

Wounded Healers

In every profession there are certain key indicators that tell you things are not going according to plan. I'm not sure that I've been a minister long enough to know what those signs are in ministry but in a previous career as a teacher I knew that if you saw children disappearing out of a class room window, something was amiss. And something certainly was amiss one day when a small group of 13 year olds from a class I had been attempting to teach, found their way out of a first floor drama studio window, led by a young man called Jimmy Jepson. Jimmy was a child much talked of in the staff room because of his challenging behaviour and argumentative family. Jimmy had for months been making my life painful, the lessons he attended went so badly wrong that I was silently relieved that day when he led the escape committee out of the window. Except that wasn't the end of it – they were quickly caught by the deputy head, who had found them shinning down a drainpipe and they were brought back to me. The lesson had not been going well with the remaining children either – my key was stuck in the stock room door.

But when Jimmy Jepson was brought back reluctantly into the room, muttering an apology, little did either of us know that our relationship was about to take a turn for the better. Firstly the stuck key gave Jimmy a rare chance to shine. He came from a long line of burglars on the once infamous Manor Estate in Sheffield. He quickly and deftly nursed the stuck key, rocked it gently and lo and behold the door opened and the key was released.

And then as he triumphantly passed the key back to me Jimmy spotted one of my fingers, laughed, held up one of his fingers and shouted 'Na then miss, tha's gorra bent finger just like mine'.

And it was true. Jimmy Jepson and I had something in common after all.

When I was two I put my finger in a bicycle chain, turned the pedal and chopped the end off it. My mum wrapped the end of my finger in a hankie and rushed me to hospital where it was sewn on again. The operation was a success but this bent nail is a life long reminder to take care when putting fingers near bike chains. And Jimmy had chopped off the end of his same finger in a door when he was little and it had been sewn back on but had grown bent just like mine. Ever after when Jimmy and I were in a classroom together, I only had to wiggle my crooked finger at him and he would laugh and settle down to work.

And why tell this story? – because I think it holds a message about life for us all – we humans get wounded in life one way or another and our wounds can help us connect with one another.

The image of a wounded healer is an ancient and powerful one. Long ago, in ancient Greece, the story was told of the great hero god Heracles who was invited to the cave of the centaur Pholos. Chiron was there that day. Chiron was known to be the most wise and benevolent of centaurs and a great master of healing. Heracles had brought along a flask of strong wine to the gathering in thanks for the centaurs' hospitality but the smell of the wine attracted other centaurs who – in a manner more reminiscent of a northern city on a Saturday night – became drunk and started to fight. In the struggles that ensued it is said that poor Chiron was inadvertently struck in the knee by an arrow shot by Heracles. Chiron was well able to instruct Heracles in the art of treating the wound but alas it was not that simple. The arrow had been tipped with a poison from the Hydra – a many headed monster nearly impossible to slay – and Chiron's wounded knee would therefore never be fully healed. Capable of healing others, the greatest of healers was unable to heal himself – and being immortal, Chiron lives forever with this wound, as the archetypal wounded healer, able to train and assist others yet never freed from his own wounds.

We live in a society that values success and perfection and banishes imperfection to the shadow lands – in psychological terms we repress that which is uncomfortable, unattractive, difficult, embarrassing. How great is our need for people who are prepared to accept themselves and others in our totality – 'warts n all', as the saying goes.

We live in a society that holds on to an illusion that everything can be fixed. But we know in our heart of hearts that it can't. Machines can be fixed, sometimes, buildings can be fixed, sometimes – but we can't 'fix' people. Yes we make great strides in medicine but life itself is a terminal matter – we are not the immortal creatures of Greek myths. And our wounds are not always of a physical kind. I think it would be unusual to find in a room of people like us today anyone who did not have a sense of being wounded in some way by their life experiences.

I don't know what your symptoms of this might be –

- for me I sometimes notice that I hold back from leaping into some of life's experiences because of what happened when I tried that before,
- or I find myself reacting too quickly or too sharply to something quite innocent – as though an invisible nerve has been touched,
- or I realise that a life experience is repeating itself again – that an issue I thought I had dealt with is back again, once more on the agenda.

Whatever your version of this is – I do believe we are all wounded in one way or another – and that it is the wounds that we are unaware of that may cause problems to ourselves and in our relationships with others. Wounds need to be brought into consciousness – healing is helped by fresh air and light.

And though much healing can take place alone, perhaps in our dreams when we are asleep or as we sit in contemplation, there are times when we need the attention of another for healing to occur – healing not perhaps in the sense of curing – because a cure may not always be possible – but healing is possible – healing in the sense of becoming whole and complete, healing in the sense of integration of what is and acceptance of it. And the attention of another can help greatly at these times. John O'Donohue describes this act of being with another as a 'soul presence' – allowing ourselves to become a conduit through which love and care and concern can travel through to where they are most needed. This is what we are doing when we listen to one another, when we can be with another person, or even with ourselves, in the most difficult moments, when we can simply BE – without any hope or pretence of making things better, but with a profound willingness to share their experiences, staying open to the pain of existence, witnessing this unique version of life – this for me is healing, real healing. Author Alice Walker wrote beautifully of this process "We are all" she wrote "substantially flawed, wounded, angry, hurt, here on earth. But this human condition so painful to us, and in some ways shameful – because we feel we are weak when the reality of ourselves is exposed – this human condition is made much more bearable when it is shared, face to face, in words that have expressive human eyes behind them."

It was Carl Jung who more than anyone else utilised the wounded healer archetype in his work with people. Jung used the myth of Chiron to describe the process he believed we all need to undergo if we are to be fully who we are – we have to work through our own wounded-ness – rather than becoming stuck in those wounded places and continually recreating them. We have to journey down into those dark places within us, feel the pain, accept what is, almost give up – acknowledge our own powerlessness – only then do new shoots of possibility start to emerge – in Jungian terms a transformation can begin in the psyche when our ego self lets go – and it is that deeper self that links us one to another – and to the transcendent, to the divine, whatever that means for us. At that deeper level we are all one. And at that level our wounds can be seen as transformatory forces – containing great riches for those who will undergo the exploration. Furthermore, Jung underlined the importance for those who care for others, those who seek to heal the brokenness of others, he stressed the vital importance of our tending first to our own problems, of knowing well our own brokenness before we minister to the brokenness of others. A key message I think for all of us carers – care first for yourselves.

Carolyn Myss is a fascinating writer and speaker, a medical intuitive and healer – someone who has a very personal take on modern life. I heard her speak a few years ago at a conference at Findhorn and her words have stayed with me. She spoke of the importance of people helping one another to become more open about their wounds, be those wounds physical, emotional, spiritual – this she said was the task of our age. Many of us will have been brought up by parents for whom it would have been terribly shameful to speak of emotional distress or of difficulties in life. That old answer to the question 'how are you?' - 'mustn't grumble' – has become the stuff of comedy routines. Yet 'mustn't grumble' was one of the corner stones of our society and lingers even today. Some of us remember a time when disabilities were seen as shameful – if you had something wrong with you, you stayed inside, you didn't complain if you couldn't get your wheel chair on a bus or in a toilet. As is often the way with us humans – we have now come full circle – comedians now mock our present day answer to that 'how are you?' question. The new age person who replies with a long list of their woes, both physical and psychic, along with a report on the troubled state of their inner child. Carolyn Myss' warning was exactly this – don't get stuck at the stage where all attention is focussed on the wounds – work through that stage and move on.

Perhaps we do all have within us a troubled child – but we also have within us the wounded healer – the one who knows their own wounded-ness and can therefore bring a healing presence into their relationships with others. And that healing presence has at its core a belief in our ability to work through our wounds and then to transcend them – you remember Jimmy Jepson, the naughty school boy who joined us at the start of this address – Jimmy and I are more than our bent finger nails – yet it was our fingers that brought us together and helped us form a relationship of value to us both. I end this address with the hope that all our wounds may help us grow and connect and ultimately transcend them – for growth and connection and transcendence are perhaps what these strange and sometimes quite magical lives of ours are all about.

Amen.