

The Spiritual Embrace of Cyber-community

By Vanessa Ochs

Thank you so much for the warm welcome home. It's messages like this that make it all worthwhile. I am getting stronger by the day and I'm sure it's because of all the positive thoughts from all my friends on the site that have helped with my recovery.

This is an e-mail I received from a person I don't know. From her user name, it must be a woman, and if I put enough hints together, I think she lives in England and is middle-aged. She has the same disease as a member of my family. She has had similar surgery, similar complications and has tried similar solutions. She sent me this letter after she had returned from her most recent surgery.

The only reason I know her is because we both read and post on a Website for people who have had this particular surgery and their families. In the last half-year, these people have held my family and me warmly and wisely in their hearts. They have offered bits of specific information one can only know from experience, and they have kept us from crossing over the line to despair. They have prayed for us. When we have had information that seemed relevant, we have shared it, and when a "keep up the faith" posting seemed called for, we sent it. And we have prayed, too, rooting for people we don't know.

A lot of people say that a virtual community cannot compare to a human community when it comes to depth of relationships. In theory, it seems hard to argue with that claim, and until the past year, I'd have agreed in principle. Even the Jewish directive of *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick, seems to agree: after all, when visiting the sick, you are supposed to appear in the presence of the sick person. You yourself need to go, and not a proxy, a card, a phone call, or an e-mail.

But real experience has shown me otherwise. Sometimes, the person you need to hear from when you are sick is not your neighbor or your student or your cousin, but someone who knows exactly what you are going through. Sometimes what you need isn't another bouquet of flowers, but really specific intimate information about what it feels like to have this particular illness and all the particular issues it raises. Sometimes, you feel you can't burden the people in your "real" life with the weight of illness because you don't want to overwhelm them with the saga or the intimate details, particularly if it has been a long haul. Sometimes, you need words of encouragement from people who have been where you are now, people who can pray that the same relief or recovery they have known will come your way.

And sometimes, you need the information or the encouragement of the prayers in the middle of the night, or when you are really far from home. And you can turn to

a computer and you are not alone, but held in the arms of a community that does not know you in the conventional sense, but holds you nonetheless.