LOST BOY: The journey of healing from childhood sexual abuse

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There I was, a veteran youth pastor, sitting at a youth worker's retreat listening to the speaker talking about how to understand and counsel youth who had been victims of sexual abuse, when something began to awaken inside me. I awoke to the nightmarish reality that I was the abused kid he was talking about…

That retreat is now more than a decade in the past, but it was the beginning of a long and difficult journey of healing from childhood sexual abuse that has become a most significant part of my personal spiritual formation and my ministry to youth and young adults.

THE WOUNDS OF CHILDHOOD[i]

Kids who are abused sexually or otherwise have lost their childhood innocence. They have been robbed of it and left instead with a bag of scars and memories that they are unable to deal with. There are numerous self-protective "defense mechanisms" that victims like myself use in order to survive the trauma of abuse. An abused child is not able to feel the full emotions of pain, fear or rage that are associated with abuse. If they could, they would go crazy. So what often happens is that the terrible memories and accompanying emotions are blocked or repressed involuntarily until adulthood. Along with repression there might also be denial or rationalization of the experiences. "It happened so long ago." "Worse things have happened to others." "Maybe it was all just a bad dream." "He really didn't mean anything by it."

Survivors of childhood abuse sometimes become excellent people helpers themselves. In a strange sort of way, helping other people to deal with their pain becomes a way to avoid facing one's own. This is who I was. I became a caring and outgoing youth pastor. As I look back there seemed to be certain types of kids who were drawn to my ministry and whom I was drawn to pay attention to. A number of these kids had been victims of abuse themselves. I believe that they may have been attracted to my ministry, unconsciously knowing that they would receive the empathetic response of a fellow traveler. Yet I wonder about the depth of assistance I was able to offer them at that time. I continue to have a deep desire to help kids who have been victims of abuse, who struggle with low self-esteem, who find it hard to assert themselves in relationships or tasks. But at that retreat, I began to realize that I was the abused kid with the low self-esteem who needed the ministry of healing.

THE JOURNEY OF HEALING

A few years after the retreat, I went to a spiritual director to get help for the spiritual stream that had run dry within me. I was expecting some accountability for my spiritual disciplines or some advice on how to pray better. Instead, I was led to the mirror of my soul to look at my self and the wounds of my past. The trickle of living water on my

spiritual streambed did not come as I expected. Although I would not wish any kind of trauma on any person, it has been through my wounds that God has shaped me for life and ministry. That is one of the mysteries of divine work.

There is no need to describe all the details of my childhood experiences or the personal aspects of the journey of healing during adulthood, but there were a few ingredients in my healing journey that are typical for adult survivors of childhood abuse. (In fact, most adult human beings come to process previous life experiences in some way, shape or form at some point in their lives. How we process and integrate our experiences, both delightful and difficult, will have a profound influence on our personal formation as well as our approach to ministry.)

The emotions that I was unable to experience as a child and as a teenager now came roaring to life. It started with terrifying nightmares and irrational fears and moved to feelings of deep pain, loss and betrayal. I was a powerful and successful man in the exterior world. I had a successful youth pastorate with a growing ministry and good relations with colleagues and congregation, a loving and supportive wife, three healthy children, a house and a mini-van… What more could a man want? But pain does not discriminate. On the inside I became a little lost boy, feeling fully the terror and hurt of my childhood wounds for the first time.

Death and numbness seemed almost pleasant realities in the midst of the terror and pain. I felt the loss of my childhood innocence and the betrayal by my boyhood hero. If life was described in climatic seasons, autumn and winter were the perpetual seasons of my spirituality as I recovered from the Surgeon's scalpel that was removing the pain and fear of my past. The season of Lent, with its rituals of brokenness, deprivation and desolated deserts also became very real for me like never before.

The road to healing is often different than expected. For victims of abuse it often comes through anger and empowerment. I found it very hard to be angry with my abuser, but for real healing to happen I had to leave the role of the victim that had become my retreat for so many years during my youth and young adulthood. Jesus is angry when the human temple of the Spirit is desecrated, now he was calling me to place the responsibility for the abuse where it belonged, with the abuser. The silence and the darkness of the evil tomb of abuse had to be broken!

"The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall." [Malachi 4:2]

I regained my childhood innocence, the lost boy was found. The Easter of new life became just as real to me as the Lent of desolation. Spring was a welcome after waiting in a long winter. I was born again, a grown man, free and empowered to be who I was created to be. Mysteriously, God used the most terrible thing in my life as that which brought new insight, joy and meaning to life. But how did it affect my ministry?

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Henri Nouwen, in his book, The Wounded Healer, has articulated for me how our wounds can become our gifts of healing to others.

"Making one's own wounds a source of healing does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains but for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all [people] share… Since it is [the minister's] task to make visible the first vestiges of liberation for others, [s/he] must bind [her/his] own wounds carefully in anticipation of the moment when [s/he] will be needed. [S/he] is called to be the wounded healer, the one who must look after [his/her] own wounds but at the same time be prepared to heal the wounds of others." [ii]

By facing our own traumas, shadows, shortcomings, hurts and wounds, whatever they are- by being honest with God and ourselves about who we are, we create opportunities for others to be real with themselves and to come to us for healing ministry. This is a very difficult thing to do, as it was for me. But until we do, we, as youth ministers, will (often unconsciously) continue to be too preoccupied with ourselves to really listen to young people in pain. Jesus' example of the "wounded healer" (1 Peter 2:24) has become the basis for my ongoing ministry with youth and college students. I am both the "wounded minister" and the "healing minister" at the same time. I cannot separate one from the other.

How does this look in daily life and ministry? It does not mean that we "hang out all of our dirty laundry" every time we talk to young people or that we shock them with the sordid details of our past experiences. It does mean that we are conscious of the fact that we minister out of the woundedness of our selves. It does mean that we are honest about our wounds with those we minister to and with so that we can be truly "with" them in their unique experiences.

Each time I share of my self with my wounds I am vulnerable. I take the risk of misunderstanding or rejection and relive the pain to some extent (just as is happening to me as I write), but each experience also brings a measure of healing personally and opens the door of invitation for others to entrust their wounded selves to the Wounded Healer whom I represent as a minister.

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[i] A few books that helped me to understand some of these dynamics:
Heggen, Carolyn Holderread. Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.
Davis, Laura. The Courage to Heal Workbook. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

[ii] Nouwen, Henri. The Wounded Healer. New York: Doubleday, 1972, p. 88 & 82.