

Three Wounded Healers

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If we type "The Last Lecture" into Google, the following
abbreviated quote appears.

On September 18, 2007, science professor Randy Pausch spoke to 400 people at Carnegie Mellon University for his last lecture . Randy told his audience about the cancer devouring his pancreas that will claim his life in months. That day, Randy was energetic, handsome, and cheerful. He seemed invincible.

Randy's lecture and his book has become a phenomenon.. He died in July, but his legacy will continue to inspire us all, for generations. End of quote.

Without doubt, Randy Pausch's last lecture was an inspiring, courageous and compassionate contribution to the world, and legacy for his wife and young children.

But in leaving out his process in arriving at confident happiness and victory, he raises an unrealistic bar, and provides a model likely to demoralize many when crisis hits.

His lecture may be helpful to some, some of the time, and harmful, to most, most of the time. I hope I'm wrong, but the point is valid.. This talk refers to wounded healers who are healers because they share the process, the inevitable hell they've gone through and learned to deal with, which is what leads to healing. There are exceptions. The unconscious defense of denial works for some. But it can't be prescribed.

All of us have been, are, and will be wounded, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I believe at some level we all know that. I wish to introduce, or reintroduce for you three wounded healers, who by sharing honestly the process they've gone through, are a gift to us.

Each one has a track record through their writing and speaking, to help us become wounded healers, rather than merely wounded.

I've read their writing, heard their presentations and know them personally. They're for real.

Jane Babin, a lawyer, has Lou Gehrig's disease, physician Rachel Remen has Crohn's disease, psychologist Dan Gottlieb is quadriplegic as a result of a car accident. Their conditions are chronic, i.e. incurable at this time in history.

The lives of two, perhaps all three of these wounded healers, will be shortened by decades as a result of what happened to them.

Each has had to deal with panic, depression, anger, grief, envy, as part of their challenge and part of their healing process. Each has had to struggle with their disability, to make sense of their lives and their loss, to fight for meaning, and resist the temptation to quit. Their losses, limitations, suffering and crises are sad, even tragic.

Their responses provide encouragement for us, whatever has, or may befall us.

Well known is that danger and opportunity are part of the Chinese symbol for crisis. These wounded healers have known danger, in their physical being, and emotional responses and found the strength within to convert their crisis into an opportunity to mature, grow in wisdom, and deepen in compassion: qualities expressed in their speaking and writing.

What they have lost shadows them daily: yet as quadriplegic Dan Gottlieb wrote "If it were not for what happened to me, I would not be the man I am today."

A New Testament story describes an ill man waiting for 38 years to be the first to enter a river with its healing waters. The belief at that time. The story has Jesus come along and confronting him by saying: "Do you want to be healed?!" 2000 years before Freud's concept of a symptom's secondary gain.

To paraphrase, he's told: "Get up, wake up, be proactive"...He does and is healed. This story may/may not be historically accurate. Regardless, it embodies truth for healing .

Another biblical story involves a woman, having a bleeding condition for 12 years. She had heard about Jesus, and believed he could heal her. She touched his robe and was healed. Jesus reportedly asked who touched him. The woman fell at his feet and confessed. For her, it was magic. If Jesus wanted, another grateful follower. But he chose a different outcome. He empowers and blesses her by sharing the healing secret: "Daughter, your own faith has made you well. Go in peace." Corroborating an account in the New Testament that Jesus couldn't do any healings in a certain town, because of their lack of faith. No belief...no healing placebo.

However serious or limited our wounds- to be active, and believe in the power of faith and trust and optimism, and to accept the caring support of others, is the road towards healing. That road may/may not lead to cure, always temporary for everyone. But that

healing path can reveal and heal the soul which is the experience and gift of the following wounded healers.

Jane Babin's book "Pearls in the Pond" includes a talk shared with pre-meds at Williams College.

"Hope is central to my ability to deal with dying. As my night grows darker, my hope grows brighter- I still have dreams, and hopes.

I hope for the opportunity to love and feel love from those closest to me; I hope for moments of creativity, to be able to meaningfully contribute to this world.

I have hope that when my mission here on Earth is completed, that I make a peaceful transition to a place of comfort and love.

Lastly, I can remind the medical community that those with disease have faces, voices, families, hopes, joys, fears and a need to be treated with compassion and respect. I am not just a body with disease. I am a spirit about to fly."

In her sermon given at the Laconia Congregational church titled the blessing of despair, she tells us the questions her crisis evoked for her and the answers she gave to those same questions.

Our questions and answers to our crises may be different, but questioning and forging serious answers is key to our healing process.

Jane's questions: quote: "Who am I, and what will become of me now that I can't control my destiny?"

How have I lived my life? Have I been the best person I could be, have I treated others with respect and kindness?"

Her answers to her own questions...

"I have gone from teaching at University to teaching with a different mission, speaking not to business students, but to medical professionals, victims of disease and the public on my experiences in living with ALS.

The changes in me, physically, emotionally and spiritually have been profound.

My mission now, to educate others about ALS, and to participate in clinical trials to help researchers find a cure has strengthened me as a person, and made my life purposeful.

This mission has helped me understand why we are here and to share with others that life is not about earning and having and doing, but about giving and sacrificing and being. I can no longer run or ride a bike, tie a shoe, or carry a textbook. Yet in this weakness I

have become strong, finding strength, through God, to do things I never thought I would do; the strength to accept my limitations, to be confident enough to write a book, to speak to hundreds about a disease I barely knew existed.

Beliefs count... the beliefs she grew up with as a catholic didn't carry her...she felt rejected, abandoned, cursed by her god...but part of her healing was to study the writing of Catholic and Jewish mystics, to take in the love of others, and to seek meaning with what she had left to her. She did what psychiatrist Victor Frankl, in the Nazi concentration camp concluded was necessary for a chance of survival, to find or create meaning in that context. Frankl went on to create a form of therapy called logotherapy, i.e. meaning therapy. Carl Jung taught that in the second half of life, the challenge we all face if we are to resolve our neurosis is one of meaning.

Jane wrote: "I never considered myself to be particularly religious. I believed myself weak in that respect, too, until I realized that being religious does not mean how often one attends a service or the time spent in formal prayer."

Quoting Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, she wrote:
"A religious person is one who suffers from harm done to others, whose great passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.' This is what I aspire to be."

The next wounded healer is physician Rachel Remen, author of the best selling book Kitchen Table Wisdom, subtitled Stories that Heal, and also My Grandfather's Blessings, subtitled Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging.

As a teen-ager she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, had several surgeries, was told she might live to be 40, and never married with that prognosis having been laid on her.

She wrote it was when she found her anger about her medical condition that she stopped experiencing herself as a victim, and began her healing.

We know anger can be dangerous, and used to make the lives of others, even and sometimes especially our care givers, miserable, directly or through passive-aggressiveness. She committed the energy of her anger to find her voice, and to move her life forward in the direction of healing.

For years she has been head of a research and treatment center for cancer patients in California. She's now in her sixties, and a mentor for physicians throughout the country. So much for her prognosis of 40 years.

Dr. Remen is a frequent keynote presenter at physician conferences, where she addresses the meaning too often lost by the routines and the pressures that physicians live with. I've heard her at three such conferences, and at each event, physician attendees, who rarely if ever give anyone a standing ovation, always do so for her.

She treats the body, but mainly speaks to the heart and souls of physicians as well as patients.

I attended a workshop she led for eight of us, the other seven of whom were physicians. When I arrived, she walked up to me and began talking. Though we had never met, my experience was as though we knew each other well, and had a trusting relationship that only evolves over a long time.

It was a powerful and unique experience. I described it that way when we said our goodbyes. She said: "I was just being sincere." I replied: "Well, I had never experienced that before." She said: "Just be sincere."(!)

So often the most profound and powerful insights turn out to be commonsense and simple to understand, though not necessarily simple to take in and to do.

A workshop exercise she created was for us, strangers to one another, to pair up, sit facing and looking at each other, not allowed to speak for five minutes.

My partner in awkward silence had an M.D. and a Ph.D in a subject I couldn't pronounce or spell, let alone understand. His face emanated pure intelligence, an IQ over a thousand. I thought I'll avoid him when this is over, I'm not in his league, and no way could we connect. After several minutes, he blushed. My impression dramatically changed. I could relate to him. Like the rest, I shared my experience with the group. Dr. Remen said: "How interesting. Most of us spend our schooling and training time to develop strengths and abilities to succeed and be respected by others. But if our strength is all we show, we separate ourselves. It's our vulnerability, shared, that enables us to connect..." If we incorporated that sentence, the quality and meaning of our lives could be changed: It's our vulnerability, shared, that enables us to connect... a life changing realization, especially but not only for men who believe that showing vulnerability telegraphs weakness and failure as human beings.

In Laconia, N.H. our Hospital has a spiritual care committee of a dozen local clergy who meet monthly year round. We decided to gift our own doctors with her book. That gift was for our doctors, but also for ourselves. We wanted our doctors to find working with us as their patients extremely meaningful (!) rather than a task and an ordeal. Her book is a best seller and is offered by book clubs as an enticement to join them.

The third wounded healer is Dan Gottlieb, Ph.D psychologist. I was introduced to Dan by David Elpern. By phone David told me he had heard a very powerful speaker, a quadriplegic psychologist whom he was inviting to present at a conference. I thought, but was ashamed to express it to David, how could a quad in a wheel chair be a powerful speaker. Well, he turned out be the most powerfully moving and insightful speaker I've ever heard. David refers to him as a modern day Buddha.

When a loose truck tire hit his car on the Philadelphia turnpike, Dan woke up in a hospital bed, hearing a physician in the corridor refer to the quad in room such and such.

Dan immediately realized, “oh my god, he’s talking about me”. That was twenty five years ago.

At that time, Dan was a husband, a father, and a successful psychologist. Instantly he and his life were changed...

Now he was a quad in hospital room such and such. He thought his career, and his life, were finished. Poof. And he was thinking of taking his life.

That night, a nurse walked into his room, and sat next to his bed. Dan had on a neck brace so couldn’t turn, and it was dark so he never saw her face... The nurse asked “Is it true that you’re a psychologist?” “Yes”. “Do you mind if I share something with you?” “Not at all, go ahead.”

She said she was devastated by being rejected by the most important person in her life, and was having suicidal thoughts. She spoke. Dan listened, and said a few things. She was clearly relieved by talking with him. And Dan realized that though now a quad in room such and such, he could still contribute. He said this nurse couldn’t know he was thinking of suicide also, and that their conversation may have saved two lives.

Dan decided he would give his tragically transformed life, two years, and then decide whether it was worth living or not. After two years, he had a consult with his inner god, and said: “I want you to promise that I can be cured.”

His god answered: “I won’t give you that promise. Live or die.” Dan tried again: “At least promise me that I can have relief from the suffering I have been experienced for so long. Same answer. “No. Live or die.” His inner god added “I only require one thing from you, which is faithfulness. And I only promise you one thing, which is Presence.” That was 25 years ago.

Those two sentences are worth remembering. When deeply depressed, there’s not much we feel we can do- but we can carry out these words until the depression subsides. “I only require one thing from you, which is faithfulness. And I only promise you one thing, which is Presence.”

Dan has a therapy practice in Philadelphia. He writes a regular column in the Philadelphia inquirer and has an award winning public radio program in which he interviews guests. His book Letters to Sam, Sam being his autistic grandson has been translated into 15 languages. His recent book, Learning from the Heart, is a great resource for persons who are grieving and/or angry about loss, for couples who need to access and express the love they have for each other but have turned off because of their conflicts, and for people who are anxious.

When Dan goes to a restaurant, in wheel chair, with his adult daughter, the waitress typically asks her what she wants. Then, not looking at Dan, the waitress asks his daughter what he wants, as though this Ph.D psychologist can’t talk, since after all, he’s in a wheel chair. Dan, smiling and looking at his daughter, says: “Tell the waitress that I want such and such for my meal.”

Dan describes the life changing insight he gained as a result of his accident. He understands why people don't look at him in his wheel chair. "I'm every one's worst nightmare: dependent, helpless, impotent...24-7." Before his accident, his struggle and stress was striving to be part of the in-group. His insight was that being everyone's worst nightmare, he could never be part of the in-group, which freed him from the stress of people pleasing, and enabled him to be himself...

On Dan's professional card, he leaves off his Ph.D, replacing that with the word 'human' (!) Such a radical idea! Psychologist Dan Gottlieb: Professional credential? Human

Not many psychiatrists, therapists, pastoral counselors, clergy including myself, has made a practice of revealing that our doctoral degrees giving us licensure and professional status, may have less to do with our being catalysts to healing as does our own humanity and vulnerability, the suffering and crises, mistakes and traumas we've learned to cope with and perhaps resolved.

Dan isn't cured... he won't be cured... but his response to his tragic accident has enabled him to become a wounded healer, a gift to the world. Dan told me that his book, Letters to Sam, was written as a legacy for Sam, but it was also his prayer for the world.

Jane Babin, lawyer, Rachel Remen, physician, Dan Gottlieb, psychologist, each traumatized and challenged physically, emotionally and spiritually and each responding by becoming wounded healers. None of the three want to be idealized or sentimentalized by us. Their wish, their gift and their writings are to help us with our wounds to become wounded healers.

In speaking of these three, I've given you three appetizers. Their writings give us all full meals to feed our souls, move our hearts and empower us to become wounded healers. They did it. And yes, we can. So be it...