now in remission. The man with end-stage liver disease who now walks around as though he has a new liver. The woman with lupus and rheumatoid arthritis who was able

to decrease her medication.

One by one, they were healed.

Does God Really Work This Way?

The notion that a priest or rabbi can use touch with someone who is suffering, pray for healing, and act as a conduit for God's healing energy is an ancient tradition reflected in just about every major religion.

A close reading of the Talmud suggests that rabbis used touch to heal

more than 2,000 years ago, says Simkha Weintraub, rabbinic director of the National Center for Jewish Healing in New York City. Christians have honored the tradition since the time of Jesus.

Nevertheless, as a dues-paying Quaker, I've always felt a little uncomfortable when someone says that God has empowered him to heal me in one way or another. For one thing, how do I really *know* that God is signing the healer's paycheck? For another, as a spiritual descendant of those radicals who felt that God actually listened to what they had to say, I tend to believe that God has the ability to heal me without any go-betweens—miracles *do* happen, and enough of them have happened in my own life that I no longer have any doubt about whether they occur or who's responsible for them.

And, third, I can still remember how uncomfortable I was as a child watching those popular '50s television programs in which a perspiring televangelist grabbed someone from the studio audience, yelled at God, yelled at the sick or injured person, and practically scared them back to health. Did God really work this way? I had my doubts.



"The scientific evidence supports that belief can heal."

"We All Have the Ability to Heal"

To help answer my questions, the Rev. Beck—or Tanya, as everybody calls her—has arranged for me to have a healing at The Pilgrimage Institute for Integrative Healing, the nonprofit organization that grew out of those Wednesday night gatherings in the church's education building. Located near the church, the institute is now

housed in the back of a single-story building, a stone's throw from the intra-coastal waterway at Clearwater, FL.

The building is a simple white stone structure, with pale peach carpets and walls, soft, overstuffed sofas, afghans, and books. It's staffed by a director, a receptionist, and more than 85 volunteer healers who come and go as they're needed. Some are doctors, others are nurses, therapists, and massage therapists. But some of the healing is done by accountants, filmmakers, and housewives.

Most have been trained by Tanya and Marilyn B. Gatlin, PhD, a member of the Wednesday night group and a counseling psychologist now based in Santa Fe, NM. Their partnership began when Tanya developed the idea of a healing center. They hit a turning point early on in their relationship when they realized that they could create a better

circle of healing if they prayed and did the laying on of hands together. (Originally, one person did the laying on of hands while the other prayed separately.)

"The difference was amazing," recalls Tanya. "It amplified everything." The sense of God's presence was intensified, and its effects on the people touched seemed to be more powerful.

Excited about the possibilities, Tanya and Marilyn began working together as a team and encouraging others to do so as well. "God is within every one of us," Tanya explains. "So it's not only a priest's hands that can heal. We all have the ability to heal. All it takes is human compassion and the desire to focus your total attention on another person."

A Personal Pilgrimage

As the number of people who came forward to work as healers steadily increased, Tanya and Marilyn began to experiment with a wide variety of touch therapies such as Reiki, a Japanese form that uses a gentle touch



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to enhance the flow of energy through the body, and therapeutic touch (developed by an American nurse), which doesn't involve touch at all but theoretically works on the "energy field" surrounding the body. Those therapies that didn't seem to do much were dropped, while those that seemed

to increase the effectiveness of prayer and touch were included in what has now come to be called the "Pilgrimage Healing Process."

To show me how this modern-day laying on of hands works, Tanya has asked Diane Love and Carole Butler, both members of Pilgrimage's healing team, to give me a healing.

A tall, down-to-earth woman of 52 with dark hair and an irreverent sense of humor, Diane is actually a massage therapist by trade. Carole, a small, blonde woman also in her 50s, teaches yoga.

The two women escort me into one of the peach healing rooms, where I snuggle into an old-fashioned wing chair to discuss what it is I'd like them to work on. But open as they are, I'm



Does the laying on of hands make the body remember wellness?

not quite ready to reveal my innermost thoughts to two complete strangers. So I simply ask them to do what they can for my shoulder. I spend so much time in front of a computer, I explain, that it constantly aches. I would like the pain to go away.

With an understanding smile, Diane invites me to remove my shoes and lie down on the massage table. Soothing music reaches out from a stereo system,

and the two women gently cover me with an afghan.

Standing on opposite sides of the table, each woman takes one of my hands, holds it in hers, and closes her eyes. No sound penetrates the cocoon from outside. I listen to the gentle cascade of music in the background and watch the filtered light through a shaded window. Gradually, my breathing slows, and I begin to relax.

Build a Strong Spiritual Life

To be able to heal yourself and others, you need to build a strong spiritual life. Here's how the Rev. Natalia Vonnegut Beck suggests you start:

Make contact. Start every morning with a prayer of gratitude for another day. Draw in the morning's peace by taking a slow, deep breath. Feel it spread throughout your spirit, mind, and body. Exhale, then stretch and acknowledge every part of your body.

Create a healing space. Keep one room or corner in your home for prayer, spiritual reading, and contemplation.

Use a mindfulness meditation to slow down. Most of us are whizzing through life without even noticing that we're alive. Learn to focus on the here and now. Once a day, sit down in your healing space, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. Breathe slowly, and listen to your breath as you inhale, then as you exhale. Be aware of all that is occurring within your body—the sound of your heart, the lightness of your arms, the flow of your spirit. Meditate for 10 minutes, then open your eyes, and gently move back into the world.

Read. Pick any book or magazine with a spiritual theme, and spend 10 minutes a day reading and thinking about it.

Make a list. Jot down all the things that are blocking you from a deep spiritual life: not enough time, too many distractions, too much pizza. Develop a plan to overcome them, and write it down.

Share the journey. Designate one particular person as your "spiritual" friend. Meet once a week—either in person or on the phone—to discuss spiritual issues. Maybe you can even go over your list of spiritual blocks and monitor your progress in dealing with them.

Contemplate the mysteries of faith. Ask your-

self, "What is this stirring inside?" If, in moments of stillness, you feel a presence or energy inside you, focus on it, and try to sense what it is to you.

Build a faith community. Spirituality grows when it's stimulated and nurtured by those around us. Attend a local church or synagogue, or form your own group of like-minded believers. Meet regularly, preferably once a week.

Be with people who care about you. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't reach out to others or be a good Samaritan, says the Rev. Beck. It does mean that you should stop hanging out with folks who don't respect your values.

Honor yourself. Don't follow somebody else's idea of who you should be. Figure out who you are, then reject everyone else's opinion that doesn't honor your belief.

Make a covenant with God. If you feel like a victim, if you feel overwhelmed, out of control, scattered, unloved, untouched, or depressed, draw up a contract with God. List all your needs, then promise to turn them all over to God. In exchange, God promises you the "fruits of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. Not a bad deal.

Diane begins to pray. "Heavenly Spirit, hold us in a sacred circle of love and healing. Open the dark places within Ellen, fill her with your healing light ..."

When she finishes, Diane asks me to listen to my breathing. "Focus on the word *peace* as you breathe in," she suggests, "then focus on the word *gratitude* as you breathe out."

As my relaxation deepens, she moves to the head of the table and cradles my head, while Carole moves to the foot and gently takes hold of my



"The anxiety that has gnawed away at the edges of my life for more than 40 years is gone."

ward as though flinging something away.

An Unexpected Result

My thoughts drift along with the music as my healers repeat this practice half a dozen times. Then, standing beside my ankles, each woman holds one of my hands and the foot farthest away from where she's standing. The sensation is comforting, almost as though I were being held by my mother.

Each healer moves once again to my shoulders, where she sweeps her hands down my arms and legs several times, then resumes her position at my ankles with one hand on my ankle and the other on my knee. A few minutes later, the healers move their hands to knee and hip, then hip and waist, and on up to the top of my head.

continued on p. 186

The Healing Network

The Pilgrimage Institute for Integrative Healing provides services in several cities. By calling the number below, you can learn if there is a healing center near you. There is no charge, although tax-deductible donations are always gratefully received.

Location: Largo, FL (headquarters)

Name: The Pilgrimage Institute for Integrative Healing

Contact person: Cindy Livernois

Phone number: (727) 449-9774

continued from p. 137

The positioning of their hands at times closely corresponds to the energy centers that are called *chakras* in Eastern medicine, but I'm barely aware of their motions. My mind is centered in a quiet, white place. I don't see anything, but I feel very free and as though my entire spirit was about to cascade into bubbling laughter.

Hands held above my body once again, Diane and Carole walk down opposite sides of the table several times, then pause, with Diane at my head and Carole at my feet. They

don't touch me, but I feel as connected to them as if they were. They lift their arms out toward one another above my body, and I feel as though I am cradled in their love.

Lost in the moment, I am unaware when Diane and Carole step back from the table, until I hear Carole thanking God for the presence of the Holy Spirit, for this time together, and for the healing spirit that has bound the three of us together in its light. They touch my head and feet lightly, as though bringing me back to reality, then quietly wait until I'm ready to sit up.

I could lay there forever. I feel calm, peaceful, and deeply centered. My shoulder feels better, but it always



does after I've lain down for a while, so whether or not the healing fixed it, I don't know.

Something feels different, though, and it's not until the next day that I realize what it is. It's the chronic anxiety that has plagued me since I was 5: the fear that makes me double-check doors, triple-check alarm clocks, and throw up if my son is more than an hour late coming home. The anxiety that has gnawed away at the edges of my life for more than 40 years is gone.

Completely, totally gone.

"Whenever Two or More Are Gathered in My Name"

I call Tanya's boss, researcher

Herbert Benson, MD, president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel/Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Tanya became the Daniel G. Hollbrook Fellow there after accepting Dr. Benson's invitation to develop a program that will show doctors how to provide spiritual care. I put my question to Dr. Benson directly: How can the laying on of hands heal?

"The scientific evidence supports that *belief can heal*," replies Dr. Benson. Studies have found that those who have deep beliefs—whether they are marked by individual prayer, communal worship, or even nonreligious spirituality—generally live a longer and healthier life.

One explanation for these findings may be what Dr. Benson calls "remembered wellness," or the body's ability to recall what it feels like when it's healthy. That ability can be invoked whenever belief is present, and scientists are now beginning to use sophisticated brain imaging scans to actually see the brain trigger the changes that promote healing.

But Marilyn believes that there's more to what's going on. After all, it's faith in God that we're talking about here.

"Modern physics reveals that the human body is a field of energy, connected to and interacting with the energy that surrounds us," says Marilyn. "Tanya and I understand this energy to be the creative power of God."

Disease can cause blockages to the flow of energy, as can feelings of depression, anger, resentment, and bitterness. In hands-on healing, we affirm the possibility that the power of God's love may flow through the hands of the healers to help dissolve these blockages."

That flow heals the schisms between mind, body, and spirit, says Tanya. It creates wholeness. Sometimes it results in a cure, and sometimes it results in the ability to see past the pain and agony of the instant and get on with your life. Is it a miracle?

"I don't think we create miracles," says Tanya. "God does that. But we do help people heal." •

Several months after her healing experience, Editor-at-Large Ellen Michaud remains fear-free, and her shoulder doesn't hurt as much as it did.

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