Henri Nouwen, The Wounded Healer

Our own experience with loneliness, depression, and fear can become a gift for others, especially when we have received good care. As long as our wounds are open and bleeding, we scare others away. But after someone has carefully tended to our wounds, they no longer frighten us or others.

When we experience the healing presence of another person, we can discover our own gifts of healing. Then our wounds allow us to enter into a deep solidarity with our wounded brothers and sisters.

To enter into solidarity with a suffering person does not mean that we have to talk with that person about our own suffering. Speaking about our own pain is seldom helpful for someone who is in pain. A wounded healer is someone who can listen to a person in pain without having to speak about his or her own wounds. When we have lived through a painful depression, we can listen with great attentiveness and love to a depressed friend without mentioning our experience. Mostly it is better not to direct a suffering person’s attention to ourselves. We have to trust that our own bandaged wounds will allow us to listen to others with our whole beings. That is healing.”

If there is any posture that disturbs a suffering man or woman, it is aloofness. The tragedy of Christian life is that many who are in great need, many who seek an attentive ear, a word of support, a forgiving embrace, a firm hand, a tender smile, or even a stuttering confession of inability to do more, often find their ministers distant men [or women] who do not want to burn their fingers. They are unable or unwilling to express their feelings of affection, anger, hostility or sympathy. The paradox indeed is that those who want to be for “everyone” find themselves often unable to be close to anyone. (p. 71)

…it seems necessary to re-establish the basic principle that no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process. The beginning and the end of all Christian leadership is to give your life for others. Thinking about martyrdom can be an escape unless we realize that real martyrdom means a witness that starts with the willingness to cry with those who cry, laugh with those who laugh, and to make one’s own painful and joyful experiences available as sources of clarification and understanding.

Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being hurt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: “Who can take away suffering without entering it?”

The great illusion of leadership is to think that man [or woman] can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there. (p. 72)