

## *Prologue: Invoking Healing*

One must not forget that recovery is brought about not by the physician, but by the sick man himself. He heals himself, by his own power, exactly as he walks by means of his own power, or eats, thinks, breathes, and sleeps.—GEORG GRODDECK, *The Book of the It*, LETTER 32

Much of *On Learning to Heal* was written during the first year and a half of the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic. This coincidence made me acutely aware that neither the word nor the concept of healing (if not the process itself) seemed especially relevant to how we think about this catastrophic event. While politicians and public health officials did not hesitate to recruit war imagery to describe the pandemic—whether characterizing the virus as “the enemy” or representing the scenes in hospitals as “battlefields”—almost no one seemed to consider that healing might offer another possible way to think about our situation. Certainly, media reports assiduously chronicled the heroic efforts by health care providers to support those severely afflicted with the symptoms propagated by the novel (and probably zoonotic) coronavirus. Indeed, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, choruses of clapping, cheering, drumming, and trumpeting regularly started every evening at 7 p.m. in recognition and appreciation of these efforts, not only in my Brooklyn neighborhood but in neighborhoods around the world. This daily anthem offered a sonic tribute to those who toiled, often in underequipped and overcrowded circumstances, to keep the people most afflicted by the effects of SARS-CoV-2 infections alive.

I live around the corner from a large hospital, run by one of New York’s major hospital corporations, so it seemed fitting that my neighbors exuber-

antly expressed their appreciation for the “frontline workers” we saw coming and going past the refrigerated morgue trucks. This sonic ritual, echoed across the globe, recognized in a mundane way something that actually goes on all the time, albeit not always with the same degree of public appreciation: very sick people who require support to go on living receive the active attention of others—at least if it’s available and they can afford it. In the case of COVID-19, these acts of attention appeared especially courageous, not only because a deluge of critically ill people, each one a potential vector for the highly contagious virus, easily overwhelmed hospitals but also because so little was known either about the virus or about how to treat it. As medical personnel struggled—frequently without proper personal protective equipment—to improvise new ways to respond to the multiple life-threatening impairments that can follow a SARS-CoV-2 infection, they valiantly exposed themselves to the viral contagion in the service of caring for others whose lives hung in the balance.

However, as much as these efforts deserve our gratitude and respect, something else very important to sustaining life—indeed, something without which no life would ever be sustained—goes unnoticed when we focus our praise exclusively on those who staff our hospitals, no matter how courageous they may be. The fact is that every single person who has contracted COVID-19 and recovered, no matter how much medical intervention they benefited from, has done so because they have an intrinsic capacity to heal. As Georg Groddeck reminded us in the early years of modern medicine, before almost any of its currently effective protocols existed, if we heal, we do the healing, even if we depend on others to assist us. Yet this healing capacity has remained almost entirely unnoticed and unacknowledged in our thinking about the pandemic. Healing is one of the essential tendencies of all living organisms, and without it none of us would still be alive. Unfortunately, when we focus so intently on medicine as a (potentially) curative technology, we often neglect to acknowledge that all medicine can ever do is support and encourage this vital potential. Medicine does not and cannot heal us. Skilled care provided by clinicians, nurses, radiologists, lab workers, respiratory therapists, physical therapists, dialysis technicians, nursing assistants, dieticians, porters, cleaners, and so on, no doubt maintains and sustains the lives of many critically ill patients, including those struggling with COVID-19-related symptoms. Yet it is important to remember: healing doesn’t actually travel from the outside in, because whatever can be done *to* us depends on the potential to heal that lives *within* us. Others can support and

encourage this capacity, but they do not and cannot make it happen. Of course, because there were no specific treatments for the new disease at the time, those caring for people with COVID justifiably deserve our highest esteem. Still, even given these trying circumstances, healing itself might deserve some praise as well—which is what this book tries to give it.