

# Rolheiser: Our wounds, our gifts, and our power to heal others

Nearly fifty years ago Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled, *The Wounded Healer*. Its reception established his reputation as unique spiritual mentor and he went on to become one of the most influential spiritual writers of the past half-century. What made his writings so powerful? His brilliance? His gift for expression? He was gifted, yes, but so are many others. What set him apart was that he was a deeply wounded man and from that disquieted place inside him issued forth words that were a healing balm to millions.

How does this work? How do our wounds help heal others? They don't. It's not our wounds that help heal others. Rather our wounds can color our gifts and talents in such a way so that they no longer educe resistance and envy in others but instead become what God meant them to be, gifts to grace others.

Sadly, the opposite is often true. Our gifts and talents often become the reason we're disliked and perhaps even hated. There's a curious dynamic here. We don't automatically, nor easily, let the gifts of others grace us. More often, we're reluctant to admit their beauty and power and we resist and envy those who possess them and sometimes even hate them for their gifts. That's one of the reasons we find it hard to simply admire someone.

But this reluctance in us doesn't just say something about us. Often it says something too about the persons who possess those gifts. Talent is an ambiguous thing, it can be used to assert ourselves, to separate ourselves from others, to stand out and to stand above, rather than as a gift to help others. Our talents can be used simply to point to how bright, talented, good-looking, and successful we are. Then they simply become a strength meant to dwarf others and set ourselves apart.

How can we make our talents a gift for others? How can we be loved for our talents rather than hated for them? Here's the difference: we will be loved and admired for our gifts when our gifts are colored by our wounds so that others do not see them as a threat or as something that sets us apart but rather as something that gifts them in their own shortcomings. When shared in a certain way, our gifts can become gifts for everyone else.

Here's how that algebra works: Our gifts are given us not for ourselves but for others. But, to be that, they need to be colored by compassion. We come to compassion by letting our wounds befriend our gifts. Here are two examples.

When Princess Diana died in 1997 there was a massive outpouring of love for her. Both by temperament and as a Catholic priest, I'm normally not given to grieving over celebrities, yet I felt a deep sorrow and love for this woman. Why? Because she was beautiful and famous? Not that. Many women who are

beautiful and famous and are hated for it. Princess Diana was loved by so many because she was a wounded person, someone whose wounds colored her beauty and fame in a way that induced love, not envy.

Henri Nouwen, who popularized the phrase, "the wounded healer" shared a similar trait. He was a brilliant man, the author of more than forty books, one of the most popular religious speakers of his generation, tenured at both Harvard and Yale, a person with friends all over the world; but also a deeply wounded man who, by his own repeated admission, suffered restlessness, anxiety, jealousies, and obsessions that occasionally landed him in a clinic. As well, by his own repeated admission, amidst this success and popularity, for most of his adult life he struggled to simply accept love. His wounds forever got in the way. And this, his wounded self, colors basically every page of every book he wrote. His brilliance was forever colored by his wounds and that's why it was never self-assertive but always compassionate. No one envied Nouwen's brilliance; he was too wounded to be envied. Instead, his brilliance always touched us in a healing way. He was a wounded healer.

Those words, wounded and healer, ordain each other. I'm convinced that God calls each of us to a vocation and to a special work here on earth more on the basis of our wounds than on the basis of our gifts. Our gifts are real and important; but they only grace others when they are shaped into a special kind of compassion by the uniqueness of our own wounds. Our unique, special wounds can help make each of us a unique, special healer.

Our world is full of brilliant, talented, highly-successful, and beautiful people. Those gifts are real, come from God, and should never be denigrated in God's name. However, our gifts don't automatically help others; but they can if they are colored by our wounds so that they flow out as compassion and not as pride.