

The Integrated Journey of a Wounded Healer

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Abstract: Understanding the impact of life experiences on the therapeutic relationship begins with self-reflection. This reflection examines the impact of the traumatic wounds experienced by me as a therapist and the journey of my wounds and healing.

Keywords: wounded healer, formational prayer, EMDR

Who heals the Wounded Healer? Who offers her a bouquet of roses instead of ashes? Who delivers her messages of joy instead of doom? Who restores to her a praising heart instead of a languid spirit? Who will help rebuild the old ruins of her post-traumatic stress disorder? I did not have the answers when I asked these questions—nor did I know that the path to find hope, healing, and health would be the same path that would guide me to the integrated journey of finding myself as a wounded healer. The same journey taught me how to offer my wounded condition to others as a source of healing.

Jung is noted for coining the term “wounded healer” in the world of psychotherapists. However, Nouwen (1979), in his text *The Wounded Healer*, examines what it means to be a Wounded Healer in the modern world. Nouwen speaks about the wounded healer:

For a deep understanding of his own pain makes it possible for him to convert his weakness into strength and to offer his own experience as a source of healing to those who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood sufferings. (p. 87)

I had no doubt that I was wounded but had every doubt that I was a healer. I did not know how such intense suffering could serve as part of the healing journey for myself and certainly not for others. Yet, in my frailty, I examined my pain and wounds and I discovered the many identities of Sherri, the Wounded Healer. There was the Wounded Healer, the Client; the Wounded Healer, the Teacher; the Wounded Healer, the Student; the Wounded Healer, the Therapist. The pain was necessary and was purposed. It was purposed to integrate the segmented parts of me. It was purposed to teach me that joy and sorrow can coexist. It was to teach me to count every day and make the days count.

After a six-month journey where traumatic stressors became bags I carried with me daily, it was time to seek help. I sought out a Christian, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)—and Formational Prayer—trained therapist. Step by step, day by day, month by month, over the course of a year, we made sense out of my woundedness and how the wounds could become a sense of healing for others. The story I wanted to hide became the story I could not wait to share. I found myself, the person of the therapist, the wounded healer in the midst of pain and great weakness. I found an inner strength planted within me that was watered and nurtured through the pain and sorrow. It took six months for my walls to crumble down, but it would take over three times that time to rebuild. The first contributor to the wall of healing was discovered as the Wounded Healer became the client.

The Wounded Healer as Client

Who heals the Wounded Healer? Another Christian Wounded Healer. It was important for me to seek out a Christian therapist because my faith offered me hope. As a clinical social worker, I believe that to eliminate faith and spirituality from the treatment process as a source of hope is to deny an opportunity for healing. I believe it and I witnessed it in the dark night of my soul. At Emerge Counseling, with the help of my therapist, I rediscovered that when the darkest part of night was holding on to me, God was holding on. It was the therapeutic alliance and my therapist's disclosure of her faith that created a healing environment. "The importance of a solid, empathic therapeutic relationship takes on special relevance when we are working with traumatic stress issues" (Marich, 2014, p. 115). The relationship and faith were a dynamic duo resource during my treatment process. It is my faith that gave me a reason to search for light. It is my faith that helped me to believe and hope for the light even when I could not see it. It is my faith that led me to the light.

Within a period of six months, traumatic events took turns entering my life and slowing down my will to live. Time stopped, and when it began again, I realized I was experiencing textbook symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The nightmares, fear, flashbacks, panic attacks, and feelings of despair were common companions. When I could no longer medicate the wounds of sorrow through eating, I sought care for my journey to hope, healing, and health. As mentioned, my journey companion was a Christian EMDR therapist who specialized in Formational Prayer. She walked alongside me on my journey to healing. She helped me to sort through the rubble and build a new, stronger city out of the wreckage. She helped me brick by brick to build a transparent tower that would help others to climb over their adversities.

As we floated back to the first, worst, and most recent memories of my traumas, I began to see light in the darkness. We spent several sessions working on stabilization and resourcing. The session where light met darkness was also where Formational Prayer met EMDR protocols. As I explained to my therapist, I could not get rid of the image of my sister being found dead even though I was not present when she was found. We began with the Safe Place Exercise, a regular EMDR stabilization exercise—but my therapist also integrated the spiritual aspects of Formational Prayer. The safe/peaceful place is a resource used for calmness and to reduce anxiety (Parnell, 2008). It was through this experience that I felt Jesus lifting my bowed-down head and relieving me of my depression.

Therapist: Find a comfortable way to sit so that your feet are comfortably rested on the floor. Close your eyes and pay attention to your body and how it feels. As you slowly breathe in and out, imagine that as you are inhaling you are sniffing a flower. Exhale as though you are blowing out a candle. Let the inhale and exhale be smooth and gentle. Be present. What are you noticing?

Sherri the Client: I am noticing that my body is feeling relaxed and my shoulders don't feel as heavy as they did.

Therapist: When you are ready, allow your imagination to take you to your safe and peaceful place. Nod your head when you can visualize your safe place.

Sherri the Client nods.

Therapist: What are you noticing?

Sherri the Client: I see a field of daisies, and I am sitting under the tree. The air smells of fresh rain. The flowers are moist beneath my feet, and I can feel the dampness on my bottom.

Therapist: Go with that.

A few moments of silence.

Therapist: What are you noticing?

Sherri the Client: I notice that I feel at peace and the flowers are inviting me to run wild in the field, so I run.

The session continued with me sharing what I noticed. At one point, the therapist asked if I wanted to ask Jesus to join me in this safe place. When I did, I understood what it meant to let Jesus be the keeper of my peace.

In my spiritual imagination, I invited Jesus to sit under the tree with me in the field of wet daisies. I laid my head upon his lap. I told him about my sorrow and how I missed my sister. I explained how the pain in my wrist and the screw which held it in place did not allow me to write on the whiteboard in the classroom. I wept over the losses of the last several months and told him that I could no longer handle the weight of the sadness. Jesus invited me to hand my sorrows over to him. He said, “Cast your burdens upon me and I will give you rest.” I explained that I did not know where to start. He invited me to begin to hand over one burden at a time. I placed my car accident; my son leaving home; my financial stressors; my new job anxieties; and my physical, emotional, and spiritual pain in the palm of his hand. He assured me that a great exchange had been made and that my tears were water for the daisies. With every tribulation, something beautiful would grow within my life. I sat in silence for what seemed like hours as peace overtook me and ushered me into an atmosphere of hope and healing. Health did not come right away, but through multiple weeks of intensive EMDR and Formational Prayer, I ventured on the path to wellness.

I sought peace and I found it. Each session was full of a holy healing presence that helped me to remember that peace is a promise God keeps. He stayed true to being the peace-giver even when chaos came to wreak havoc in my mind. Through prayer, Christ-centered mindfulness, EMDR reprocessing, and other cognitive behavioral and narrative therapy strategies, I found there was a blazing, healing light shining through the darkness and overshadowing my wounded soul. As a client experiencing EMDR treatment, I found light. I found light when the darkness called me to flash back to the sound of screeching tires and the image of the shiny black BMW slamming into the side of my van. The light overshadowed the sounds of the dark cries of my children as they learned that my youngest sister died from a heart attack that taunted me day and night. The light peaked through the fear of starting a new job in the midst of grief. The light offered me a pillow

to cry upon when my son left home for college. The light led me to see how this journey through grief and suffering was equipping me to be a better teacher.

The Wounded Healer as Teacher

Who offers the Wounded Healer a bouquet of roses instead of ashes? The integrated journey of the wounded healer could not have come at a worse time. My bags were not packed for this adventure. PTSD and depression jumped into my luggage just as I was beginning my career aspiration of assistant professor of social work at the university where I worked for ten years before receiving this position. This is where, on my journey, I learned that joy and sorrow could reside in the same place. By the time the semester began, sorrow had become my constant companion. She joined me every day. Some days she sat quietly in the back of the classroom, and other days she bullied me and tried to take over my class. She taunted me and chased me down the academic highway. Somehow, I managed to outspeed her and gain the lead. My teaching experiences became a safe haven and escape from my grief. They became stops on the journey to hope, healing, and health.

While teaching Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Cultural Diversity, Service Learning, and Civic Engagement in Health and Human Services, I found hope. While still receiving therapeutic treatment and reprocessing unresolved trauma in my life, I wrote courses that were directly related to my healing process. I wrote the classes Spirituality in Social Work and Trauma-Informed Social Work Practices. As I researched and read dozens of books and articles, the writing of the courses became a teaching tool for me to process my own wounds. As the wounded healer who was a teacher, I could stand outside of my trauma and write a course to help others discover that spirituality matters in social work. I could read about the impact of an empathic therapist and the power of the therapeutic alliance in the healing process. After reading many texts, I selected the text, *Spirituality Matters in Social Work* (Dudley, 2016) which introduces spiritually influenced and spiritually sensitive interventions such as mindfulness, prayer, meditation, sacred texts, and guided imagery into the treatment process.

As I wrote about a spiritually sensitive approach to the interactive processes of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation, I experienced these from the other side as the Wounded Healer as Client. My clinician was utilizing my faith in the treatment process through many of the practices Dudley (2016) suggested, and I was witnessing the effects of providing a holistic treatment that integrates faith into the treatment process. My journey was beginning to integrate. One of the activities I included in the Spirituality in Social Work course that I was writing was for the students to listen to the song “Here” by Jobe (2012). The video invites listeners to rest and lay down their burdens. Just as my Safe Place experience had invited me into the arms of Jesus to rest, the students were able to be exposed to the same experience. The artist includes within the song a diaphragmatic and complete breathing exercise during the bridge of the song. The artist instructs the listener: “Breathe in / Breathe out / You will / You will find Him here” (Jobe, 2012, track 12). The instruction for the exercise was to allow the “Him” described in the song to represent the person’s masculine, nurturing figure. Within the Trauma-Informed Social Work Practices course, as a part of the safety and stabilization exercise, I was able to introduce muscle relaxation, breathing, grounding, and other trauma-informed strategies that I experienced

within my own treatment process. I was being nurtured and was able to integrate my experience into the teaching environment.

Through the teaching experience, the ashes of my sorrow were being traded for the rose bouquet of teaching. As I sought to sharpen my expertise in trauma-informed care so that I could share it with my students, I became the Wounded Healer as Student.

The Wounded Healer as Student

Who delivers the Wounded Healer messages of joy instead of doom? The best teacher is one that is willing to be taught. I enrolled in the Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Certification training through the Institute for Creative Mindfulness to ensure that I had intensive training in trauma-informed practices. The Basic EMDR Training Parts I and II were building blocks in my wall of recovery. These trainings are interactive and hands-on, utilizing therapeutic learning labs as a part of the process. I anticipated learning; I did not anticipate healing.

The training followed the trauma-informed protocols and produced an environment conducive for exploring unresolved trauma and for healing. The eight-phase model includes (1) client history, (2) preparation, (3) assessment, (4) desensitization, (5) instillation, (6) body scan, (7) closure, and (8) re-evaluation (Marich, 2011). The therapeutic learning labs were designed to walk through the eight-phase model of EMDR. During the resource development and installation, also known as the preparation phase, more of my journey was integrated. My two therapeutic lab partners were also Christians. They adapted many of the resources or coping skills to be spiritually sensitive. For example, the Safe Place exercise which is common to EMDR included inviting in Jesus. We also used the Nurturing Figure and tapping. As I explored my own resources through the activities, I learned how to integrate spirituality into EMDR. It was during the reprocessing that I learned the most about EMDR as a student recipient.

During these learning labs, I processed the post-traumatic flashbacks of my sister's death, the car accident, and unresolved childhood trauma. Though I sought to be a student, I also received healing. During the processing of the worst memory of my childhood, I revisited the day my father did not pick me up for his scheduled weekend visit.

As I floated back, I noticed the hot sun that caused perspiration and soaked my halter top. I waited for three hours sitting on the cement steps. The neighbor children played four square on the street in front of my house. The fluorescent-pink chalk marked the A, B, C, and D blocks. I longed to play but was afraid that if I began a game, I would miss my father coming to pick me up. The day turned to dusk. As the streetlights came on, my mother yelled from the porch for me to come into the house. The tears soiled my yellow halter top. My father had not shown again.

My lab partner and the workshop instructor helped me process the past trauma of that day I waited for my father. This was illuminated in my mind. During the remaining therapeutic lab sessions, we processed the relational trauma that soiled my life. The labs were transformational. Not only did I begin the healing process of my attachment deficits but, also, the labs served as

instructional tools for me to use in my role as the Wounded Healer, the Teacher. As a Wounded Healer Teacher, I was assisted by these tools in recognizing the value of therapeutic learning labs and was influenced in the way that I set up the Trauma-Informed Practices course. As a result of this experience, I changed the course to a flipped classroom. In a flipped classroom instructional model, students learn basic subject matter knowledge prior to in-class meetings then come to the classroom for active learning experiences (Long et al., 2017); I included therapeutic learning labs.

This experience integrated the Wounded Healer Client, Teacher, and Student. Again, I found another indication that joy and sorrow can coexist. It was during these trainings that I received messages of joy instead of doom. As we began to unpeel the layers of unprocessed trauma wounds, I realized that the layers of healed wounds gave me the power to heal others.

The Wounded Healer as Therapist

Who restores to her a praising heart instead of a languid spirit? On my Wounded Healer integration journey, the opportunity to serve as a mental health therapist for a private Christ-centered counseling agency appeared as an overnight bag. Packed into this overnight bag was an answer to my hopes and prayers. Trumbull County did not have any Christian designated counseling agencies. As a Formational Counselor, the opportunities to practice my specialty were limited. Formational Counseling is a ministry of Christian caregiving that integrates pastoral care, spiritual direction, spirit-directed counseling, and mental health counseling with a view of bringing hope, healing, and spiritual well-being to broken people. The dilemma was that the excursion opportunity was showing up in the midst of my grief recovery.

I had to make the decision whether to pass up the offer or to permit it to join the integration journey. With the help of my Christian counselor, I made the decision to serve at the agency with a limited caseload. It was here that I truly practiced the ministry of Formational Counseling. At this time in my life, I did not have the strength to depend on my own wisdom. This forced me to surrender the guidance of my interactions with wounded people to the wisdom God provided me through my faith. As my clients experienced hope, healing, and health, I came to better understand what it means to be a Wounded Healer. The agony of my sufferings was transforming my life. In the darkest of nights, bright lights of hope were shining through for me, and in return, I was able to offer that light to others in the classroom, within the therapeutic alliance, and within the therapist's office. The tragedies that could have destroyed me were part of my journey to mold me into my purpose as a Wounded Healer. My initial response to my trauma was to hide it and nurture my languid spirit. The true healing response is to share it with a praising heart.

The Thriving Wounded Healer

Who would help to rebuild the old ruins of my post-traumatic stress disorder? My integrated journey was orchestrated, and other Wounded Healers were chosen to walk with me on the journey. Ultimately, I believe that the trauma recovery was not a curse but a blessing in my life. I believe that it was pre-destined to bring me closer to the promised path of hope and the bright

future that is part of my life journey. Though I mourn the loss of my sister, the loss of the use of my wrist following my car accident, my separation from my son that occurred during his move, the instability of my previous job, and so many other things that happened during the collision of the traumatic stressors in my life over a year ago, I am grateful for the journey. It has strengthened my faith, given me hope to face another day, and equipped me with a confidence to pursue my purpose as Wounded Healer in the many facets of my life.

I now understand why a therapist who survives and thrives from her own adversity becomes more suited to accompany clients on their healing journey. I agree whole-heartedly with Nouwen (1979):

We see how loneliness [life's wounding] is the [counselor's] wound not only because he shares in the human condition, but also because of the unique predicament of his profession. It is this wound which he is called to bind with more care and attention than others usually do. For a deep understanding of his own pain makes it possible for him to convert his weakness into strength and to offer his own experience as a source of healing to those who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood sufferings.... Once the pain is accepted and understood, a denial is no longer necessary, and [counseling] can become a healing service. (p. 87)

I realize it is not my education that most qualifies me to serve as a healing agent; it is the suffering, endurance, and transformation that has equipped me. A Wounded Healer emerges from persevering the pain. It is the pain, suffering, and process of recovery that gives me an intimate relationship with healing. It is this transforming, integrated recovery experience that qualifies a healer to walk beside others on their integrated journey.

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