



John Calvi works with a client.

Margaret Haggerty

Six Healing Sayings

by John Calvi

I had begun to wonder whether what I was doing was at all useful. We had been working for more than an hour.

The stillness in the massage room had become thick. The soft-music tape had run out and the candle had burned low.

She lay on her side. I placed one hand over her heart and the other at her mid-back. "Take a breath," I said quietly. Soon all we had worked for was achieved.

Her chest and belly heaved twice. Her face tightened, and the sound of old pain broke the air. She wept with her whole body, soaking the sheets and exhausting herself. She purged an old hurt which could not become history until it had been released.

John Calvi, a member of Putney (Vt.) Meeting and a Released Friend working in the AIDS epidemic, will conduct a workshop at Friends General Conference in July on "Healing from Lifewounds."

The quiet following the storm was both clean and full—not unlike a meeting for worship at its best. She accepted a glass of cold water and a box of tissues. Gazing out the window at the Vermont greenery, she asked, “What do I have to learn to stay this clear?”

A good question. Laying down the weapons around the heart is one thing. Getting them to *stay* down is another piece of work.

Those around us who are trying to heal from various “life wounds”—assault, life threatening illness, addiction—have encountered powerful forces rare in day-to-day living. This experience freezes ways of thinking and feeling at such basic levels that unspoken assumptions can be radically changed.

All of life can suddenly feel like a dark alley. Suddenly previous ideas about credible love, the balance of good and evil, and one’s own safety are thrown horribly into doubt.

How we feel about being in the world is clearly reflected in our emotional “repertoire.” As fear replaces *joie de vivre*, our emotional repertoire loses what I call its “roundness” and develops flat sides where some emotional expressions have been lost altogether. In working with trauma survivors, I ask them to look and see how “round” their emotional life seems to be.

One way to check for roundness is to use the “six healing sayings” I’ve been presenting to clients since 1982. It’s an easy way to tell which feelings have been let out and which are still “shut-ins.”

These six sayings comprise all the really important messages one person gives another. I ask clients to ask themselves: “Which of these six messages are the easiest to say? The most frequently uttered? Which are the most difficult to say? Are there some which are never uttered? Does the pattern remain constant regardless of who you’re with—family, coworkers, friends?”

The six sayings are the following:

1. “I love you.”
2. “Thank you.”
3. “I’m sorry.”
4. “I need help.”
5. “That’s not good enough.”
6. “No! Stop! Bug off!”

Each of these is essential because they express feelings *we cannot live without*. The absence of any one of them denotes a numbness or starvation which deserves urgent attention.

“I love you”—in its most genuine form—is probably the most expansive of the six. It expresses joy, trust, power, and vulnerability all at once. The multiple realities expressed in this phrase contribute to the many forms of expression it takes. Someone who can’t say “I love you”—or chooses not to—is, in a sense, standing at the edge of the river of life and suffering from thirst. This particular handicap can be the most painful to observe in oneself or in others, because the feeling is so essential.

“Thank you” is a statement of receiving and appreciation, and thus an acknowledgment of our interdependence. It is also a benchmark for those seeking a more spiritual life. Gratitude increases as fullness of “living in the light” increases. When “thank you” is missing, isolation reigns. This is particularly true in our culture, where ingratitude is perceived as arrogance and spreads ill feeling, whether at the kitchen table or in the boardroom. “Thank you” can be a very difficult phrase to say for people who have a chronic feeling that no matter what they receive, it isn’t enough to make up for injustices suffered (such as sexual assault).

“I’m sorry” is our greatest expression of humility. It holds the overwhelming power of acknowledging and beginning to rectify injustice; it is our simplest and most exquisite example of nonviolent conflict resolution. Humility is powerful. It is often hard to understand that having power and being humble are not contradictory in nature.

“I need help” means asking that emotional needs be met. Oddly enough, reluctance to say this is often based not on a distaste for admitting need, but—and this is particularly true for those who have been abused as children—on a fear that help is simply not available. A philosophy of scarcity has set in; there’s an unspoken assumption that one is unworthy of receiving help or that there is simply not enough help to go around.

“That’s not good enough” is a statement of power and need. It expresses self-worth and self-value; in its best sense, it brings everyone involved to attention. Saying “that’s not good enough” is an ongoing work for people who are learning to fend off their own victimization. That’s why it is so frequently heard in the AIDS epidemic. Having one’s life threatened by not only disease but moral and legal condemnation as well has broken many lives.

But it has also created some fierce warriors who cry, “That’s not good enough!” and refuse to accept the terrible rumor that they are not entitled to society’s compassion.

“No! Stop! Bug off!” is even more colorfully expressed in my workshops. The point is to *make space*, particularly *recognized boundaries*, and to express anger. Many people have been hurt by anger and equate it with violence. Quakers to some extent perpetuate the concept that anger can’t be expressed without violence. Yet, *honest anger* and *abuse* are quite distinct. Shrieking “How dare you!” is *not* the same thing as striking a blow.

It is important to separate the two and to release the power of anger. Fury and indignation have saved many lives. People do not die from anger. But it may be that they die from stifling it. Inability to express anger has been documented as a contributing factor to cancer, heart attack, and depression. It can be a difficult thing to say because—like “I love you”—it is tremendously powerful. Unlike “I love you,” it is not given enough cultural space to have its own natural rhythm and enter the waves of all feelings.

Want to start using one or more of these phrases more often? I suggest two things: being playful, and paying close attention. Choose the three most important people in your life and recall a moment when you conveyed each of these sayings to them.

Or try this approach: Put your name in the middle of a blank page in your journal. Put the names of people important to you around the edge of the page. Recall your messages to each and mark them in one color. With another color, note their messages to you. With a third color write down the messages you would like to give or receive.

If you get a chance, work on this exercise with someone else who is also eager to expand. Have a dinner where you try to use all six sayings with one another: “Mom, please pass the peas and bug off.” “Certainly, dear, and that’s not good enough.”

It sounds silly, but the stretch that one has to make to use these six sayings is one of the most elemental moves possible to counter the tendency to contract that comes after a traumatic experience. The reach to say what is *felt* has to be an expansive gesture. It opposes the natural tendency of the wounded to shut down. It is a determined reach for clarity. □