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Wounded Healer: A Spiritual Autobiography

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The underworld of human life is undeniably painful, messy, dark, and overwhelming. The sight of it can be disfigured and horrendous; thus, extreme measures are taken to deny, ignore, cover up, and run away from it. However, the darkness of human life is an important ingredient that gives birth to understanding, humility, compassion, and beauty. The key is to look at our wounds with compassion, honesty, and vulnerability. There is great worth in being vulnerable with our wounds. It takes courage to sit with, feel, and examine our wound because it pains us in the most sacred place of our heart. However, when we allow ourselves to be in mercy of our wound, we find something precious and valuable in it. I was able to arrive at my findings by reflecting on the movement of my experiences and wounds. I sense that one of the most important avenues to our spirituality, growth, and wholeness, is through our wounds. This is particularly valuable for a therapist to take note, as we are often referred to as Wounded Healers. The purpose of sharing this article is that as therapists, we need to know our own vulnerabilities and wounds in order to acknowledge, appreciate, and hear the qualities and values of another's experiences and struggles. This article tells of my unique story, as I journey through confusion, sorrow and defeat; and in doing so, discover the hidden beauty of the wounded soul.

KEYWORDS wounded healer, spirituality, vulnerability, sanctification

The story of the soul began long before our existence. Our story is enfolded within the world story, and the world story is wrapped around our private story. The moral and spiritual texture of each story is the progressive embodiment of set of questions, some conscious, some unconscious. The more consciously we address the questions of our lives, the more we will experience our lives as meaningful.

-James Hollis

My story begins with listening to my mother's story. At age eight she lost her father and was abandoned by her mother. My mother was pulled out of a school that she so loved. She was left isolated and under the ownership of others. The stories she told were of injustice, cruelty, repressed hopes and dreams, and lack of love and care. At age eighteen, she found herself in complicated relationship with my father. For reasons of her own, my mother decided to stay with my father. It probably had a lot to do with her still aching heart, sufferings, and undigested life. Her heart remembered what pained her the most. She was determined to protect her children from that same fate. She was determined that her children will grow up with parents. My family dynamic was strange and very broken. Mom was devoted and sacrificed every inch of herself to care for the family. She struggled to fulfill multiple roles as a provider, a homemaker, and a mother. Dad faithfully obsessed over mom, afraid she would leave him. Preoccupation was his work and life. They fought all the time, and the frequency and intensity grew day by day. It was passionate, enraged, violent, painful, and still vivid in my mind. Despite the unjust hardship, mom endured - out of fear, love of her children, for a hope of a family she never had, or by powers and forces beyond herself and her understanding.

Interwoven in the complexity of my parents' life, my story emerged. In particular, my mother's story broke my heart and I empathized with her. Her story became my story and my life. My childhood was spent hurting for my mother's unjust life and wanting her to be happy. Stories she told were bigger than what a child can contain, control, or navigate. Being a child, I knew very well my limitations and capabilities. I am unsure how I knew, but I started to pray to God. The prayers were not up, far way, to an above being; but rather intimate, personal, somewhere near my heart. Hart (2003) explains, *in spite of their naïveté in the ways of the world, children have remarkable capacity to see the world with their heart. Children have the capability to open to deep currents of consciousness. And through that opening come a pearl of insight appears* (p. 23). In my naïve and childish way, I prayed a simple and earnest prayer: "My mom needs to be loved. My dad is not capable. I am only a child. But you are God, bigger than anything. If you love her, it will be enough. So please love my mother." Not having anywhere else to go to, I turned to a divine power for comfort and guidance. According to Hart, children are able to enter into depths of consciousness naturally and regularly. But contemporary psychology underestimate the complexity of the human spiritual life. As a society, we need to restore the idea of our larger nature. We need to recover our spiritual life because it is the very essence of who we are. Spirituality is the sea within which we live, and its water is that makes up most of who we are. Rather than thinking ourselves as human beings occasionally having spiritual experiences; it is helpful to think of ourselves as spiritual beings having human experiences. As a child, we knew this, as an adult, we must not forget this (Hollis, 2003, p.16).

I do not recall much of what took place during my early teenage years. What I do remember is moving around a lot. In mom's attempt to end the chaotic relationship with dad, she moved my younger brother and I out of our home. I remember staying at homes of relatives, temporary shelters, and finally to a rundown apartment. Mom was under a lot of pressure trying to adjust to her new life. I tried my best to not add to her already difficult life. However, inside I was hurting, confused, and overwhelmed. At night when all were asleep, I locked myself in the restroom. Every faucet was turn on, letting water run to mute the sound, and I wailed holding on to my aching heart. I had no words, I did not even understand why. I just wept. It must have been my way of dealing with the *fate* given to me. Moore (2005) wrote: *Fate play a crucial role in most dark nights, and it pay to have respect for the role of fate and destiny in our lives. We are not entirely in charge. Sometimes it may be our task to cooperate with signs of our destiny, even when we would rather move in a different direction. Where you fit in the scheme of things is not your choice. Your job is to deal honestly and generously with the fate given to you* (p. 298).

My mother describes this time of life as being on a boat, in the middle of the ocean, with no one and no place to turn to. In the mercy of the wind and the waves, our desperate and broken family was blown, tossed and turned, and landed on a Presbyterian Church. We found ourselves at the end of our limits, and found religion. As Moore (2005) puts it, *you exceed the tight limits of you self and discover what it is to live religiously* (p. 303). I liked the idea of having a Heavenly Father. He was powerful, good, loving, and dependable. He had qualities that I longed for with my own physical father. I wanted to be protected and loved by this Heavenly Father. Jesus embodied pain, suffering, and healing. He healed the sick, made the blind see, casted out demons, and preformed numerous miracles. He was gentle, kind, and a compassionate healer. I felt understood and comforted by this deity that borne the suffering of the world. My sorrows felt at home. I immersed myself in the teachings of the Bible and the church. My heart understood pain, limitations, and that we were not entirely in charge of our own life. My deficiency lead me to rely on God for hope, guidance, source of strength, and belonging.

Once off to college, for the first time in my life I was away from my dysfunctional and burdensome family. I was alone to live my life independently. What I thought was freedom however, I found myself imprisoned by something unexpected. Much like when *Eve* bit into the *Apple of Knowledge* and realized her nakedness; I saw myself, where I came from, my brokenness, and my demons. I saw my naked, wounded, and horrendous self. A heart once filled with innocence, beauty, generosity, faith, and love has turned dark, ugly, and cold. It must have been there all along, but I just did not realize it until then. Here, I found my battle with depression and self-torment. Here, I found what Moore (2005) described as the *dark night of the soul*. The capability of my own dark thoughts scared me. It gripped me in a hopeless defeat and held me at a slump that I could not escape or control. I could not turn to anyone. I could not turn to God, the way I was able to before. I felt guilty, ashamed, and evil. I stopped going to church, and then all other activities. Eventually, I locked myself in my darkness; confused and paralyzed.

The winter of my junior year, depressed and desperate, I made a resolution to go to church every Sunday no matter what. I attended a small church and met a pastor. I did not realize then but, I met a person who would shine a light deep into my heart. He recognized the deep dark night that was shadowing and over powering me. He offered counseling sessions, Bible Studies, and assigned books for me to read. On many occasions, I saw the pastor pray. He was praying so hard that it looked painful. It must have been this kind of service to the church and his passion for God that made an impression on me. I knew from my previous teachings that God is love but the pastor embodied it in a way I can actually see and feel. He often said, “love is wanting the best for that person and doing what I can to get you there.” This stranger cared enough to notice me, and genuinely wanted me to be well. He filled my heart with what he cherished and loved the most, God. He poured himself out to the church he served and he left my life, never to be seen again. I have been in romantic relationships later in my life where men claimed their true love. But their love seems selfish and shallow compared to what I received from the pastor. There was something about his heart that was beautiful. It was pure, true, and good; while having depth, intelligence, and color. In my heart, he remains as the most beautiful person.

Once I graduated from college, I realized that I was no longer a child. I grew lonely living a life in the bodiless and intangible spiritual world. I ventured out to find love in a form of a physical man. I met a guy who was eager to start a family. I did not know him very well. I had one sit down dinner with him and his family. They prayed together and shared their meal as a family. Hunger grew in me. I wanted what he had - a loving family. I was convinced that with him I would be able to do this because he already had it. The Inuit Folktales tells a story of the *Skeleton Woman*: *No one remembered what she was supposed to have done to so offend her father. But no one could forget what he did to her. Down, down in the icy depths she fell; where the sea creatures feasted on her flesh. Her legends grew up, that the bay was hunted and none of the local fishermen will go near it. But one day a young man came in search of food. He didn't know what laid beneath the surface. He thought he caught great a fish, but what he raised was something that terrified him.*

Like the fisherman who did not know what laid beneath the surface, what he caught was something he did not expect. Beneath the surface appearance, I had a darkness; a dysfunctional family, a wounded heart, and dark shadows. He did not like it, frankly, it terrified him. What he discovered was unfit for his well-adjusted, bright, and sanitary life. Unlike the story of the *Skeleton Woman* who became whole, and lived happily together with the fisherman; mine had a tragic ending. Despite my whole-hearted desire, I was too broken to make a family. The relationship ended dramatically. With it, something in me died. I grieved the death of the relationship, but

something deeper was killing me. In the tender place of my heart, was an earnest and vulnerable desire. The *pitiful jumble of bone* desired to feel the warm of an embrace. However, I understood the hideous sight of the skeleton woman. I quietly murdered my own hope and desire. It was painful. I felt an inner deadness.

My dark nights became darker. I was gripped by the phenomena of anxiety attacks. Overwhelming fear and anxiety engulfed me. I did not even know what I was so scared of, but it was terrifying and unbearable. I felt like I would lose my mind. Dark nights frightened me, which kept me from sleeping. When I did sleep, I had nightmares and I woke up in sweats. I wished my anxiety was a nightmare that I can just wake up from, but it was my reality that I could escape. I sought help from friends, family, counselors, and well-intending doctors; who prescribed medication and sent me home. I eventually learned to deal with my anxiety by stop running from it, and letting it overtake me. The most difficult challenge is to let the process take place, and yet that is the only release from the pressure of the dark night. I let fear consume me over and over again until it hammered me out of my sensory. There was no other way. In the hands of anxiety, I dangled helplessly.

I have come to live and function with my dark nights to the best of my abilities. My interest in human psychology and my own struggles lead me to a career in a behavior health clinic. From that momentum, I gained the courage to apply to a master's program at Regis University. I am finding that there is so much material to learn that it is difficult to keep up and process what I am learning. Out of many, I am surprised that the matter of the heart is acknowledged. The heart really is a thing of beauty. It knows so much. It's full of wisdom, secretes, depth, and understanding uncontainable by mere words. It is able to feel and understand the vibrations of the world, as well as, the vibration of our own deep soul. The heart is sometimes mentioned in religious practices. However, it is vague and requires a lot of faith to try to understand it. I am pleasantly surprised that the heart is tackled academically- To study and value it is astonishing. In our modern world of science, logic, and evidence this approach is powerful, and maybe the only approach to get through the modern minds. It may be a necessary effort to bring us back our own consciousness of the heart, soul, and powers.

The quality of the heart is much like our dreams. The most vivid and moving dream is forgotten within few hours. Like so, enlightenment and realization touches and awake our heart. However, when the moment passes, it is difficult to describe exactly what we experienced. We are even limited in how we talk about the heart because we lack language to describe the spiritual world. The matters of the heart do not develop or serve the same purpose as the intellectual life does. The heart is not an intellectual concept, but rather a purification of emotions, morals, and values. Its orientation is not on knowledge, but on the spiritual life. The heart does not work like the body. When our body is in pain, the goal is to heal. In other words, to get rid of the pain. We would be mistaken to think that the end result of the heart's pain is final victory and end of all suffering. The truth is, there is no such thing as healing. At least not what we understand as healing, the removal of pain and discomfort. The purpose of pain is for moral development, maturity, and a way which allows our experience of life to take place more intensely. We learn to be fully human by suffering through it. Pain, evil, darkness, guilt, as well as goodness, beauty, joy may be necessary for us to become complete human beings.

Depression has always been an intimate and private suffering. It is formed side by side with our personal tragic experiences, our wounded heart, and our ability or inability to deal with pain. We automatically assume depression is inside us, personally and individually. Our logic tells us, "I am depressed, the depression is caused by me, therefore I am depression." The doctors,

professionals, and the dominate society all agree, so they give us pills we take to fix our problem. Hillman (1999) states: Our culture bias attaches a “me” to whatever happens. Whether properties, possessions or very our experiences, ownership is our way of life. Psychology interiorize these events and make them personal. The night terrors become that, and only that; they remain humanized and do not lead to gods. They are my problem for which I see my therapist or take my sleeping pills. Therapy interiorizes strong affects, reflecting them back into the subjective “me”. Now, we are more than convinced that we are the problem; each on his own. So, we hide in secrecy to deal with our problems in solitude. We suffer quietly, turn to addictions, and occupy ourselves with things to numb, hide, distract, cope, and live with our very private and personal problems. The irony is, we fear rejection, isolation, and not being able to belong; therefore, we withdraw in solitude to suffer silently.

The tricky truth *is that the problem is the problem, not we are the problem*. Depression is an age-long phenomenon much older, cleverer, and more powerful than us. Depression happens between us and the world. Yes, some aspect of depression belongs to us, but we need not forget that depression is also the *world story*. When we assign problems, like depression, to an individual we are setting him up with an opponent much greater than one man’s capability. Depression is a communal problem; the way we heal is a communal process. The problem is not *my problem that I need to figure out and deal with on my own; but our problem*. What relief, freedom, and power this gives us! Additionally, it brings life back to the world and allows it be alive again! We become aware of the powers, forces, and pheromones beyond ourselves- invisible to eyes but we feel them with our heart, soul, and emotions. There are different ways to navigate powerful experiences. We can internalize it, or externalize it. The difference between “I have a problem” verses, “we have a problem” is huge. We can encounter the power of what we are experiencing by storytelling- Make it a part of the *world story*.

The idea of forces, powers, and phenomenon beyond ourselves can be a scary thought. It makes us vulnerable and our desire to want control can no longer be. Maybe this is one reason why we don’t let it pass our minds and logic. However, pretending that it is not there will not make it go away. It is necessary, rational, and a privilege to think about such things. Humility is required to realize that things are larger than us. We are humbled by pain, depression, guilt, and dark nights as they chip away at us. Suffering is a sanctification process to break, cut out, and refine us; to be more human, grow, serve a higher purpose, encounter something larger than us, and an avenue to unexplainable phenomenon. A path to get there is by suffering through pain. The trouble is, the heart does not work like the body. We cannot medicate and rationalize bad moods away. When we do, we rob ourselves of phenomenon, powers, and beauty beyond what our body and logic can comprehend. The soul is part of something larger, it longs to be part of something larger. Hollis (2003) wrote: *No matter how small our role, each of us is a carrier of cosmic energy and a crucial part of a great, unfolding pattern. We will not see the end of that pattern, but we need to carry our own part of it to the end. No mosaic exists without its separate, brilliant fragments. Somethings is living us, even more than we are living it* (p. 22).

I am still in the process of making sense of my experiences, dark nights, spirituality, powers and phenomenon, community, human suffering, and the profession of counseling. As I study the field of human psychology, I hope things will come together to make more sense. I learned to accept and live with my dark nights, but am not yet in love with it. We saw a chip of a mother who lost her beloved son to cancer. To her surprise, she come to love the cancer that took her son away because it was a part of him. It may be our fate to suffer, yet with proper vision, we may see the beauty in the pain and understand that it comes from Heaven. We have to be a special person

to love it but if you do, we may know what the notation of Heaven is all about (Moore, 2005, p. 299). Can we treat suffering with respect? Can we live with dark nights in dignity? Can we love our pain as the mother loved cancer?

Mediocrity is when we fail to let our inner brilliance shine. We do this by doing only what is necessary and sufficient. In other words, *by walking in shoes too small for our feet, or refusing to follow our calling* (Hollis, 2003, p.16). When our inner spark show itself in our personality, way of life, values, and expression we can live life in brilliance. It is when we live in personal brilliance, referred as *scintilla*, which makes life worth living (Moore, 2005, p. 313). The beauty of the moon is seen in the night sky; its luminosity can only be appreciated in the dark. As so, in the dark nights of our soul we discover our own light and how it shines. Here we uncover our scintilla, a spark that lies at the heart of each one of us. I would like to think that the story of a wounded healer is a journey of love. We come to love what is difficult to love in our own wounded heart, and somehow found beauty there. We discovered its secrets, depths, worth, and found it beautiful. We have known suffering, known loss, known limits, known the underworld, and out of the depths found that which shines with brilliance. We have become the wounded healer.

You become the wounded healer, someone who has made the descent and know the territory. You take on depth of color and range of feeling. Your intelligence is now more deeply rooted and not dependent only on facts and reason. Your darkness has given you character and color and capacity. Now you are free to make a real contribution. It is a gift of your dark night of the soul!

—Thomas Moore

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