

The Wounded Healer



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The Wounded Healer. This fascinating Jungian archetype offers rich possibilities for our lives. It is active in many of us, but how it plays out depends a great deal on the choices we make.

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Chiron, in Greek mythology, was a centaur-half man and half horse. The other centaurs are usually depicted as violent carousers, coarse and unthinking. But Chiron was sensitive, gentle and intelligent. He practiced medicine and was mentor to a number of famous figures in Greek mythology. In an altercation involving Hercules and hordes of those other centaurs, he was wounded with a poison-tipped arrow. Because his father was Zeus, the king of the gods, Chiron was immortal and could not die from the wound, so he had to live in excruciating pain. The stories of his medical work following his wounding from that poison arrow attribute an increase in both his skill and his compassion to the pain.

Eventually, he was able to surrender his immortality and die, but for the time he lived with terrible pain, he has come to be known as the “wounded healer”. Carl Jung, the famous early 20th century psychiatrist, used Chiron’s story as the basis for his own wounded healer archetype. An archetype is symbol for a pattern of behavior which we often emulate either consciously, or more likely, unconsciously. His idea was that a psychotherapist or mental health counselor, with a depth of empathy perhaps because of her or his own painful life experiences, stands in a position to understand the pain of others and potentially help them. This is a vast oversimplification, and it is critical to note that the capacity to harm is as great as the capacity to help. What makes the difference in being able to use pain to help rather than to hurt is the degree of self-awareness and ongoing self-examination on the part of the therapist. That self-awareness is usually the result of much close work and time spent with the pain of the wound.

There is a 2006 study by psychotherapist Allison Barr wherein close to three quarters of the people in the study, all of whom were mental health professionals, considered their own early psychological wounding experiences to be directly related to their career choice.

You may have noticed that Jung chose the word “heal” rather than “cure” for his archetype. Many people use the words “heal” and “cure” interchangeably, but there is a distinction. Don Murdock, a mental health counselor, refers to curing as a bio-chemical process. It implies a restoration of the person to the state they were in before they broke a bone or contracted a disease. Murdock says that a person may be cured and yet not healed. Healing is characterized by acceptance of reality and making peace with whatever limitations are the result of that reality. Healing comes with a deep sense of well-being even in the midst of what may well look like brokenness.¹ As nurse Susan McCabe says, a cure is an expected, narrowly defined destination. “The provider’s role is pass or fail.”² Healing is a process, the results are often unique to a particular individual, and again as McCabe says, “there’s always hope for healing”.

I can remember specific patients from my days of clinical pastoral counseling at St. Luke’s Hospital here in Bethlehem. I saw examples of people who were definitely not cured, but who I

¹ “Curing and healing are not the same things. Curing is a bio-chemical process. Broken bones and many diseases can be cured, i.e. restored to their previous condition. Healing is about wholeness. A person can experience a cure and yet, not be healed in any meaningful sense. Healing is characterized by acceptance of reality, even painful reality. It is about making peace with what is and doing the best one can within limitations. ... It is about a deep sense of well-being even in the midst of brokenness.” Don Murdock, cited on counseling page <http://www.wmeades.com/id213.htm>

² “A cure is an expected, narrowly defined destination. Healing is a journey with unexpected twists and turns.

For a cure, the provider’s role is pass or fail. As a part of healing, the caregiver accompanies the patient on their journey, meeting them where they are at any given time, and having a supportive role even to the end. There’s always hope for healing.”

-Susan McCabe, RN, 3.29.09

would call healed, and those who I would not call healed, whether or not they were cured. In my usual pastoral calls in hospital rooms, I visited with an older woman whom I found out later had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had perhaps a month to live. I didn't know when I visited with her that she was dying. I can't remember her name or her illness, but I remember her face and demeanor quite well. I don't expect people in a hospital bed to be very chipper, but she was radiant. She wanted me to call her by her first name and patted her bed for me to come sit beside her. She was inviting me into relationship with her. She was curious about ME, not concerned about herself at all. She knew she was dying, but nothing in her manner suggested bitterness. In retrospect, I would call her healed, although no one would call someone dying of a disease cured. By contrast, I also remember a late-night visit to a man who had lost his wife a few years before. His physical condition was uncomfortable, but manageable. However he was still reeling from a series of setbacks that had begun around the time of her death. He referred angrily to his "golden years". It would be hard to call him healed.

In her book, The Drama of the Gifted Child, Alice Miller describes the influence of writer Hermann Hesse's parents, Johannes and Marie, on his later functioning. Both Marie's father and Johannes were tyrannical and authoritarian. Marie described her childhood as "unhappy" and in her diary tells of how her will was broken at the age of four. Hermann was a headstrong and defiant child and was eventually sent to an institution for the care of "defectives" when he was fifteen. It was made clear to him that he could only return to his home if he "improved" or became more compliant. Eventually he did, but the severe depression that had begun to plague him in his

first year of school persisted for the rest of his life. Like any story of the transmission of hurt from one generation to another, this one is complex and has more wrinkles that I am presenting today. I share the story to illustrate how a person's unexamined and unhealed hurt can then become the source of their own capacity to cause hurt. In this case it is Marie whose wounds never healed and became a source of pain for someone else. While Hermann Hesse went on to considerable professional success and even fame, he never made peace with his mother and when she died after a long and painful illness, could not bring himself to go to her funeral. In spite of his brilliance, one hesitates to call him "healed".

I can also share with you an example of someone whose wounds have healed. The most recent inaugural poet, Richard Blanco, has quite a story of wounds inflicted in his childhood and of his road to recovery. From the time he was very little, his grandmother, one of his caregivers, psychologically abused him, denigrating any behavior of his that struck her as effeminate. Drinking through a straw was derided as unmanly. GI Joe figures, for some an emblem of boyhood, were considered dolls. Playing with them earned Richard the sneering label of "señorita". He was later in mastering riding a bike than her timetable for a real boy. When she telephoned him and he responded with his unchanged, boy's voice, she ridiculed him as a little girl. She called him faggot and Mamacita's boy and though this was before he was even sure what she meant, he knew that whatever she meant was very bad and that he shouldn't be that.

As he grew up and became more aware of his attraction for other men, the shame of being something his grandmother so disapproved of caused him to shut down emotionally. He was

diagnosed with dysthymia, a kind of pervasive, low-grade depression. The pain of his relationship with her had a large influence on the type of man and poet he would become, but after years of psychotherapy, acknowledging the pain and accepting all of the characteristics he had grown to have, he was able to stand at the hospital bed where she lay dying and realize that she had loved him the best she could, that no one is either all good or all bad, and as he says “she slips away silently, without a word, and I let her go.”³

It is important to note that the archetype of the wounded healer only tells of the POSSIBILITY for helping others to heal—it is not a promise. Like any archetype, it has its shadow side, the negative possibility. The shadow, when activated, makes further development very difficult. The shadow of the wounded healer is acceptance of victim status. It does not recognize a healthy acceptance of responsibility for the future; it can only lay blame on things in the past. The shadow may also lead to overextending oneself in the effort to help such that one doesn’t sufficiently care for one’s own needs.⁴ Being stuck in a victim role can lead to difficulty forgiving. The converse of that may be equally true--that difficulty forgiving leads to being stuck seeing oneself as a victim. Researchers who study forgiveness are very clear about what forgiveness is and is not: forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation requires all parties to work together. Forgiveness is one person’s response. Forgiveness can take place whether a relationship is

³ Richard Blanco, inaugural poet, from “Making a Man Out of Me” in Who’s Yer Daddy? Gay Writers Celebrate Their Mentors and Forerunners. 2012. University of Wisconsin Press.

⁴ Caroline Myss

resumed or not. Forgiving and forgetting, contrary to the popular expression, do not go together. You do not have to forget in order to forgive. You may well remember a wrong committed against you, but you no longer feel resentment over that wrong. Forgiveness does not imply condoning or excusing a wrongdoing. A wronged person may well take steps to ensure that they are not violated again. This brings me to the final thing that forgiveness is not. Forgiveness does not imply any kind of restitution. That may happen separately or it may not, but in any event, forgiveness is marked by what psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky calls “a shift in thinking”. This shift involves letting go of ill will.⁵ She and others summarize a process by which an individual may come to genuine forgiveness, involving remembering both the events that actually happened and your feelings about the event, understanding and empathy of the point of view of the person who wronged you and a concrete expression of forgiveness. This may take the form of a letter, whether or not it is sent, it may take the form of a journal entry or disclosure to a trusted friend. Some counselors may recommend that you recall a time when someone forgave you, but most emphasize that forgiveness is not a once and done, single point in time. Memories of the wrong may come up from time to time and it may be necessary to repeat the process and recall your choice to forgive.

Carol Pearson, Director of the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland and co-author of the book “What Story Are You Living?” that I quoted in the introduction to the meditation, also writes, “When people lack the ability to know what story they

⁵ <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/forgiveness/understanding> - downloaded on 1/22/2013 1:57 pm

are living, they also may fail to develop the qualities required to take adult responsibility for the state of their families, communities, and the larger world.” So I want to pose a question--what story are you living, and if the story of the wounded healer resonates with you, what ending are you creating?

The nurse I spoke of earlier, Susan McCabe, referred to healing as a process and not a destination. Healing is characterized by the acceptance of one’s pain and the capacity to grow from it. The capacity for growth comes with self awareness and with that awareness comes the possibility for choice. Whatever has happened in any of our lives, we always choose our emotional response.

Is your own story more like the dying woman I spoke of who was, despite her circumstances, was hospitable and radiant, or like the man in the hospital bed, embittered by the hand life had dealt him? Will you be like Hesse, still so angry with his mother that he could not bring himself to go to her funeral, or will you be like Blanco? Despite the abuse he suffered from his grandmother, he was able to let go of the resentment and find acceptance and peace. We choose which story we will live. May we be wise in that choice.