



## **Medical Marriage, Part I**

**Roland W. Gray, M.D.**

In Greek mythology, Chiron was a leader and wise elder amongst the centaurs, half man, half horse. Although renowned for his skills and art as a healer and physician, which made him the patron saint of these vocations, he was unable to treat an incurable wound in his own knee which he had suffered through an arrow. He was perhaps the first “wounded healer”.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest and spiritual writer coined the term “wounded healer” to describe the emotional state of those engaged in ministry and call them to identify the suffering in their own hearts and make that recognition the starting point of their own service. Physicians share many of the same characteristics in that we are all “wounded” by events in our past, and yet are called upon to help others define and overcome emotional and physical wounds in their lives. This month, I want to explore the ways in which we can recognize and manage our own wounds as they relate to caring for others.

### **The physician as wounded healer**

Most physicians are wounded healers in the sense that we have experienced and survived poverty, hunger, war, family heartache, divorce, physical/emotional abuse, racial/ethnic discrimination, religious persecution, gay bashing, life-threatening disease and other losses that transform us in ways beyond our imagination. In most cases, when we survive emotional and physical traumas, we are strengthened, yet made more vulnerable at the same time. Although there are variations in the extent to which we experience transforming personal traumas, few of us are unscathed. And yet, we rarely stop to consider that we are asking ourselves as well as others in our profession to set aside our own wounds to deal with those of our patients and our families. Those of us who are most successful at setting aside our own wounds are more vulnerable to compassion fatigue and/or burnout, marital discord and dysfunction and other impairments that can lead to our undoing.

### **Attributes of wounded healer physicians**

Many of the characteristics that serve physicians well professionally are liabilities in our personal lives. Coping skills we learn through the process of our own wounding, lead us to have difficulty communicating and to isolation and loneliness. Attributes of the wounded healer include:

- Powerful/controlling
- Perfectionism and procrastinating lifestyle
- Competitiveness, both personal and professional
- Dedication
- Emotional remoteness
- Ability to deny/ignore feelings, particularly anger
- Avoidance of vulnerability, authoritative response style

The expectations of others; whether our families of origin, our families as adults, our patients and/or peers, become part of how physicians define themselves. We are expected to be available at all times, with no emotional or physical wounds ourselves, to meet the needs of others. But we cannot ignore our emotional wounds any more or better than anyone else.

### **Healing others as a wounded healer**

So how do we identify the suffering in our own hearts and make that recognition the starting point of our own service and relationship to others? The first step is recognizing that although we are all wounded in some way, our best service to others comes about when we approach others, patients and family alike, from a position that acknowledges our own past emotional/physical damage and survival. We have to remain connected to our own wounds and vulnerability to understand and meet the needs of those around us.

Our personal wounds determine who we may be drawn to as spouses, and as friends. Most of us are responsible and committed to our work, which makes balancing personal and marital life a challenge. But it's a challenge well worth undertaking as our families can be a source of great support and comfort to us as wounded healers. Next month, I will explore the issue of medical marriage and how our personalities and personal styles can be managed to accommodate stable relationships with our spouses.

Physicians can easily access the TMF Physicians Health Program by calling (615) 467-6411 or writing the TMF, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Nashville, TN, 37027. All communications to the program are strictly confidential.

*To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physicians Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411 or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.*