

## Original Article

# Through Darkness into the Light – A Path to Health as Described by Adults after Having Lived through Personal Suffering

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## Abstract

**Background:** Health and wellbeing are highly prioritized among human beings today. Exploring the nature of health and finding deeper ways of understanding health from a holistic perspective and from the viewpoint of human beings themselves is crucial for becoming in health.

**Aims:** The aim of this study is to uncover a nuanced understanding of the core of health by exploring what gives the suffering human being the strength of becoming in health. The research questions are: 1) What is the source of strength for the suffering human being on the path to health? 2) What enables the suffering human being to dedicate continuous strength when becoming in health?

**Methodology:** The study uses a hermeneutical approach. The material was collected through focused interviews with ten adults who had lived through personal suffering and regained health. The texts were interpreted through hermeneutical reading.

**Results:** The path to the source of strength leads through darkness. The suffering human being may find strength from within. Love is seen as the inner and eternal source of strength. Faith and hope enlighten life in a new light. The human being's movement towards the source of strength goes through a creative act. The source of strength demands a sacrifice which is the human being's smallness. An encounter in communion enhances strength. The source of strength awakens the love for the almost other which is seen as a health potential. Actively loving the almost other enables a becoming in health.

**Conclusion:** The darkness of suffering conceals the keys for initiating a movement in health. Actively loving the almost other is the basis for becoming in health and covers a continuous dedication of strength and love.

**Keywords:** health, source of strength, becoming in health, strength, health potential, wellbeing, focused interviews, hermeneutical reading

## Introduction

The nature of health is enigmatic. According to Gadamer (2003), health is not easily grasped. Since health is considered a mystery

(Antonovsky, 1991; 1993) it is important to explore health in different ways in order to attain new ways of deepening the understanding of health and becoming in health. This study originates in a view that sees suffering as a lack

of strength (Lindholm & Eriksson, 1993) and strength for health as being gained from a source of strength of some kind. In order to deepen the understanding of the mystery of health this study wishes to put forth a new way of understanding health by considering the human beings themselves and their thoughts about how they may find strength and preserve their health.

The concept of health has evolved over time. From a salutogenetic viewpoint, individuals who have faith in life and a strong sense of inner coherence are viewed as having better health and as being able to better endure different sufferings. Seen from this perspective, manageability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness are equally important for a sense of inner coherence in life (Antonovsky, 1991; 1993). Meaningfulness in life is, according to Antonovsky, the most important criterium for experiencing health and quality of life.

Eriksson's ontological perspective differs from the salutogenetic perspective because it emphasizes that the human being does not fully have to comprehend or understand the mystery of life in order to become in health (Eriksson, 2007). Eriksson, however, stresses that the human being, despite suffering, may find strength to become in health through wonder and in reverence of life's glory and holiness. She also highlights the human being's experience of meaning in life as essential for health.

Earlier research indicates that inner strength in communion is vital for health and concerns being creative, flexible and believing in one's own possibilities (Lundman et al., 2012). Nygren, Norberg & Lundman (2007) mean that inner strength entails viewing life in a positive way without fear of the darkness in life and being active and in growth towards new patterns. Also Fagerström (2010) underlines that having a positive life-orientation is a health resource. A preserved dignity also seems to be important for the human being on the path to health (Parry & Glover, 2010). By giving actively while simultaneously suffering the human being has a meaning in life that enables strength. Several studies consider faith and hope as important for becoming in health (cf. Lohne, 2008; Hughes, et al. 2009; Fletcher, Schneider & Harry 2010; Saarelainen, 2012). When life itself may become visible for the human being despite suffering a force of becoming in health is enabled

(Söderlund, 2004). Some studies (Lindholm, 2000; Strang & Strang, 2001; Tibus & de Souza, 2011) point out that spirituality and living near death may open new horizons of understanding that enables the human being to reach a deeper and renewed meaning in life, which in turn makes way for health.

Previous research also indicates that suffering means that the human being experiences a lack of strength and freedom and is self-centred and passive (Lindholm & Eriksson, 1993). It is therefore relevant to further investigate how the suffering human being may break this pattern of suffering and alleviate it by shifting his or her focus, becoming active and experiencing communion. Since earlier research also underlines the concept of health resources as regards becoming in health, this study wishes to highlight another way of viewing the movement of becoming in health, namely, considering that a path to health may be created by the suffering human being when being active in his or her own life.

### **Aims**

The aim of this study is to uncover a nuanced understanding of the core of health by exploring what gives the suffering human being strength of becoming in health. The research questions are:

- 1) What is the source of strength for the suffering human being on the path to health?
- 2) What enables the suffering human being to dedicate continuous strength when becoming in health?

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Eriksson's caritative theory as part of the caring science tradition (Eriksson et al., 1995; Lindström, Nyström & Zetterlund, 2014).

In this tradition, the human being is placed at the centre of everything and seen as a unity of body, soul and spirit. Since the human being is viewed as unique, holy and inviolable, health is something that may develop from the human being's own will. According to the ontological perspective of caring science, health is understood as a "becoming", a movement towards deeper wholeness and holiness. When the human being's inner health potential is touched, a movement occurs, and this is seen in

the different dimensions of health as “doing”, “being”, and “becoming” in a wholeness that is unique to human beings. “Doing” implies what the human being does for his or her health, “being” means the endeavour for balance and harmony, and “becoming” pertains to a deeper level of integration and feeling of wholeness (Eriksson et al. 1995; Eriksson, 2007; Lindström, Nyström & Zetterlund, 2014). The substance of becoming in health has to do with the discovery of the inner room (cf. Wärnå, 2002; Hilli, 2007).

Health and suffering are seen as constantly present in human life. Health is seen as a becoming which in turn originates in a view that health cannot be understood apart from a deeper wholeness that includes suffering. Suffering in itself has no meaning but since health and suffering are integrated with each other in a constantly present movement, suffering is seen as existentially important for the human being (cf. Wiklund, 2000). Suffering may enable lust for life and is therefore essential for becoming in health (Eriksson et al, 1995). The human being can ascribe to suffering a meaning which resides alongside the suffering and gives strength to become in health (Eriksson, 1994). When suffering is united with something else, it may be alleviated. Since health and suffering are seen as each other’s prerequisites and as the basis for understanding the notion of becoming in health, this study considers it crucial to explore these two simultaneously by embracing the importance of the darkness of suffering in order to reach a new way of understanding health.

### **Methodological aspects**

The study uses a hermeneutical approach according to Gadamer (1996). The material used for creating the proposed nuanced and deeper understanding of the core of health consists of texts from focused interviews with adults who have lived through difficult personal suffering and regained health.

An interview guide was used as a guideline for the focus interviews. The study’s method is hermeneutical reading (Koskinen & Lindström, 2013).

### **Ethical approval**

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the ethical committee of Åbo Akademi University.

### **Participants and data collection**

The focused interview data was gathered in ten different interviews, with a total of ten participants. The age range of the participants was 19 to 64 years. The inclusion criteria for study participation was being 19 years or older, having lived through personal suffering and regained health and being willing to give informed consent, as well as having a desire to share difficult experiences. The participants were chosen by the researcher from the media or the Internet. Initially the participants were contacted by email and received an invitation to participate in the study. If they answered yes to this invitation, they received a new email with detailed information about the study and were given brief information about the interview questions.

Each interview lasted for 60 to 90 minutes, and all the interviews were digitally taped and transcribed. Study participation, data storage, and data handling for research purposes were approved by the participants when providing their informed consent. The participants were informed both orally and in writing about the study purpose, confidentiality, withdrawal of consent and publication intent. Seen from an ethical perspective, it can be seen as defensible to carry out this study because it might reasonably entail an alleviation of suffering for those who put their experiences into words and share it with someone. The participants in this study have been treated with respect in order to preserve their dignity throughout the research process. If there were difficult feelings among the participants during the interviews the researcher stayed with this person for a longer period of time. The study follows The Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2012).

### **Hermeneutical reading of texts**

The texts from the interviews were initially read several times for the purpose of underlining themes that led to new questions that were subsequently asked to the texts so that the matter or the substance in these could be uncovered (Koskinen & Lindström, 2013).

Reading the texts with openness was carried out in order to obtain a sense of the whole, through reflecting the whole against the parts. Features that emerged from the texts were placed into meaningful units. The interpretation was a

continuously moving process between understanding and interpretation, between the parts and the whole, in order to uncover the substance beyond the present. The meaningful themes were finally lifted to higher levels of abstraction in the interpretation.

## Results

The path to health goes through darkness into light in the sense that when life itself is lighted up a becoming in health is possible. The spiritual dimension, the abstract other or love, is awakened in this movement. Love is seen as the inner and eternal source of strength, but strength may be dedicated from different source of strength in daily life, since these also radiate the holiness that originates from the source of strength. Actively loving the almost other is fundamental for becoming in health.

### The darkness of suffering as a guide to the path of the source of strength

Being in the darkness of one's suffering might sometimes feel almost insufferable. When the suffering human being feels like giving up he or she may benefit from trying to endure a while longer. When the human being endures and is present in the suffering, he or she may become aware of a longing for life and love in the face of death. The human being may then focus his or her inner longing and rest in it. This might act as a crucial turning point that gives strength for becoming in health.

*"...[...]...life in the deepest darkness, in hopelessness, made me want to get out of there. Finally I somehow got strength from feeling nothing."*

### Love as the inner source of strength of the suffering human being

The source of strength seems to be an inner strength within the human being named love. The human being may, however, be blind to this inner source of strength. Suffering might enable the human being to see beyond what is here and now and becoming aware of the universal dimensions of existence. The human being might feel trapped in suffering on a particular level, but when becoming aware of a higher universal existence in life the human being realizes the potential of the source of strength of love. When the human being focuses his or her inner longing and momentarily rests in it he or she may catch a

glimpse of eternity, and become aware of the inner entity of love, that is, the core of the source of strength, and may dedicate to him or herself this strength.

*"We all have strength within us that we are not aware of. We should trust in that we have it...[...]...we should try to make the most of the strength that we have within us."*

### Faith and hope as visible makers of life and love in suffering

The source of strength demands a sacrifice. This sacrifice means surrendering to the thought that the source of strength is what first gave the life and love out of which the human being is created. The human being is called to live in this *first love*. This offers an alternative perspective in life, originating from eternity, which gives a positive and loving outlook on oneself and others. Experiencing the love that pours out from the source of strength provides the human being with the keys of faith and hope, enabling an experience of health, despite suffering. Closeness to the source of strength implies an ontological and holy communion, which also can be mediated and experienced through a concrete other.

*"...[...]...experiencing that communion and that love that they mediated gave me strength. And the fact that there amongst these people also were people who earlier had been in my situation bore witness of hope."*

### Creative acts as the human being's movement towards health

Becoming in health moves through a creative act where the suffering human being calms him or herself and listens to his or her own inner voice of longing. In order for the human being to reach his or her inner room he or she may take help from different concrete activities. This act implies that the human being experiences rest, joy and peace. To have the courage to dream seems to be a form of "resting in doing", and getting away from the suffering for a while which may help the human being reach the inner room. Different kinds of creativity may provide help in reaching this source despite suffering. Painting, music listening, spending time in nature and daydreaming may constitute these external activities that help the human being to reach towards the source of strength.

*"Whilst painting I don't think of anything. And when it is done I do not feel anything, I am completely empty. And it is a nice feeling that enables me to start all over again."*

### **The human being's smallness as a condition for the dedication of strength**

When the suffering human being realizes his or her own smallness the source of strength may become uncovered. This smallness means that the human being is allowed and dares to be him or herself. Realizing this smallness involves an inner struggle, since the human being may not wish to be small, nor acknowledging this smallness. Allowing oneself to be small and forgiving oneself brings relief and reinforces strength. This changes the perspective and enables an awareness of a higher dimension of which the human being plays only a little part, a part of the whole but not a determining one for the wholeness. This may give the human being a sense of freedom and a moment of rest from suffering.

*"The turning point came at the psychologist who said that I should welcome the fact that I felt little and lonely. Thanks to this I began to see the matter from another perspective."*

### **An encounter in communion as enabling strength**

Through an encounter in weakness a genuine and authentic communion may emerge since weakness seems to provide strength. When the suffering human being is close to the core of life and is true before the circumstances in life he or she realizes the truth (the universal truth of life) which enhances strength. The human being that has a home within no longer feels the need for prestige but can allow an experience of weakness and may see life as it is, fully exposed. Strength resides in weakness.

*"In my suffering I realized that only in weakness can there be real communion. When people meet in strength there is fellowship, it is nice and good but when we are weak and people begin to express their weakness to each other real communion develops."*

### **Love from the almost other and actively loving as a basis for becoming in health**

The suffering human being experiences reverence and gratitude in life, being near the core of life.

The spiritual dimension may offer the human being eternal inner peace which enables love. Experiencing love from the source of strength touches the suffering human being fundamentally and lends a sense of meaning which enhances strength. The source of strength thereby confirms the human being's longing for love and dignity.

*"That night when the decisive turning point came I got to experience that I was loved...[...]...I felt a warm outpouring force of love...[...]...I got to see that I was worthy and I began to like myself on a deeper level, not only for that false facade I had created."*

The source of strength awakens the love of the almost other which constitutes an almighty force for becoming in health. This means taking responsibility not only for the life of the other, but also for one's own life, giving oneself a value and choosing direction in life as well as actively loving through concrete actions. Loving in this sense means loving all humans equally, which is possible through the eyes of the first love, the holy dimension of the abstract other.

*"...[...]...I had to fight since the greatest driving force for me was the grandchildren...[...]...I have also discovered that the best way of helping yourself is to help others."*

### **Discussion**

This study indicates that the path to the source of strength leads through darkness into light. By facing the darkness of suffering the human being may catch a glimpse of the core of life. Life's ultimate meaning, the encounter with suffering and death, represents a path to existential awakening (cf. Saeteren, 2006) and a contact with the source of strength of *the first love*, the abstract other. Other studies also indicate that spirituality and living near death may open up new dimensions for achieving meaning and vitality in life (cf. Wiklund, 2008; Rykkje, 2014).

The temporary meaning aspects in daily life, or any kind of ill-health, seem to be a block that prevents the human being from seeing his or her true potential (through the light of eternity that is radiated from the source of strength). Facing suffering and death may act as a crucial turning point that lights up life and awakens the human being's own faith and hope which gives courage and will to fight against the darkness. This gives strength to create a first movement forward in

becoming in health. This study does not propose that everyone has to go through a difficult suffering in order to experience health but rather highlights that suffering may enhance and offer a new perspective on different aspects in life. The smallness and weakness of the human being are seen as essential conditions for the dedication of strength. This dedication is primarily concerned with a universal but simultaneously personal experience of being received in communion (cf. Wiklund, 2000)

According to this study, communion may be received through creative acts that liberate the suffering human being for a dedication of strength. This creative act is preceded by a holy presence where the human being, through solitude, becomes enraptured in a quiet “doing” in order to experience the holy dimension of the source of strength. In this holy presence, the human being reconnects with an inner room of rest and peace. This room bears the name of love. This study also indicates that the suffering human being’s becoming in health requires an activity from the individual to make choices in life in freedom. This will and choice should not be forced, but has to come from within (cf. Lindholm, 1998). Through the awareness of love and the freedom of choice the human being may receive the courage to become in health.

A paradoxical but interesting result in this study is that the dedication of strength requires that the human being (although he or she is suffering) simultaneously and actively lives in the first love by loving the almost other through concrete actions. Even when suffering oneself, it is empowering to reach out and provide help for someone else. Loving someone gives a meaning in life that enhances courage and strength. This may be compared with Murray et al. (2004) who state that spiritual needs are important for health and are expressed through having an active role in life where the human being feels useful. Also Chao, Chen and Yean (2002) mention spirituality as a path to communion with the other in love and with nature.

### Conclusions

The suffering human being’s encounter with darkness in suffering may act as a key for becoming in health. Enduring and being present in this darkness may uncover an inner longing for life and love. Whilst resting in this longing, the

human being may experience the source of strength that consists of faith, hope and love of the almost other. Actively loving the almost other is the basis for becoming in health and covers a continuous dedication of the source of strength where strength and love are regained.

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### Author contribution

Jessica Hemberg was responsible for writing the article at all stages of the development of the article. Lisbet Nyström, as supervisor, was involved in the interpretation of the texts. Katie Eriksson has, as the second supervisor, contributed with critical revision of the article.

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