

“Welcoming my wounds:” Healing and the Body’s Knowing

In *Tattoos on the Heart* Fr. Greg Boyle SJ tells the story of Jose, a former gang member in west LA.¹ Jose remembers his mother telling him over and over again: “I wish you’d kill yourself; you’re such a burden to me.” As a child she beat him with everything you can imagine – and a lot of things you can’t. He took to wearing three t-shirts to school: the first soaked up most of the blood, but some still leaked through leaked through to the second t-shirt. A third t-shirt covered everything. Kids would tease him, because the temps were breaking 100 degrees – and here’s this kid wearing three t-shirts.

Later on, Jose’s mother dropped him off at an orphanage in Baja, California. It took his grandmother ninety days to find him. He left home as soon as he could.

Joining a gang offered Jose the family and feeling of belonging he’d never had at home – but, like his mother’s beatings, gang life marked him too. Tattoos tagged him as being part of *this* family – and not *that* one. Gang violence made everyone a target. Eventually, Jose left.

Now, Jose works at Homeboys Industries, the corporation Greg Boyle started to stop gang violence. Now, the “wounds” the gang inflicted are gone: Jose had his tattoos removed. Now, he wears just one t-shirt, and it says Homeboys Industries on the front and, on the back: “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.” Now, Jose has a different relationship to his mother’s wounds:

“I used to be ashamed of my wounds. I didn’t want anybody to see them. Now, my wounds are my friends. I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my wounds. After all, how can I help the wounded, if I don’t welcome my own wounds?”

How do we welcome our own wounds? Because when they are acknowledged and deeply known, they offer a wisdom that can be harnessed for healing.

You, healers in the medical professions, you already know this: you're marked women and men. And if you weren't wounded before you got here, you've been marked by what you've seen and done since you arrived. You are "wounded healers," as Henri Nouwen put it.ⁱⁱ

How do we welcome our wounds? I can only tell you what I know. Here's what you need to know about what I know: two things.ⁱⁱⁱ

First, I speak as a gang member myself, my gang being the Lutheran tribe. My tattoos are the marks of my baptism, largely invisible, equally deep. My gang fiercely believes God loved us enough to want to share our lot, even and especially the wounds. God became human to feel that full range of human experience. That love extends beyond the gang to every member of the human family – at least, that's how we read "God so loved *the world*...." (John 3:16).

Second, I speak as a caregiver for my husband Bill, who was himself mortally wounded by the T.Rex of brain cancers, glioblastoma multiforme. At the outset, our Bay Area radiation oncologist warned us: "Don't live the disease." Then, it made little sense, but in time, I understood: we had to live our lives, fiercely and joyfully. To do that, we had to welcome our wounds.

I can only tell what I know – and here's how I'll organize it:

you welcome your wounds by claiming agency;
you welcome your wounds by remaking, repurposing, re-
fashioning the broken pieces;
and finally, in welcoming your wounds, you discover compassion.

In the remainder of my time with you, I'll build out each of those points narratively, trusting that you can amply supply stories of your own.

I. Claiming agency

Listen to how Jose tells his story as an adult: Not "My mother beat *me*." Not "The gang tattooed *me*." But "*I* welcome my wounds. *I* run my fingers over my wounds. After all, how can *I* help the wounded, if *I* don't welcome my own wounds?"^{iv}

Jose had no control over what happened to him; he could only control his response. He could have chosen revenge, rage, and endless resentment, the formula, in fact, for gang life. Rather, Jose chose to welcome his wounds.

This is grace.

I want to talk about that agency in terms of time and space, and I'll do that narratively, from my story. I invite you to supply your own.

Time...:

Cancer altered our sense of time. In our Old Lives, we never had enough. The lines from James Joyce read at our wedding proved prophetic: "Rapid motion through spaces elates one."^v Two high-powered university professors, we rushed from meeting to meeting, exhilarated by how much we could pack into a day.

In our New Lives, we spent a lot of time waiting: waiting for treatments and appointments, waiting for a doctor to step into a room, waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for the news that was mostly bad.

Before, we were in charge of our own time; now, something else was, and that something else was cancer. We knew the disease would take Bill's life. I didn't want it mastering our time as well.

Words from the psalms surfaced in my consciousness: "Teach us to number our days aright" (Psalm 90:12). "Teach us to number our days aright:" apparently we weren't the first to need instruction.

How would we number our days?

I started keeping several calendars. One marked the trajectory of treatments and therapies; other calendars were more cyclical. I marked the moon's phases, the season's rounds. I memorized the complicated palette of sunlight, as it expanded and contracted in the kitchen where we had breakfast together every morning. I kept liturgical time, which in my Christian gang, circles through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus with the regularity of respiration.

Of course, I hoped we could circle back to the time “Before Cancer” -- that may have been my own form of “magical thinking.”^{vi} But we found ourselves spiraling deeper and deeper into a mystery that held us. We let that mystery number our days.

...and space

Anthropologists call hospitals and clinics “liminal spaces,” those places that sit in between where you came from and where you are going: a place of illness to a place of health, a place of health to a place of illness.^{vii} When you enter a hospital, you never know which of these liminal spaces you’re entering.

How would we inhabit our liminal space in a way that retained a sense of agency?

Here’s what I know: we arrived at the hospital for Bill’s first surgery and were quickly dispatched to small cubicle for changing clothes. We were stumped by two long, white, stretchy tubes. Were they sashes for the gowns he’d been instructed to put on, one open at the back, one at the front? Were they elastic shoelaces for an as-yet-unseen pair of booties?

Under-slept and over-anxious, my imagination ran wild, until a big buxom no-nonsense nurse burst in, picked up the tubes, and said: “Here, honey, let me help you with those. You plant your foot right here, and I’ll get ‘em on ya. It’s the only thing I know that works.”

And that’s how Bill’s foot came to be between those two gigantic breasts, as she quickly slithered the sock up to his knee. I asked if I could have some too – and if she’d put them on me.

Liminal space is the place where unexpected things happen, things you can’t reproduce on the outside, things you sometimes can’t even talk about. But those kinds of things became commonplace in liminal spaces.

At Bill’s request, a friend and priest accompanied us to the hospital. I wasn’t sure why Bob was there; I don’t think Bob was either. But he

knew how to claim agency in liminal spaces. He simply acted like he belonged. Watching him, so did we.

What our friend did, when he wasn't just being there, was pray. He prayed with us; he prayed without us. He prayed with words; he prayed without words. He prayed when we were looking; he prayed when we weren't, pretending to read a magazine. Whatever words he spoke aloud, they were the right ones. It was enough to have someone else order our wildly spinning fears into the straight line that language requires. He reclaimed the space: it was *our* space, a space of prayer.

Recovery landed us in another liminal space: a glassed-in cubicle in the new neurosurgical ICU. Here patients had respite from the bustle and beeping of a regular ICU. Privacy allowed for quiet and conversation. Happily we needed both. Bill could talk after a surgery that was dangerously near his speech and language center. We were all enormously relieved.

Posing as a priest and his secretary, an old high school buddy and his wife snuck into the unit, and we pulled the curtains, closed the doors, and told raunchy jokes like we were at the annual Labor Day picnic.

"If I'd known you were going to be feeling so frisky, I'd have brought a thermos of martinis!" Peter declared. Without missing a beat, Bill snapped back: "You just wanted to see if losing part of my brain had turned me into a Republican! Not a chance." The nurse had to tell us not to make too much noise. Every bad joke reclaimed the space as ours -- and fiercely.

There were quieter times in the room too. I sat next to Bill as he slept off surgery, trying to fathom the horrific diagnosis we'd received. Though the surgeon assured us of "clean margins" around the tumor, he'd been equally realistic about residue. We'd come from a land of good health; we were heading into a land of radiation, chemotherapy, and -- and this, only if we were lucky -- more surgeries. How would we inhabit this space?

We didn't talk about diagnosis or destination, but we had learned something from our priest buddy. We prayed. Prayer made it possible

to claim agency in liminal spaces. We set our faces toward whatever lay ahead.

In that ICU and beyond it, we leaned into a routine we'd established over the years of our marriage: we prayed together. I read the texts; we sat in silence. As he sank into deeper prayer, Bill's heart rate would drop enough to set off the monitors in the nurses' station. Staff raced into the room to see what was going on, until he figured out what was up. "I'm meditating: the alpha state just slows down my heart-rate. No cause for alarm, just reset the monitors."

Monitors readjusted, Bill prayed without interruption. Prayer became for us, not a liminal space, a place in between other destinations. Prayer began to feel like the place to which we were headed.

The *Suscipe*: Living inside a prayer

Bill had been a Jesuit for thirty-two years, when he left to marry. Leaving the priesthood was not just leaving an institution; it meant leaving people you dined with every night, people you vacationed with, people you looked forward to retiring with. It was a wrenching decision for an extrovert, and Bill told his closest friends: "Brain cancer is hard, but leaving the Jesuits was harder." Happily, many of the Jesuits still numbered among his closest friends.

Bill needed these men in his life. He'd spent more time with them than with his biological family. They were his First Family. They gathered around us.

The brain tumor research center at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center was on the ninth floor of a building on Parnassus Heights, which commanded a view of Golden Gate Park and Golden Gate Bridge beyond, with vistas out to the ocean in the west and to the Bay Bridge in the east. When he could still see well enough, we'd stand at the window in the waiting room, and Bill numbered all the Catholic parishes by spire. He knew the priests who'd served those parishes, the kids who'd attended their schools, and the nuns who'd taught them. For a native San Franciscan like Bill, the City was a storied landscape.

One afternoon we were getting tests lined up for the second surgery. We had two hours between appointments, and we crossed Golden Gate Park to St. Ignatius Church, the twin-spired Jesuit parish on the University of San Francisco campus. Bill's family marked all their rites of passage in this space: marriages of his siblings, countless baptisms and confirmations, the funerals of both parents. We didn't know it, but Bill's own funeral would be in that space in just five months.

On this weekday the church was dark and quiet, out of the wind and sun and fog. We found ourselves in the St. Ignatius Chapel. On the wall was a prayer we knew as the "*Suscipe*" of Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuits.

Since Bill couldn't read, I automatically read everything aloud, honing a theatrical talent I hadn't known I'd had. This time, I barely made it through the final stanza: the "*Suscipe*" was a devastatingly accurate description of brain cancer.

 "Take, Lord, receive
 All my liberty, my memory, my understanding, all my will,
 All that I have, all that I possess.
Lord, you have given all to me:
 Now I give it back to you.
 All is yours.
Give me only you love and your grace.
 These are enough for me."

We knew all the things Bill couldn't do. On the other side of the Golden Gate Park at the medical center, these numbered as "deficits" – and we hated the term. Bill's functioning on the Karnofsky Scale dropped by the visit. We couldn't live by the medical calculus of the Karnofsky Scale.

The "*Suscipe*" gave us another world to inhabit. This world acknowledged the hard, cruel edges of loss, not in terms of measurable "deficits," but in terms of the bottom line: liberty, understanding, and will. It factored in the psychological and spiritual costs of not being able to read, not being able to drive, and having the increasingly frequent verbal traffic jam.

The prayer's calculus was real. But it refused to end with loss. It pointed to the incalculable blessings that filled our lives: the love of our families, both our families of origin and that First Family, the sturdy friendship of Bill's high school buddies, that tribe of friends who phoned us, fed us, and fearlessly took Bill out to lunch. The calculus of grace was as real as the progression of the cancer.

This prayer offered a time and space we could inhabit, a place we would call home.

I want to close this section out by distinguishing between suffering and grief. Suffering is what happens to you. Grief is what you do with it.^{viii} Suffering gets stuck in accusative case: "My mother beat *me*." "Brain cancer killed *him*." "Seizures left *me* without oxygen." Grief takes charge in nominative case agency: "*I* welcome my wounds." "*I* run my fingers over my wounds." "*We* lived inside a prayer." "*I'm* praying." Grief can even order people around: "Turn your monitors down."

We claimed agency by focusing, not on what we had no control over, but on what we could control. Yes, the time grew short; yes, that space got narrower and narrower. But it was still there. We inhabited it, fully and fiercely.

II. Remaking/repurposing the broken pieces

Suffering fragments both body and soul. The French philosopher Simone Weil called it "affliction," noting its dimensions of physical pain, social isolation, and spiritual alienation.^{ix} You know each one intimately, either from your own experience or that of your patients or colleagues. How do we welcome these wounds?

Think of Jose: his life was shattered by physical pain, the isolation of poverty, and finally, by what Greg Boyle calls "a lethal absence of hope." How did those broken pieces come together again?

I'll tell you what I know. Again, I'll build this point out narratively; again, I invite you to supply your own stories.

In pieces....

After Bill died, I was, quite literally, in pieces. Fourteen months of making life-and-death decisions had snapped my executive capacity. I couldn't sequence things, even the simplest ones. I couldn't dress myself, invariably putting on shoes before stockings, forgetting earrings, going out of the house without a jacket. Paying bills took enormous effort.

One morning I found myself hyperventilating in front of a pile of dirty clothes. I had to sit down, calm down, and mentally run through the string of steps that would lead to clean clothes: "First, gather the darks in one pile; then, gather the lights in another. Then, close the hamper lid. Then, take them downstairs. Then, place them in the washing machine...." I felt like someone with situational dementia. This was not welcome.

Reading cookbooks helped me gather myself. Cookbooks adopt a language of raw command, unsoftened by adjectives or adverbs:

Peel.

Chop.

Boil.

Puree.

Just reading these orders signaled that someone else was in charge.

Further, cookbooks sequence things, calmly and precisely, something of which I was incapable.

First, peel.

Then, chop – not the other way around.

Somewhere in the universe, order existed. This was deep consolation.

Out of these pieces, a new creation

Then, a few years after Bill died, a friend in Minneapolis invited me to climb Kilimanjaro, a free-standing peak, the highest on the continent, Africa's "Shining Mountain." "Climb Kilimanjaro:" it hadn't been on my bucket list. At the time, the whole concept of "bucket lists" – a list of

things you *have* to do before you die – was a sore point. We hadn't had the time.

Broken and in pieces, I was, quite literally, list-less. So when I received this invitation, I shrugged – listlessly – and said: “Why not?” A few months later, we found ourselves at the base of Kilimanjaro. We started climbing.

We climbed through the rainforest, steamy and close with the calls of strange birds. There was evening and there was morning, a second day.

We climbed through the alpine meadow, filled with scrub trees green against the red volcanic rock. There was evening and morning, a third day.

We climbed above the tree line, into a zone where plants burst from every crevasse and cranny, and we counted the hardy species that survive altitude and intense swings in temperature. We wondered if we'd be one of those species. Because, as the air got thinner and colder, we had to find a pace – no matter how slow – that would allow for steady forward motion, so that we weren't stopping and starting all the time. We had to find a rhythm of breathing -- no matter how shallow – that would allow for steady respiration, so that we weren't gasping for air. There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

Then, we climbed out of the realm of vegetation entirely, entering the fierce landscape of the summit itself. Here there was nothing but scree, searing sun, and large shards of pyroclastic blast. Something violent had happened here, perhaps a domestic argument between giants with a large collection of red pottery involved. Perhaps a gang war. Perhaps even a beating. There was evening –

-- and at midnight we made the final ascent. By that time, like the mountain, we were ourselves in pieces, shattered by exhaustion, thin air, and the cold. The only thing that kept us climbing was the pull of the hundreds of hikers in front of us, the push of the hundreds of hikers from behind. Broken as we were, together we snaked up the mountain like something alive, our headlamps steady shards of light in the inky darkness.

And as the new day dawned, we stood at the summit and surveyed the wreckage we'd spent the night zig-zagging through. I looked at the earth's curvature gently falling around us, and I remember thinking: this whole mountain is one huge mound of broken pieces, shards from something else. And yet, there it was, the tallest peak on the continent. Out of these pieces, a new creation. That was the insight I needed.

Wisdom from the first creations

Suddenly, things that had been familiar made a different kind of sense. I began to see the breakage everywhere. This time, it didn't frighten me: something new was about to be born.

Creation always happens out of the broken pieces of something else. Look at the Genesis accounts again. They're not scientific truth; they're just wise. Here's the wisdom they telegraph: For that first creation to happen, that smooth stone of matter, "without form and void" (Genesis 1:2, KJV), had to be shattered.

Light is broken apart from darkness, day from night, the heavens from the earth and the seas, sun from the moon and all stars. Adam himself is wrested from the earth, which struggles to hold onto one of its own.

Then, even Adam is broken. The only way to get to Eve is to break open Adam's body.

New creation always comes out of the broken pieces of something else.

I used to tell people: "If you see my Old Life out there wandering around, would you remind it where I live? It seems to have forgotten my address." Suddenly, even that dark joke seemed oddly hopeful. There was New Life out there, and it would be born out of the pieces of the old one: like the shards of the deep magma that turned into Kilimanjaro, like the wounds that made Jose a healer. Out of these pieces, a new creation. What would it be like?^x

Whatever it resembled, I knew it would not be like the Old One. The New Creation is not like the Old Creation.

Or, to use the language my gang uses, resurrection is not resuscitation. No one recognized Jesus after he rose from the dead, even the crowd who was with him 24/7. They thought he was a gardener, a harbormaster, a wandering rabbi – even a ghost. The New Life comes on its own terms: we know only that it comes out of the pieces of the old one.

New Life comes when we welcome our wounds. How do we welcome our wounds?

III. Rediscovering compassion

Now Jose's words carry a certain urgency: "How can I help the wounded, if I don't welcome my own wounds?"

After all, passion and compassion are not just etymologically related. It's not just that the two words come from the same Latin verb, "to suffer" (*patior, patere, passum*). In Latin, "to suffer" is a passive verb – but then suffering is what happens to you. Compassion chooses to stand with someone in times and spaces of their suffering. You know how to get there, because you've been there yourself.

Compassion pushes beyond service, which is kind of a big word in my gang. Lutherans are all about serving the neighbor in need. But by the time you've identified a "neighbor in need," you've made a judgment. You've judged, first of all, that the neighbor needs something, and second, that you know what that is. So it sets up a relationship of inequality or paternalism at the outset.

Medical judgments are appropriate in the medical setting. People come here because they judge that they need something you have – and they don't. There's an inherent inequality in the professional-client relationship in terms of expertise. After all, we didn't look for a neurosurgeon who knew as much about the brain as we did. But we were blessed to find one who had both expertise *and* compassion.

Our first Bay Area neurosurgeon, Dr. Larry Dickinson demonstrated *expertise* over and over again, as he prepared to operate on what he

called “the high rent district” in Bill’s head. But Dr. Dickinson demonstrated *compassion* when he answered the question Bill posed to him after we learned the latest MRI showed definite “shadows” that needed the attention of a second surgery.

Dr. Dickinson was in the midst of explaining that his team wasn’t up to the second surgery, but he knew someone at UCSF who could whom he would call as soon as we left the office -- – when Bill interrupted him with his question: “What would you do if I were your brother?” And Larry said: “I’d drop everything and take you skiing.”

I don’t know where that answer came from, and I don’t need to. But I knew he’d been there. Dr. Dickinson delivered the medical judgment; Larry showed compassion. The noose of the cancer was tightening; yet, I felt a spaciousness I couldn’t fathom.

For the first time, I felt like we were on solid ground. And I knew – with utter certainty – there were lots of other people standing there, Dr. Larry Dickinson among them. These people had been there -- and they weren’t afraid to come back.

How does Jose work with recovering addicts and alcoholics at Homeboys Industries? Well, I haven’t been there to watch, but I bet you anything: he’s not wearing three t-shirts any more. He doesn’t have to tell his story: it’s written on his body.

How do we harness the wisdom of the body in pain?

By claiming agency and living life, not as victim, but agent;

By remaking/repurposing the broken pieces, refashioning them into a new creation;^{xi}

By rediscovering compassion;

In short, by welcoming our wounds.

I’m always struck with one of the central stories from my gang. Their leader had been tortured and put to death, and he was supposed to be

back and wandering around among them. But, as I mentioned, nobody seems to be able to recognize him.

This guy even shows up for dinner, at their table – and they don't know who he really is -- until he blesses the meal. Then, they get it. And then, he's gone.

So one of the guys who missed the meal tells the others: "I'm not gonna believe it's him, until I see the wounds." He knows how to identify their leader, not by his blessings or his teachings or his enormous expertise. He's identified by his wounds, the marks of his torture and execution, wounds in his hands and his feet and his side.

And then he appears to them, and he says: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side" (John 20:27).

And they ran their fingers over his wounds.

So: I'll give Caravaggio, that "bad boy" of Renaissance painting, the last word. Here's his image of the last story – and you can see that doubting homie putting his hand right in the side wound, which shocked his contemporaries no end. Which was exactly what he wanted.

Don't be afraid of your wounds: they hold great power.

Martha E. Stortz

Bernhard M. Christensen Professor of Religion and Vocation

Augsburg College

Minneapolis MN 55454

stortz@augsb.org

ⁱ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

Listen to his interview with Krista Tippett in the Chautauqua Institute Interfaith Lecture Series from the summer of 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9MkHqIMBfc>

Accessed January 27, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1979).

ⁱⁱⁱ I borrow that phrase, “I can only tell you what I know,” from anthropologist James Clifford, who himself borrowed it from a Cree Indian hunter who came to Montreal to testify in court regarding the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay Hydroelectric. He’d been asked in a trial to swear on a Bible to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” He considered this for a long moment, before observing: “I’m not sure I can tell the truth....I can only tell what I know.” James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 8.

^{iv} Horrible, unspeakable things happened to him, but still Jose asserts his agency. He doesn’t speak in accusative or dative case, that is, of “me” and “to me.” Claiming the nominative case, “I” “I” “I,” he takes charge.

^v The line is from James Joyce’s short story, “After the Race,” in *Dubliners* (West Warwick RI: The Merry Blacksmith Press, 1914), pp. 35-43.

^{vi} Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

^{vii} Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

^{viii} Cf., Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Louisville: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1983).

^{ix} Of the last, Weil writes:

“Affliction causes God to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God’s absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be only with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job.”

Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in George A. Panichas (ed.), *The Simone Weil Reader* (Mt. Kisco NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), p. 442.

^x My gang calls this “resurrection.” And as much as I might have wanted to have the Old Life back again, resurrection is not resuscitation: New Life entirely.

^{xi} This is the work of memory, a “dangerous memory,” as we literally re-member bone on bone, flesh on flesh pieces that have been torn apart. The phrase is

fundamental to the theology of Johannes Baptist Metz. Cf., *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1998).