

The Wounded Healer: A Jungian Perspective

Kathryn C. Larisey

Anxiety, dizziness, a sense of impending doom. What is happening to me? I am supposed to be hosting my daughter's 8th birthday party. Instead, I am sitting on the edge of a hospital bed in the emergency room. Heart pounding, head down, hands clutched before me. What am I to make of all of this? I thought I was having a heart attack, but they are calling it Panic Disorder. What? Me? I have a disorder? This can't be happening. I am a mother and a wife. I have a family to care for. They are counting on me. I pray for this terrifying moment to pass so that I can return to my household duties.

Into the hospital room walks a man dressed all in black with a white collar. He is a priest. With no introductions, he quietly takes a seat next to me on the bed. We sit together in silence for what seems like an eternity. "So you want to be a healer," he says, interrupting the stillness. "What?" I ask. "You want to be a healer," he says again. "It is moments such as this one wherein healers are born."

Eighteen years have passed since this priestly visitation. Simply, and with no fanfare, this humble parish priest was articulating the archetypal energy of the Wounded Healer. It was a complete change in perspective for me. What I thought was a Journey Up was really a Journey Down. The Path of Ascent was really a Path of Descent. The most skillful clinician, rather than being a strong and capable model of good health, is one who has suffered from all sorts of illnesses and is being transformed by those agonies.

This shift in the perspective of the healer is at the core of Jung's writings. In his chapter entitled *Fundamental Questions of Psychotherapy* he explains:

Freud himself accepted my suggestion that every doctor should submit to a training analysis before interesting himself in the unconscious of his patients for therapeutic purposes.... We could say, without too much exaggeration, that a good half of every treatment that probes at all deeply consists in the doctor's examining himself, for only what he can put right in himself can he hope to put right in the patient. This, and nothing else, is the meaning of the Greek myth of the wounded physician. (Collected Works, Vol. 16, p.115-116)

Jung could not be clearer. Theories and interpretations are not much help in the terrifying depths of the psyche. A psychotherapist's own experience of being wounded is what helps her face the suffering client in simple relatedness. Jung is suggesting that

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The Pear Tree

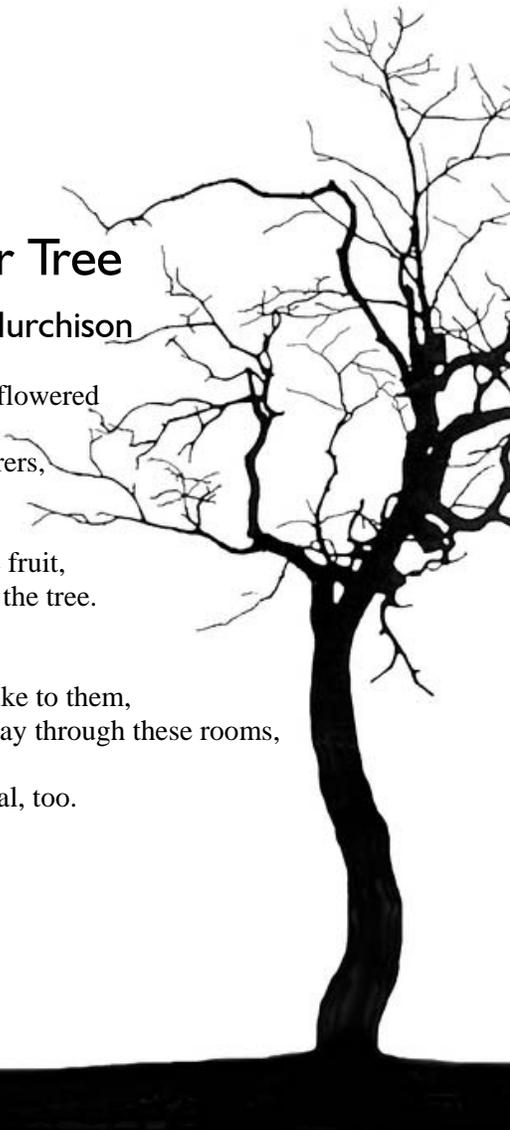
by Ginger Murchison

that, for years, flowered
has fallen
home to the borers,

their greed
for not only the fruit,
but the flesh of the tree.

Hard to say
what we look like to them,
worming our way through these rooms,

our hungers fatal, too.



Dead Tree © Vladimirs Koskins, Dreamstime.com

the therapist's "mental health" is not presumed "superior." To sit quietly and hear a client's pain acknowledges a mutual helplessness to "do" anything to make it go away. The training to hold such a container comes from the therapist's willingness to confront her own unconscious material.

Jung links the archetype of the Wounded Healer back to a Greek myth of antiquity. The myth of Chiron tells the story of how the centaur was wounded by an arrow from Heracles' bow. Chiron does not die; instead, he suffers excruciating pain for the rest of his life. It was because of his wound that Chiron became known as a legendary healer in ancient Greece.



Jung is also referencing the myth of Asklepios. This legendary orphan was placed with Chiron to learn about the healing arts, and he eventually became known as the "Greek God of Healing."

Homer referred to him as the "Blameless Physician." The myth records that Asklepios was so skilled as a healer that he succeeded in bringing one of his patients back from the dead. After his death the Cult of Asklepios grew very popular, and pilgrims flocked to his healing temples. In his honor, harmless Asklepians snakes were used in the healing rituals and were left to crawl on the floor of the temple where the sick and injured slept. From this myth emerged the image of the single serpent around a cypress branch. This so-called "Rod of Asklepios" remains a symbol of modern medicine today. The archetype of the

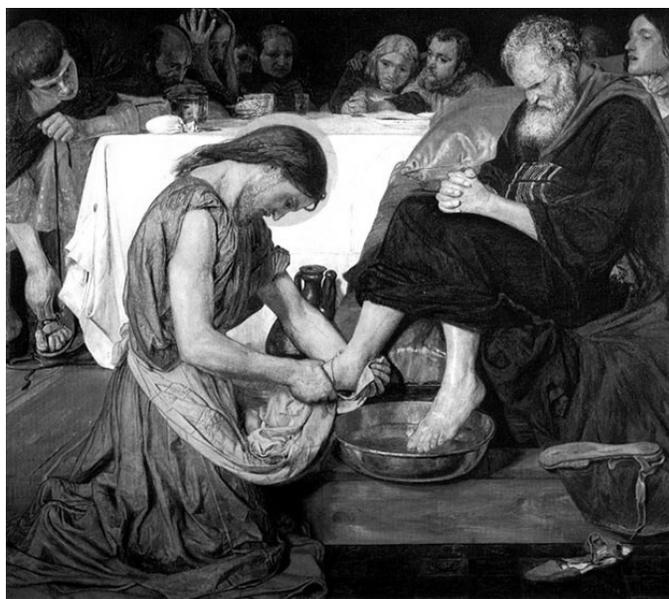


Wounded Healer is central to the Christian Gospels as well.

In the Gospel of John, Peter is protesting that Jesus is going to wash his feet. But Jesus' words to Peter trigger the same fundamental change in perspective that Jung is trying to evoke. Jesus says in John 13:1-15,

If I do not wash you, you have no part with me... For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Most certainly I tell you, a servant is not greater than his lord, neither one who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus knows that the tradition in those days is for the lowliest person in the room to wash the feet of those who enter a room after a journey. So his words are ushering in a totally new sense of what it means to be a helper. Taking the "low place" is the way into the healing profession. "High places" are to be surrendered.



So, what does it mean for a psychotherapist to resonate with the archetypal energy of the Wounded Healer? As clients make their way to my psychotherapy office with their dreams, confessions, and tears, it is almost as if there is an alchemical foot-washing taking place. I am washing their feet, not out of a sense of superiority and perfection, but rather from an energetic field of having my own feet washed as well. The poet Rumi echoes Jung's words when he sings:

Your defects are the ways that glory gets manifested. Whoever sees clearly what is diseased in himself begins to gallop on the way. There is nothing worse than thinking you are well enough.

The primary requirement for becoming a psychotherapist is not the intellectual training. It is not the methods and techniques. It is simply the willingness to kneel and be washed.