



By Dan Holden

We prefer our leaders strong and invincible. We like them to sound clear and convincing with no equivocation or doubt. We look for the right amount of confidence falling just this side of arrogance. The challenge is that we are all broken. We have suffered heartbreak and disappointments. Our marriages and intimate partnerships have at times failed. The initiatives we've undertaken in our work fail more than they succeed. We encounter unwanted people and circumstances we can neither influence or change. We try to conceal our hidden hatreds, biases, and judgments but they leak out anyway. We carry our vulnerabilities as deep secrets, seldom realizing that shame and embarrassment only fester and grow as we hide them from others who often are hiding the same secrets from us. We need to create a different story about the woundedness we all carry so that we can respond in a more whole and *holy* way to the world around us.

*Our suffering and pains are not simply bothersome interruptions in our lives;
they touch us in our uniqueness and our most intimate individuality.
The way I am broken tells you something unique about me.
The way you are broken tells me something unique about you.'*
(Henri Nowen)

The relationship we have with our vulnerabilities has become brittle and obsolete even as our organizations, nation and world are hemorrhaging change in virtually every imaginable way. Most of us simply don't know how to respond to the emotional component of deep change, searing pain and loss. The old rules remain in place. Any overt show of emotion, other than frustration, anger and impatience is to be avoided. Men are allowed more latitude than women

in this regard; we give names to women who lapse into anger and frustration. Light-skinned people are afforded more leeway than darker-skinned people. In stark contrast to the turbulence around us, the limitations of this static, unchanging leadership mold are hard to deny.

If Henri Nouwen is right, perhaps our inner brokenness, when embraced, can be a bridge that connects us to one another and to our organizations in new, energizing and life affirming ways. These experiences which feel so isolating and frightening can serve as doorways into an universal appreciation of our shared humanity. This article suggests a direction we can and must pursue if we are to restore heart and spirit to our organizations.

The need —

Sharon is an Executive Vice President in a Fortune 100 company. When her partner of 15 years, Bethany, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer two years ago, both of their lives were turned upside down. One treatment after the other was tried with no success. Amidst the highs and lows of this period Sharon said nothing to her boss or colleagues. Because she was not “out” in her organization, she deemed it political suicide to do otherwise. Twenty-two months later, when her partner died and was buried, Sharon kept this secret to herself. No one knew that Bethany’s family forbid Sharon visitation rights at the hospital. “*Family visiting hours*”, they were quick to point out, did not include Sharon.

Bruce is an up and coming leader in a large, national banking system. He has been referred to me for coaching after his scores on a leadership assessment instrument were lower than expected. He feels disappointed and confused; after all, he has been very conscious and deliberate in his self development journey. Bruce has, in the past twelve months, experienced considerable change. He and his wife have been relocated by his company to a new city in another part of the country, leaving his place of origin. He has a new role in a new job with a new boss in a new part of the organization. There was no on boarding process in place other than trial by fire. His familiar support system in and outside of work are gone. The same can be said of his spouse; they have to rely on each other in ways they’ve never had to before. Three months ago Bruce’s father passed away following an illness. He died one week before Bruce and his wife discovered she was pregnant with their first child. Bruce feels he ought to be able to ‘*push through all of this noise*’ and is reluctant to even consider that there is quite a bit going on in his life. He has begun to feel depressed over his inability to handle all of this.

Stephen is a Regional Senior Vice President in a large US health system. In the past eighteen months the parent company has acquired three smaller hospitals and one nursing home in their attempt to remain competitive. The challenge of integrating widely different cultures and leadership philosophies into one aligned and focused approach has proven to be difficult. Not that much has been done on the people side. Integration has centered almost exclusively on the technical systems side, i.e., medical records and billing, with virtually no comparable investment made on merging the leadership cultures. The results thus far are predictable: executive turnover is off the charts, internal competition and ambition-fueled secrecy and silo building have gone up considerably and bickering, open conflict and sarcastic humor have predominated important strategic planning sessions. Strangely, patient satisfaction scores have remained strong, in spite of the turmoil. Stephen sees all of this happening on his watch, feels embarrassed and overwhelmed by it, but doesn’t address it in meaningful ways. “*Hopefully, it will blow over when the dust settles after all of the changes.*”

Getting started: Look for what is absent around you —

These are not exaggerated case studies but rather a simple selection from an endless array of challenges faced by leaders today. Several themes are present in these three examples that are the focus of this article. What may make them difficult to spot is they require seeing what’s missing or absent from normal, business interactions.

- A relative absence of leadership involvement at the human interaction level — where leaders might have intervened:

With Sharon: *'Are you ok'?*...

With Bruce: *'You've been through a lot, would you mind if I checked in with you at times to see how you're doing?'*

With Stephen: *'I'm troubled by the tone of these meetings; what's going on here?'*

- A reluctance or an inability of leaders to speak from a more vulnerable place themselves — where leaders could have said things like:

With Sharon: *'This may be none of my business and I could be all wrong. I lost my partner two years ago suddenly. I felt like my world was turned upside down and I was cast adrift with no rudder. I'm here if you need someone to listen.'*

With Bruce: *'If I had been through all that you have recently I'd be reluctant to get out of bed. Maybe you've actually been hunkering down and taking care of yourself.'*

With Stephen: *'I don't like how we're talking to each other. I've been a part of several great teams; they don't sound like this.'*

- A clear sense that if you're in pain, hurting or struggling — no matter what the issue — you're in it alone. While the overt agenda is usually *"Get the work done"*, there's an apparent covert agenda as well. It looks like the tried and never true: *"Never let'm see you sweat"*, especially if sweating accompanies feeling anything at a deeper level that would require a deeper, more vulnerable and risky conversation. There is a tacit acceptance by many for this theatre act. What's often missing are colleagues and others swarming to the side of someone in trouble.

Continuing the journey — Pay attention to experiences you despise; they are hidden gifts to be offered.

The thirteenth century Sufi Muslim mystic, Rumi, is widely known for his poems that speak to both the ecstasy and deep sorrow of the human experience. In the poem, *Love Dogs*, he invites us to consider that our longing, loneliness and search for wisdom are actually gifts we can offer to our world and, through our wounded leadership, to our organizations.

*One night a man was crying,
 "Allah, Allah!"
 His lips grew sweet with the praising,
 until a cynic said,
 "So! I have heard you
 calling out, but have you ever
 gotten any response?"
 The man had no answer for that.
 He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
 He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
 in a thick, green foliage,
 "Why did you stop praising?"
 "Because I've never heard anything back."*

*“This longing you express
is the return message.”
The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness that wants help
is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.
Give your life to be one of them.*

(Rumi, from *The Essential Rumi*)

With these beautiful words Rumi encourages us to not overlook, discount or deny our own sadness and longings. They are ‘...*the secret cup*’...*the grief you cry out from draws us toward union.*’ Imagine *longing, grief, sadness, moaning and whining* as doorways into something greater. Imagine these same subterranean elements of our lives as the leading edge of the connection we actually seek. Perhaps underneath the frustration, impatience and misunderstandings that consume so much of our time at work, there is an invisible workmanship fueled by passion, hope and courage that can usher in a better way. If we did not care we would feel none of these things. Our brokenness comes from our longing. Consider this: if we were not afraid of this inner landscape but rather learned to allow for it, what is there outside of us that could frighten us? And conversely, if we deny or ignore and leave unexamined this inner landscape, doesn’t everything unknown initially land on us as a threat?

The call for wounded healers in leadership —

When I reflect on those leaders (in business, consulting, coaching and non-profits) who have left a positive mark on me years later two things stand out. First, there are not many! Second, those who I remember shared their humanity with me. Their strength, conviction, and courage to do what it took to achieve great things certainly were present, but these qualities did not distinguish them. They shared their vulnerabilities with me. They learned over time to open themselves to their doubts and fears, their frustration and despair, their hopes. Perhaps you know leaders like this. When in their presence, we realize that we have been invited into sacred space when they share their vulnerabilities with us. These are the normal insecurities and doubts that invariably arise in the pursuit of great things. We also begin to understand that the concept of strength we may have once held — invincibility and invulnerability — are often cheap imitations of real strength. Essential on the battlefield and athletic field but inadequate everywhere else.

One leader who embodied his role as a wounded healer is Mel Dowdy, Ph.D. Mel retired as Executive Director of Organizational Effectiveness at Bon Secours Health System, a large Catholic health system based in Virginia. Easily the wisest, most shrewd and fierce leader I have ever worked with, Mel and I met many years ago and immediately felt at home in each other’s presence. He seemed equally at peace with his failings and shortcomings as with his considerable skills. I met him as he was launching a first-ever cohort-learning program teaching leaders how to embrace their fullness (good, bad and ugly aspects welcomed) and bring it into their ministry as leaders. He and I were equally excited and terrified about the launch. He had entrusted the kick off session to me, who he was meeting for the first time. I was unsure about exactly what I was stepping into. That Mel was able to bring his vision into being in the midst of a recalcitrant health system is to this day nothing short of miraculous. This work has changed the lives of countless employees and their families and mine as well. None of it would have been possible had Mel not stepped into his vulnerabilities and then spoke and led us from this place.

Mel did not begin his leadership journey with this kind of access to his interior life; he cultivated it slowly and deliberately over many years. To be in the presence of this man who is largely unafraid of his own darkness is liberating for me. Years later, when his spouse suffered

a devastating health crisis, Mel entered this period with the same radical openness to his own experience as caretaker. His letters to me and others gave testimony to his own struggles as he watched his beloved suffer. Poems, beautiful words began to flow from the darkest regions in him. His words touched the hearts of many people, bringing hope and courage to all of us. Herein lies a strange irony: embracing our fears, doubts and vulnerabilities is a strange doorway of liberation for self and others. It is just the opposite of what we think will happen!

Leaders who serve as wounded healers in their organizations have learned to be whole human beings; they are the most formidable and compassionate colleagues imaginable. They are the leaders with a deep interior life, who can stand resolute and true in the face of adversity without blinking. This is what Mel continues to do.

WHAT DO LEADERS AS WOUNDED HEALERS DO?

Learn to embrace uncertainty.

Uncertainty and chaos abound in most organizations such that on any given day we might rightly wonder how far have we wandered from our own purpose? How far has the organization drifted from what's essential? Wendell Berry penned the words below as encouragement to continue the journey inwards even though the way — *your way* — is not yet known.

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work;
and that when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

Our lives conspire against us, it seems, and invite us to leave the comfortable shore. For those who have always been strong and in control, there will be times where no forward action is possible; we've been brought to an absolute standstill. For others of us who have been comfortable taking a quiet backseat in the crowd, there will be times where we must stand out — alone — and speak. For others who live and work from a more cognitive orientation — lawyers, physicians, engineers, university professors and the like, we will no doubt encounter situational challenges that are utterly unreasonable and completely irrational and frightening; no amount of logical argument will prevail. In each set of circumstances we seem to come to an end in ourselves. Something else is needed and we don't know what it is. Or what to do next. Our journey has begun.

Approaching our three intrepid leaders, Sharon, Bruce and Stephen, would likely evoke fear of the unknown in many of us. *'Will my offer of help seem intrusive to Sharon? Will she feel dangerously exposed?'* Bruce has had a series of events, any one of which would have been trouble for many of us. There is a cumulative toll that does not announce itself. We may think we are reacting to single events, but observant leaders know otherwise: they see or sense the pattern and its emotional toll. *'How can I call out the pattern in a useful way without making it seem I see Bruce as weak and ineffectual? How can I describe the strength that is actually there?'* Stephen resembles leaders we know who are meeting their metrics — in his case, customer service targets — but leave a trail of bodies behind them. Bold, courageous and hard driving and, at the same time, blind to the impact they're having. *'How aware am I of my own contradictions? What is my relationship to them?'* The answer to these questions will affect the clarity and conviction we bring to a talk with Stephen — others like him.

Build bridges.

Bridge building is arguably the most important and unheralded skill of the wounded healer. Simply put, find an experience in your life that links you to others. *‘Have I been gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender? No. Have I ever been with people who despised me? Yes. Have I ever feared doing or saying the wrong thing and suffering reprisals from important others? Yes.* You have your bridges.

Have I ever felt ashamed or embarrassed at my inability to do everything instantly well? Yes. Have I ever glossed over a painful event and attempted to jump prematurely back into life...and failed? Yes. Bridges.

Have I ever had someone point out that my impact was very different from what I intended? Yes. A bridge.

In a world that seems to draw exaggerated attention to difference, we overlook how similar we are to one another. Bridge building draws upon these similarities without negating the reality that others’ life experiences may differ from ours in significant ways. For example, I have had isolated instances of being ignored or treated as dumb and disinterested by sales people when my spouse asks me to help her shop for clothes for work. I am neither dumb nor disinterested. Does my small experience once or twice a year match the *daily experience* of many of my African-American colleagues who are assumed to be less intelligent and less promotable than their white colleagues? No. But it’s a bridge. Bridges that connect us with others differ primarily in their frequency of occurrence and severity of impact.

Find ways to join up with others by finding a link in your own experience. Leaders who serve as wounded healers learn over time how to acknowledge and use vast aspects of their life experience to join with others. We are not all called to be social workers, but we are called to become emotionally astute. The trust and openness that bridge building affords are invaluable in any organization.

See with the same grace that sees you.

Mel taught me and others in the most powerful way — without words. Mel knew he was seen, held and loved by the Sacred. He knew that nothing in him could be hidden or kept secret. His brokenness and transparency before the Sacred equip him with a gentle tenacity with others. He has high standards for himself and demands that others step up to the work and relationships that are theirs to develop. He expects others to honestly assess their performance and their own contribution when things go wrong. He blames no one, yet Mel is not someone you want to disappoint. Strangely, when defenselessness and authenticity prevail, people, performance and relationships thrive. Root cause conversations happen with greater grace, elegance and ease rather than with finger pointing, defensiveness and scapegoating. This can happen as we listen more deeply to ourselves, first, and then to others. If we are listening to find where we agree or disagree, we are part of the problem. Mel taught me how to listen for what is real.

We will each go through tough times where it is hard to see with the clarity we need. These moments can feel as if they will last forever. Like our three colleagues at the front of this article, our emotional circuits can become overloaded. We need others to see for us and, more importantly, to see us as we are, to hear us (without needing to fix, calm or even reassure us,) and to love us where we are. Leaders who have learned to access and use their own brokenness to connect with colleagues in pain are the only ones strong enough to serve in this necessary capacity. When nothing is resisted but instead welcomed, the extraordinary can happen. Trust, teamwork, culture and performance all are enhanced in tangible ways when we meet others where they are.

Listen for and find your own heartbeat, interrupt your reactive cycle.

Go ahead right now and try. By quieting ourselves we can learn to hear and feel our heart beating. We can also learn to appreciate how much *other noise* there is that blocks us from this simple challenge. If we can miss something this close to us — our own heartbeat — what else might we miss in our daily work life? The great likelihood is we miss essential things each day because we're distracted by the *other noise* in our minds. Much of this noise is triggered by our concerns about either the past (what we should have done or not done) or the future. Included in these concerns is our insidious need to manage how we want others to perceive us. We all have our strategies! Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "*We would not be so concerned about what others thought about us if we realized how little they do.*" Maybe we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously.

Fear raises our heartbeat but also obscures it, making it harder for us to find. The simple task of listening for our heartbeat, then, serves as a gentle way of interrupting our tendency to allow fear to distract us from more essential things. When Mel initially asked me to listen for my heartbeat, it took me many weeks before I could find it. For all the reasons above.

Radical inquiry: Get curious about your own fear instead of judging it.

Fear takes many forms: self doubt, concern, insecurities, feeling a need to defend your reputation, fear about saying or doing the wrong thing to the wrong person, worry about consequences or lasting negative repercussions, embarrassment of one sort or another including strategies used to avoid it, credibility threatened, regrets about the past or concerns about the future, despair, frustration, grief and the imagined loss of a future, etc. Wounded healers pay attention to their fear and get curious about when and why it shows up. Traces of it show up everywhere! We must begin to appreciate, viscerally, just how much time and energy are spent reacting to some form of fear. Why all of this attention on fear? If we see it we can better manage it; if we don't acknowledge it, fear manages us and we compensate by reacting in less effective ways.

In their 2016 book, *Mastering Leadership*, Bob Anderson and Bill Adams suggest some 65-70% of leaders lead from a place of fear. Self awareness is key. Otherwise these small feelings, if left unacknowledged, will come to manage us in less than ideal ways. We must learn how to pay attention to the moment we are actually in, and not run from it, react to it or shun it. We then discover that we can simply allow what is there to be there. We don't have to do anything! No renunciation or self loathing is required. When we begin to rest in what is and appreciate how complex and delightfully flawed we are, we may one day begin to wonder: *'Are others like me? Do they have the same secret fears and longing as I do?'* This line of inquiry is the beginning of compassion, a core attribute in all wounded leaders.

*'Here is the world.
Beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Don't be afraid. I am with you.
Nothing can ever separate us.'*
(Frederick Buechner)

Our world certainly is a place where beautiful and terrible things happen that may evoke all manner of emotion in us. I have grappled with fear and insecurity all of my life and do not minimize its impact or how tough it can be to see our way through it. Depression is never too far away from me. While in its grasp, I feel cut off from help, separated and terribly alone. Much of my/our suffering comes from resisting our experience of fear and wanting some other experience instead. When we allow it its place in us, fear in any form softens our eyes

and allows us to meet the world with compassion and grace. It becomes an experience that unites us in our shared humanity.

Require full-hearted performance, not perfection.

*God picks up the reed-flute and blows.
Each note is a need coming through one of us,
a passion, a longing-pain.
Remember the lips where the wind-breath originated
and let your note be clear.
(Rumi)*

There is much more going on in our lives than is apparent. Like icebergs floating in the sea, we show up each day with a small parcel of landscape visible but much of it lying hidden. Within this mystery of existence we live and work and try our best to be present to the day we are in. On my best days I remember where the challenging moment originated — *I remember the lips* — and show up full hearted and open, ready to meet the day's requirements as authentically as I can. I lay aside my fear-need around perfection —it's unattainability — and instead invite others to enter into the moment with heart and spirit. Accountability, trust, teamwork and alignment seem to happen with ease. We create great outcomes that we are proud of. On days like this, *my note is clear*. Not all days are like this, though.

Naturally, there are days when everything seems hard. I make promises but don't keep them. I react with anger and frustration when things go wrong. I mistrust others and lapse into critiquing and fault finding, discovering that even easy conversations are then hard. I have overlooked my perfection driven fear (if others find I am imperfect and not enough, something bad will happen to me) and now project my (self) disgust onto innocent others. Others are quick to react to my inglorious lead. *My note is not clear, I have forgotten where the passion and longing pain originated*. I have confused the speck of ice I see for the entire iceberg. I have also discovered, sliding down the ice wall into my hidden iceberg, that to choose to live with heart and spirit means being open to the full range of passions. We can't pick and choose. Frustration, anger and impatience originate just next to love and compassion. I am an orchestra conductor attempting to guide a raggedy ensemble within me that can feel slightly out of tune much of the time. I humbly reset and keep moving.

Stand in but don't allow your power to lose compassion.

Mel expected the highest and best from people, including difficult colleagues. More than this, he demanded that they step up to the courage to say and do what was required, especially when it was not easy to do so. He was fully invested and expected others to be as well. Bringing more heart and spirit into our work does not mean lowering our standards. Just the opposite. We learn to get out of our own way so performance can flow easily and naturally. The getting out of our own way is the challenge. As we grow in self awareness, our inner struggles and insecurities become more accessible to us. We begin to have a different kind of relationship with them. They inform our work when the going gets tough. Because we see our own limitations with grace, we can see others struggling with their own. Our power becomes laced with a ribbon of compassion, extended to others only after giving it to ourselves. We still have our performance standards and goals, but we don't need to pursue them with anger.

Surrender quickly and continuously.

I have long thought we needed a different word for "*Surrender*." It seems such a weak word; what place could it possibly have in leadership and high performance? I want to offer another option: "*Yielding to a superior force*." Much like trees yield to a thunderstorm and the land itself yields to the change in seasons, surrendering means we have come to an end of something. Perhaps in our own power and capacity to respond. Perhaps in our ability to influence or understand others. We require assistance in order to move with more grace and

ease through a blockage. And, much like the weather and seasonal change, the assistance is a naturally occurring dynamic and accessible to us. The doorway is surrender.

*'One surrendering bow is sweeter than a hundred empires,
is itself a kingdom...
your own essence is your wealth.'*
(Rumi)

By surrendering, we invite in the help we need. We may conceive of this as a surrendering to God, Spirit, Life, The Universe, our True Self, a Steady Center Holding Everything. We let go and then pay attention to what happens next. It can be a very simple act: when I am about to meet the Sharon's, Bruces and Stephens in my life I bow privately and ask for assistance. There seems to be an unfortunate sequence many of us move through with surrendering. Initially, we need to run into a brick wall and be brought to an absolute standstill before we even consider letting go and surrendering. Little by little we wake up. We begin to allow uncomfortable feelings and circumstances to be there without reacting and see these moments as opportunities to surrender what we think we know to a higher wisdom within. It seems to take less and less before we yield until each day is a yielding, an ongoing surrender into the mystery of life. One day, we finally acknowledge the obvious: most of the time we don't know much of anything and are, in fact lost!

Cutting Loose

*Sometimes from sorrow, for no reason,
you sing. For no reason, you accept
the way of being lost, cutting loose
from all else and electing a world
where you go where you want to.
Arbitrary, a sound comes, a reminder
that a steady center is holding
all else. If you listen, that sound
will tell you where it is and you
can slide your way past trouble.
Certain twisted monsters
always bar the path—but that's when
you get going best, glad to be lost,
learning how real it is
here on earth, again and again.*
(William Stafford)

Accepting the way of being lost is a way of surrendering, yielding to the unknown. We are back where we began -- embracing uncertainty. What if we greeted the unknown as something within us, the *steady center holding all else*? Nothing to fear out there, just an open, uncharted inner landscape to explore. We would never be more open!

From my current vantage point —

I continue learning... "how real it is here on earth, again and again." I stand in my power and advocate strongly and authentically for what matters and, simultaneously, realize that my attachments to many of my own viewpoints, opinions and ideas need to be re-examined and possibly discarded. They stand in the way of discovering where I may have shared interests with others. At times, my righteous attachment to an idea prevents me from joining with others before demanding they shift and follow me. I suspect that all identification with my role, class, level, religion, race, political party and nation will at some point become

impediments to change. I must undevelop myself. Perhaps if I undevelop myself enough I will find I already have the courage to step more fully into my longing.

Rumi once said: “*You live where God lives because your heart-donkey was strong enough to take you there.*” I want to live my way into these words. I hope my heart-donkey is strong enough for the journey ahead. May these words speak to the wounded healer in you.

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