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Margaret Naughton

Wounded Healers in Recovery – a Church of and for the Future

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Wounded Healers in Recovery – a Church of and for the Future

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As a healthcare chaplain, I am particularly interested in the concept of woundedness, especially my own and how this impacts my life, my ministry, my engagement with the world and indeed with my church community. There is something humbling and frightening in equal measures about discovering that we are indeed wounded, that we are people with wounds and hurts and scars from the journey of life. Self-woundedness was something I learned about when I first engaged in the CPE training process nearly twelve years ago. An uncomfortable zone to find oneself in as anyone who has ever undertaken a unit or two of CPE will know! No one wants to be wounded, to be broken, to be vulnerable truth, be told. Now as a provisional CPE supervisor myself, I play some small role in helping others come to know, understand, integrate and embrace their own woundedness. It is a challenging process, to face ones' own brokenness, a painful realisation of the vulnerability of the human condition and of their own condition.

The term 'wounded healer' was first coined by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung and was later used as a concept by Henri Nouwen in relation to woundedness in ministry. During a teaching session a few weeks ago, a student of mine became very upset. She was resistant to the idea of woundedness, especially around seeing herself not only as a wounded healer but a failed one at that. Her personal narrative is complex and her life has had many challenges and struggles. As we listened to her pain, I challenged her to see herself not as wounded but rather as a wounded healer in *recovery*.

She and her peers were surprised by this and in truth, I too was somewhat surprised by the image I had formed and the benefit such a concept would have for all of us in the myriad of contexts we find ourselves in ministry. For me, I have sensed a triggering of real reflection and introspection since then around all of this. What does it really mean to be a wounded healer in recovery?

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The harsh reality is that we all have a story. We all have an experience of hurt and pain that has wounded us. There are events, moments, people in our lives who have scarred us, changed us, placed us into a realm of painful vulnerability. We have all felt weak, lonely, broken by the experience of our own woundedness and indeed that of others. We have all felt on the periphery of life at some point and experienced a need for the scales of life to recalibrate.

In a society that can value strength above vulnerability, it can be challenging to admit a sense of woundedness. There can be a reticence to speak of being a wounded self, a person fragile and struggling to keep the head above the daily parapet. It can be so hard to say ‘I am struggling’, ‘I am not doing okay’, or ‘I could do with some help to make sense of myself and my struggles’.

MINISTRY

To take a step further, in ministry it can be even more challenging to admit a sense of woundedness. Do people want to be led by ‘wounded’ leaders, priests or pastors? Will they have faith in pastoral guides who do not have their own houses in order? Can wounded people lead with authority and in turn, can they earn the respect of those to whom they minister?

I would content that ‘wounded’, integrated, self-accepting leaders offer a wonderful *gift* to God’s people. I sense that in ministry, woundedness, vulnerability and a degree of brokenness is actually a key strength. Within the context of the healthcare chaplaincy world, I would surmise that patients or their family do not really want to meet someone who has it all together, all figured out, arrogant in a space of knowing or appearing to know everything. In contrast, I would suggest that a chaplain who is wounded brings a sense of an authentic self to the bedside. They bring something of the compassion of the wounded Christ to the person struggling with pain, with illness, with spiritual or existential distress. They bring an experience of the ‘living human document’ that is real, identifiable, that is human in the real sense of the word.

There is something to be said about experiencing a pastoral practitioner who has the capacity to sit in a place of vulnerability, comfortably uncomfortable with the pain of others. There is a sacredness about such an experience that can be challenging to put into words. There is a mystery, an element of recalibration of the wounds that we all have. Two people, strangers but sitting in a space of pastoral relatedness that is crafted, shaped and held by the

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gift of woundedness. A sacramental moment in the face of great pain and suffering, not a myopic vision of the human condition but an authentic, congruent and real one.

SYNODAL JOURNEY

My introspection around woundedness in recent weeks has also sparked some thoughts around the ongoing synodal pathway that is being travelled by the Catholic church at present and will continue to do so for some time. I have many years of involvement in my own church community at local and at diocesan level so I have more than a passing interest in the process of discernment that is currently taking place. As we open our hearts to the workings and movement of the Holy Spirit, what of my earlier concept of a wounded healer in recovery for a church that has been shaken and changed in the recent decades?

The church is a community of believers, some committed to daily or weekly investment of time and self and of others whose connection is looser, possibly near to detached. Some people now have a very fractured relationship with the church, hurt by the pain of exclusion and of brokenness. As a church, I believe that we have found ourselves challenged, rocked to the core of our being by the many scandals, and now a global pandemic, to stay grounded and rooted in what we believe in and what we stand for. I often wonder has the Christian message got lost somewhere along the way because we have become so disconnected from many who were previously connected and present, engaged and part of what we stand for.

Society has also changed. We have moved to a more secularised mindset with a call for a more open public square. Conversations around removing faith from our schools and our hospitals reflect this as does the call in some quarters for privatisation of faith and its practice. We live and move in a changed world there is no denying this. Society has altered, its expectations have changed, our world is not the same as it was and indeed this may not necessarily be a bad thing.

I return to my image of woundedness. I believe that the process of synodality is evolving within the context of a changed society and a wounded church. The church has hurt but it has also been hurt in the process by its own actions. It is a shaken but not broken institution and I believe that with this journey of synodal reflection and engagement comes an *opportunity* to embrace its wounds and grow from them. If I may borrow the image of the phoenix, I believe the church can rise again from the embers of pain and

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challenge. I believe that the church is being offering a golden opportunity to look introspectively and reflect on a future brighter than ever before.

How will this future, brighter than before, happen? I believe this will happen for a number of key reasons. Firstly, people are still present and engaged albeit in different ways to before. The church communities might be diminished at present but they are not lost. Parishes are continuing to find new ways to reach out pastorally and spiritually to their own people. The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged all of us to find new ways to evangelise, to offer the Word of God to those who seek it, to share an experience of all that is good about a church community. We have been tasked to think outside the box and, as a result, many and varied ways have been created in order to offer God's people an experience of Him. Where people are not able to attend in person, they are making use of the multiple electronic and technical ways that they can now avail of to become connected, to stay connected, to feel connected with their parish communities. People are still there just in a very different way than before. People of all ages are choosing to stay connected even if it has to be done in a way that would previously been unheard of. Not the ideal by any stretch of the imagination but that said, it is keeping us consolidated and connected.

It will happen because we will have a stronger foundation than before. I believe that the church of the future will be smaller in number but more engaged than ever before. Those who wish to be part of the church will do so. They will find ways to stay connected and they will reach out in an honest and open way to their faith community for the nourishment that cannot be found anywhere else. People are seeking meaning and direction in so many alternative ways and I believe that those who will inhabit the new style of church will lead the way. They will be the new pioneers because in their own unique way, they will be able to demonstrate what it beautiful about being part of a believing community, what it offers them that is different to other alternative pathways to meaning-making.

But above all, it will happen because Pope Francis is reminding us of the beauty of woundedness and the wounded. He has spoken against 'myopic existentialism' in *Let us Dream* and therefore this challenges us to see the wounds of others and to act accordingly. What I mean here is that he is reminding us of one of the central tenets of our faith – a Christian duty to each other. Such reminders will help us in our pastoral approach. What do I mean? I believe Pope Francis is reminding us time and time again in his words and in his actions of our duty to the 'other', to avoid existential

myopia and to reach out to those who are suffering in mind, body or spirit. He is reminding us that our duty is first and foremost to those who need a friend, a listening ear, a mindful neighbour. He is reminding us of the axiom of the liberation theology movement – ‘preferential option for the poor’ – thereby offering us a new pastoral vision and yardstick for the church of the future. He is challenging us to minister to the wounded with energy, with faith and with hope. This is the call to service, this is the call to the church to be bold, to be different, to be congruent, to be authentic.

However, most importantly, I believe that within this call is a greater call, a vocational call to the wounded healers, to the wounded healers in recovery, to embrace their own wounds and operate out of and within them to those who are also hurt and pained. Those who are wounded can offer a real experience of the compassionate and broken Christ to those who are also suffering. If they can own and integrate their own woundedness they have something really special to offer. Their pastoral presence can be one that is truly and tangibly real, offered from a place of understanding and a deep desire to stand side by side with those who find life that bit too hard to handle sometimes.

To my mind, a church that is led by wounded healers in recovery offers a trajectory for the future that is based on love, compassion and self-acceptance. It can offer pastoral outreach in a very open and honest way to those whose lives are a struggle. This is a church that will be stronger than ever. This is a church that will survive long after we have all gone home to God. This is a church that will return to its very foundation. Christ was, is and always will be our first example of how to minister. He ministered to the sick, the sinners, the foolhardy, those who had lost their way. ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor but those who are sick’ Jesus told the disciples in Luke 5:31 and our church of the future needs to remember this as we craft our future, as we dream our vision for the future and lay the foundation stone for future generations. A church led by, framed, supported, envisioned and articulated by wounded healers in recovery have much to offer a changed, changing and ever-changing society. This is my synodal dream for the church, for my church and for our church, a church that has so much to offer to those in need of the love, compassion and hope of Christ in their everyday lives.