

Chapter 1

Sharing Pain

Are you willing to share your own pain with others? Do you know when to let your pain plumb the depths of your soul, allowing the pain to help you grow spiritually? Are you sensitive to when it is possible to move beyond your pain to experience newness in life and ministry?

In his classic volume, *The Wounded Healer*, Henri J. M. Nouwen writes, “Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The main question is not, ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”¹

The last sentence is most meaningful in describing an important part of what it means to be a healthy, authentic religious leader: “When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing . . .” When we stop trying to hide and feel shame for having our pain, we . . . When we are able to share our pain with others, we become wounded healers, and when we become wounded healers, becoming authentic with others, a new freedom of openness and ministry is the result.

“When the Wounded Emerge as Healers” was the title of a commencement address that Professor Kimberley C. Patton shared with graduates of Harvard Divinity School. It was published in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. In a very helpful way, her words address the question, “What can we learn from the experience of pain?” Speaking directly to the graduates, she said, “Even if a broken heart does not lie in your past or present, it awaits you in your future, at some place, at some time when you will almost certainly be unprepared. But in myth,

ritual, and in theology, the broken heart is not a regrettable symptom of derailment, but rather is a starting point of anything that matters. . . . The religious imagination reveals the broken heart as the very best means to wisdom and growth, even when it disrupts the dreams and goals that have inspired us, even when it scatters the ducks we have so carefully lined up in a row. . . .²

One who was feeling the effects of having his dreams disrupted and his "ducks scattered" was Joe.

Now in his early 50's, Joe had been in the ministry for over 25 more than twenty-five years—beginning during his seminary years when he was the pastor of a small congregation near his faith tradition's school of theology. He was finding "success" as he moved quite smoothly through four congregations over those years with increasing salaries to match the increasing sizes of the communities of faith, along with the anticipated increasing difficulties; but then he found himself in significant distress in the sixth year of ministry at his fifth church. He was finding considerable resistance to his innovative ideas with a variety of criticisms coming his way. Joe and his wife were struggling in their marriage as well, as the younger of their two children dropped out of college, vocationally lost, in the throes of drug addiction, and angst-filled in the shadow of his older sister. Perhaps most significant, in the midst of all of these difficulties, Joe had lost much of his most-trusted sense of creativity in his preaching, his reserve of compassion in his pastoral care, and his strength of confidence-humility in his leadership. Now, after almost two years of being in this dark and lonely place—even feeling estranged from God—all he could imagine were ways to transition out of ministry. Looking back, he was able to see both opportunities in the next congregation that cushioned his need for another honeymoon experience and a pattern of avoidance

that had actually served him fairly well. Perhaps he ~~only had~~ could do ~~only~~ four years of ministry in any one church before he began to hit the wall, feeling the increase of stress and anxiety, and then ~~he would~~ consider another location to serve and flourish briefly once again.

Joe's ducks were, indeed, scattered. His pain was medicated by avoidance as he was always looking for the greener grass in the next location, the next community of faith. Joe's brokenness was in full view when he came to the *Sacred Chaos* seminar, which is how all of the participants in *Sacred Chaos* come to us. They are unable to see any value to what they are experiencing. They are broken leaders. In the words of one of our participants, "I can no longer lead. . . . All that I can do is follow, going through the motions, meeting my responsibilities, without joy, and without hope for a better future."

A broken heart is not something to be desired; it causes terrible pain. But a broken heart also becomes a softer heart, more aware of the pain of others. Again, Professor Patton writes, "It is highly likely that during such brokenhearted, disorienting times, illusions will shatter, old ideas will be burned up; old ways of being will dissolve and the one thing or person or way of life that we thought we could not live without will be taken from us. These are times when we will learn compassion . . . times when the unbearably wounded will themselves emerge as healers." If the wounds do not turn to bitterness, wounds in the heart can become a place where God works to bring about tenderness and kindness and moves us to compassion. And it is only in retrospect that we are able to identify how a broken heart has moved us to compassion.

I once heard Mary Cosby, the co-founder of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., speak about the need for pain to be shared within a beloved community. She told the story about a new pastor in the church where her mother was an elder. Just prior to his first

Sunday, the pastor went to visit Mary's mother and asked her, "If you could say one thing to me before I enter the pulpit of that great church on Sunday morning, what would it be?" She responded, "Remember this: Each person that you see, each pair of eyes that you look into as you are speaking, is sitting beside his or her own pool of tears."

Each of us sits beside our own pool of tears. Some pools are deeper than others, to be sure, but all of us have a pool of our own. Persons who choose to avoid their pain by denial will have difficulty reaching into the hearts of others who are experiencing pain. Pain needs to be brought to speech and shared, and as a result, the tears of transformation will be shed, and we will begin the process of making the chaos we are in become sacred. In the words of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero, "There are many things that can only be seen by through eyes that have cried."

As difficult as it was for Sarah to share her pain, she was finally able to talk about what she had been experiencing.

All Sarah ever imagined vocationally for herself was becoming a pastor. Growing up in a loving family and feeling close to the Holy Other as long as she could remember, she simply wanted to serve God and God's people. Though her faith tradition had allowed women to be ordained equally alongside men for a few decades, she was still quite aware that there were folks in her church, her second assignment since completing seminary, who were still uncomfortable—still getting used to having a woman as a leader; after all, now thirty-four years old, she was the first female clergy person to ever be a pastor of this 150-year-old congregation. The major experiences-moments of discomfort that she experienced from her parishioners were the subtle, sort-of-joking, and not-so-humorous gestures around her singleness. They were Those parishioners

were always trying to "set her up" with a potential husband. Of course, what was fundamentally painful for Sarah was her need to keep her sexual orientation secret; and, though originally, she believed that the trade-off was doable and worth it because her denomination did not allow lesbians to be married or ordained, she was finding herself more and more lonely for companionship. This then led to her need to painfully suppress her longings, live increasingly in an inauthentic manner, and face a downward spiral of living a life without her genuine human needs being met. Her incapacity to compensate for her dilemmas any longer had led her to notice an advertisement in ~~t~~*The Christian Century* for a Sacred Chaos seminar. She arrived with significant questions: 1) Should she abandon the faith tradition of her childhood and explore a tradition more open to the LGBTQ community? 2) Should she remain and stand up for what she believed was a matter of justice—joining others who were also challenging the status quo? 3) Should she ~~simply~~ depart from service to the local church and transition ~~into~~ chaplaincy or ~~simply~~ leave organized religion altogether?

As we have learned from our *Sacred Chaos* participants, the two mistakes that we make with pain are: (1) ~~W~~*we* spend all our spiritual and emotional energy trying to get out of it, or (2) ~~W~~*we* perpetuate it because we define our personhood through the eyes of martyrdom. We can avoid a healthy plan of healing and spiritual growth by taking either of these paths. The processing of pain in a healthy way begins when we become sensitive to when it is time to stay on the cross in order to plumb the depths of our spirits, and when it is time to climb down from that cross, prepared to continue along the path of spiritual growth.

Over the years, there have been many models that try to give us a visual understanding of the experience of emotional pain, especially how we have come to recognize the healing journey

~~of as one from~~ loss and grief toward acceptance and new beginnings. The model below, “The Quest for Wholeness,” is an amalgam of several ~~various~~ models along with the author’s experience of how facing one’s painful and difficult emotions, rather than avoiding or denying them, is the path toward wholeness. It is important to note the difference between wholeness and perfection. ~~Perfection as is~~ an ideal that is always out of reach. ~~And wholeness as the embrace is embracing of~~ all that simply is in a person’s life—strengths and weaknesses; successes and failures; gifts and vulnerabilities; passions and repulsions; faithfulness and sinfulness. Just as every emotion, painful or pleasant, has something important to tell us ~~or~~ to teach us, every life situation—no matter how enjoyable or how distressful—is part of the overall journey toward the acceptance of the whole of our lives ~~where in which~~ everything is welcomed. This is, indeed, the story of redemption—not about what awaits us on the other side of death, but ~~about~~ what is here and now as part of our ongoing transformation to become the best versions of ourselves as intended by our Creator all along.

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As we travel through our seasons of pain in our quest for relief, most of us will jump from the “~~H~~“healthy” to the “~~U~~“unhealthy” and back again many times. It requires a conscious effort to evoke ourselves into sustaining the awareness of pain as avoidance is always the temptation in the moment; and it is the power of this choice that opens the way for the deep and lasting work of healing in our lives. There are periods in our journeys when avoiding or forgetting or denying is the only way that we can survive . . . at least for a while. Hopefully, if we have found our blessed community, we will move back to telling and re-telling our stories and continue our journeys toward ongoing transformation and wholeness.