

## **The Wounded Healer** (Joe Colletti, PhD)

Henri J. M. Nouwen has made synonymous the “wounded healer” and the minister. In his book, *The Wounded Healer*<sup>1</sup>, Nouwen describes wounded healers as individuals who “must look after (their) own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others.” The minister is one who wants to serve others. However, the minister is a wounded person.

Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. Nouwen specifically raises the question “what are our wounds?” He noted that words such as “alienation,” “separation,” “isolation,” and “loneliness” express our wounded condition. In another book, *Being A Wounded Healer: How to Heal Ourselves While We Are Healing Others*, the author Douglas C. Smith answers the same question by describing our woundedness in terms of life’s tragedies such as divorce, death, abuse, addiction, sickness, and mental illness.<sup>2</sup>

Experiences such as alienation, separation, isolation, and loneliness are both wounding and expressions of our woundedness. We often experience these wounding incidents through other persons. Some words may be spoken or some actions taken by others that leave us feeling dissociated, dejected, companionless, misunderstood, depressed, abused, violated, and hurt. Other feelings may also arise such as embarrassment, insecurity, rejection, and inferiority. Such words or actions may have been inflicted upon us unintentionally or intentionally. Either way they wound us.

Life’s tragedies can be very wounding. Family members and friends can be wrenched from us through divorce and death. Divorce too often is marked by abuse which can be both verbal and physical scarring to spouses and children. Death can be sudden or prolonged. A sudden death of a love one can leave us without words to express an unexpected heartbreak and a prolonged death can leave us filled with words and an expected heartbreak, but devastated and pained.

Also, there are so many sicknesses that are cruel to us and our love ones. Alzheimer’s Disease is one of the cruelest. We may become increasingly conscious of our lack of ability to remember things or

---

<sup>1</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, Image Book: New York, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas C. Smith, *Being A Wounded Healer: How to Heal Ourselves While We Are Healing Others*, Psycho-Spiritual Publication: Madison, 1999.

carry out our daily activities of personal care. We may become increasingly conscious of the lack of ability of a loved one to remember things or to carry out their daily activities of personal care. They may forget how to brush their teeth or comb their hair or wander away from their home. Perhaps the cruelest of all experiences associated with this disease is when one loved one can no longer recognize another—one spouse no longer recognizing another after years of togetherness or a parent no longer recognizing the child that they brought into the world. Parkinson's Disease, cancer, war wounds, paralysis, rape, and other diseases, illnesses, and ill-experiences can be equally cruel and inflict deep wounds into our souls and the souls of others.

Wounded healers, however, do not just look after their own wounds, and the wounds of family members and friends. They also are prepared to heal the wounds of strangers. They become prepared by realizing two primary insights about their own wounds: 1) their wounds are not a source of shame; and 2) their wounds are a source of healing.

When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we become wounded healers. We do not have to be embarrassed by our wounds. As previously noted, nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. Thus, there is no need to hide our woundedness from others.

The need to hide our woundedness, however, is often an initial reaction. It is not easy to admit to a divorce. We can feel rejected, depressed, and very insecure. Also, we are not sure what another person's reaction will be once they know. It is not easy to accept a sudden death of a loved one. We often feel numb, shocked, and broken. Also, it is very difficult to except that a loved one no longer knows who we are after a life long relationship. One or more of these experiences can leave us feeling alienated, separated, isolated, and lonely.

If we have wounds we are potential wounded healers. We can transition potential healing to actual healing by coping effectively with our feelings of alienation, separation, isolation, and loneliness and with the aftermath of life's tragedies. Every person who has grown as a result of coping with such feelings and life's tragedies now has the ability to heal.

The ability to heal stems from one's understanding of one's own pain. Understanding one's own pain provides the opportunity to convert weaknesses into strengths and to offer one's strength as a source of healing to those who are unable to cope effectively with feelings of alienation, separation, isolation, and loneliness and with the aftermath of life's tragedies. Thus, not only does the pain and suffering rise from the depths of a human condition that everyone shares, but healing as well.

Nouwen's last chapter is entitled the same as his book—"The Wounded Healer" as his book and one of his concluding remarks is one of his most insightful. He wrote

A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision.

He further notes that a wounded healer's primary task is not to take away the pain, but to deepen it to a level where it can be shared. This deepening process begins a shared journey that is further initiated by acknowledging that we share one another's wounds. We feel wounded when others are wounded. I feel with, and for, others because my shared journey prevents me from distancing myself from others.

The *Spiritual Canticle* by St. John of the Cross captures the power of one's healing presence towards another's woundedness. It is a poem that tells a story of love between two lovers—the bridegroom and the bride. It is a loving exchange filled with the images found in the *Song of Songs* between Christ the bridegroom and a bride who is us. Such images are used to express the pains, longings, and desires between the two.

In Stanza VIII, Verse 11, the Bridegroom compares himself to a stag. It is characteristic of the stag to climb to high places, and if wounded, race in search of refreshment and cool waters. If he hears the cry of his mate and senses that she is wounded, he "immediately runs to her to comfort and caress her." Among lovers, the wound of one is a wound for both, and the two have but one feeling. Thus, in other words, he says: "Return to me, my bride, because if you go about wounded . . . "I too, like the stag, will come to you wounded by your wound."

To be wounded by another's wound is to wait for, and listen to, the other's thoughts and feelings. It is also to pause in our care giving to feel the intensity of the other's woundedness. And when we do so, we come to experience a mutual process of healing, because each person is the wounded and the wounded healer.