



James Hollis
American Jungian psychoanalyst
Author of sixteen books
Public speaker based in Washington, D. C, USA

Who Heals the Healer? The Profile of the Wounded Healer

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"The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on the earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only the wounded soldiers can serve."
 Thornton Wilder, *The Angel that Troubled the Waters*.

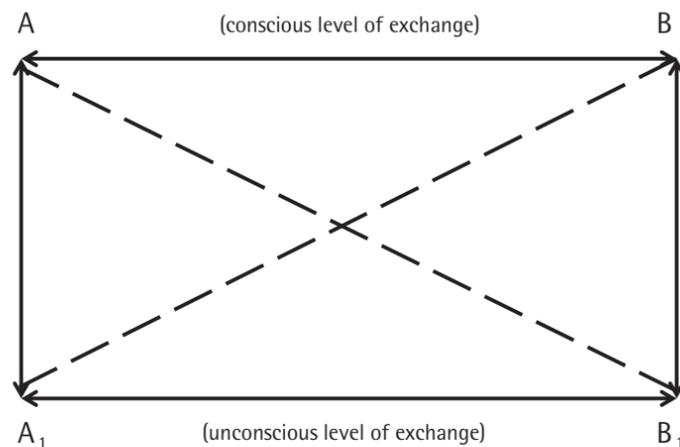
There is a wounded part in all of us, and there is a healing part in all of us. From those centers, whether we know it or not, choices rise, patterns begin, and the unconscious engines of choice create our histories. While this essay was first delivered as a speech/workshop for professional caregivers, many who did not fit that occupational designation, found that it spoke to them as well. Are not most of us, in relationships where wounded parts of us are repeatedly activated, and are most of us not also in relationships where we seek the healing of others? So, this essay is for more than therapists, nurses, clergy, social workers, and the like. It is for all of us: a reminder, a caution, and perhaps a help.

THE ARCHETYPE OF THE WOUNDED HEALER

While found in all cultures in various stories, the work, risk, gift, and cost of healing finds its mythic origin in the recognition of Asclepius, the Greek physician who, in recognition of his own wounds, established a retreat for healers at Epidaurus where they might repair and be healed of their own wounds. Little is known of that sanctuary, but what little we do know tells us the following. As *sanctuary*, one has already effected a break from the people, places, and things that were part of the mounting stresses that afflict the healer.

Those seeking healing found: "*incubation*" through sacred space, and restoration of psyche's balance.

Apparently, they indulged in *cleansing baths*, a symbolic regression to the restorative powers of the unconscious, and the archetypal fount of our origins. They were told to pay attention to their dreams as compensatory messages from the unconscious. Even bites from non-lethal serpents in the area were welcomed for quickening consciousness, and presumably, for healing encounters with the balm of the Great Mother, as we witnessed in the D. H. Lawrence poem earlier.



Jung thought a great deal about the psychology of the wounded healer. In this diagram, simple as it appears, are twelve different vectors of energy.

At the top level we see two people relating to each other consciously, as this writer and you the reader are. But both of us brought all of who we are into

this moment also. Some of that massive data dump is activated in any given moment, which is to say the two side lines are lit up, triggering the unconscious which floods the conscious person with some variant of the question: "where have I been here before?" The data from the past floods the consciousness of person A or B and influences their choices. It also inevitably falls back into the unconscious.

Additionally, the diagonal lines indicate how the unconscious material is projected onto the other person or situation. The contents of the unconscious can either continue to flood the other, distorting their reality, or return to the unconscious. Once again, the energy vector flows both ways.

And, at the deepest level, the unconscious of one person is affecting the unconscious of the other. We all know that some relationships are inherently healing or iatrogenic, depending on what material, what historic script, has been catalyzed. This simple diagram, flowing in 12 directions simultaneously, helps explain the healing or wounding effects of our relationships, the creation of their patterns, and why so many end up in the dead end of repetition.

In examining the profile of and strategies of the wounded healer, Jung concluded that half of any depth treatment consists of the healer examining her or himself, and that healing can only take place if the healer has a relationship with his/her own unconscious. For "only what he can put right in himself can be put right in the patient."¹

Of course, the healing task is *dangerous* because it opens the healer up to the toxins coursing within the other, whether of physical or psychological nature. Yet, "it is his own hurt that gives the measure of his/her power to heal...this is the meaning of the Greek myth of the wounded healer."²

As we all know, prolonged exposure to pathologies of all kinds, including racism, sexism, bigotry, poverty, and many others begin to fill one's soul like invisible silica drifting down from the ceiling. Even the routinization of office life can provide such incremental intoxication, as Theodore Roethke reveals in his pre-computer poem "Dolor."

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
 Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper weight,
 All the misery of manila folders and mucilage,
 Desolation in immaculate public places,
 Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,
 The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,
 Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
 Endless duplication of lives and objects.
 And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
 Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,
 Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
 Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
 Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

In the ancient healing arts of shamanism, the healer was sometimes known as a "sin-eater," one who helps purge the system of its toxic effluvia, but at what price to the shaman?

THE PROFILE OF THE WOUNDED HEALER

When we examine the personal psychology of the typical healer, we see that so often they have come from troubled families, learning early that their "job" was to try to restore psychological equilibrium to the family system. In his "The

1. Jung, CW 16, *The Development of the Personality*. "Fundamental Questions of Psychotherapy," para. 239.

2. *Ibid.*

Families of Origin of Social Workers, "Bruce Lackie notes that an empirical study of 1577 professional healers, nearly three quarters described themselves as "the *parentified*, child, the *over-responsible* member of the family, the *mediator* or *go-between*, the 'good child,' the *burden bearer*." ³

The highest percentage of care-givers came from troubled families of origin and "while being hypersensitive to cues and maintaining all the qualities of a good, non-demanding parental figure, *lack basic trust* in the world and has little faith in his or her own ability to *stabilize* chaotic situations significantly." Because a child really can't rebalance the troubled world around, he or she will nevertheless carry a chronic anxiety and feel compelled to respond over and over, whether appropriate or not.

Thus, he or she, are usually "wed by an overwhelming sense of *responsibility* to an intrapsychic symbiosis with his or her family." We might add that this symbiosis is naturally extended to the 'human family' in one's later life whether one is a professional healer or not. For example, a colleague of mine on a university campus, a Director of Nursing, found 80% of her students came from alcohol dysfunctional families.

Lackie adds, "Good children see the kind of overt *validation* and *recognition* outside the family that their covert role within the family does not allow. They often live with considerable *guilt* despite their special position within their family." In other words, a former child, such as we all are, often operates out of a sense of shame, seemingly contaminated by the distressed world of one's origin, or out of guilt for having failed then, and most likely now, too, to fix it.

Further, Edward Hannah, in "The Relationship between the False Self Compliance and the Motivation to become a Professional Helper"⁴ tells us, that the "False Self (Winnicott) merges with the idea (vocation) of helper" for "during early childhood, he/she accurately perceives the he or she is needed to maintain parental narcissistic equilibrium." So, apparently, both out of the pressures of the environmental demands, as well as in service to the forlorn hope that success will then make that environment safer, and more nurturant for the child, he or she is enlisted early in a rescue mission. Moreover, "When such children become [healers], they usually have chronic, mostly unconscious feelings of being used as well as reactive feelings of *entitlement*, *rage*, *greed*, *envy*, and *contempt*... [and yet] guilt feelings in response to these reactive affects contribute to a lifelong need to make reparation for the fantasy of damaging the needed but archaic objects." Why guilt? Again, because *I failed to heal those archaic objects called Mother and Father*. Why entitlement and greed? Because I sacrificed so much of my own legitimate agenda, that I am now deserving of recompense. Why envy? Because others have it easier than me. I have to carry this extra burden, invisibly. Why contempt? Because I am really above all this and wonder why they don't all just take care of their lives rather than dump it all on me.

These illogical but powerful phantasies rise from the familiar archaic thinking of the child, and all of us under stress: "I am my environment. My environment is a message to me about me." In this book *Countertransference*, Gerald Searles concludes of the healer gestalt in us: "life consists basically in his *postponement*... of his own individuation in the service of his functioning symbiotically as therapist to one or another of his family members, or to all collectively in a family symbiosis."⁵

Jung noted that virtually everyone carries, and may be managed by a "patho-

3. Bruce Lackie, "The Families of Origin of Social Workers," 1981. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240339951_The_families_of_origin_of_social_workers

4. Edward Hannah, "The Relationship between the False Self Compliance and the Motivation to become a Professional Helper," *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 1990. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00377319009516680>

5. Gerald Searles, *Countertransference and Related Subjects*, 1979.

logical secret." One such secret may be expressed as the terribly haunting refrain, "I failed to heal my family." I can give you many, many examples of the depression, ("learned helplessness"), anger, (threat turned inward), and burn-out of tired souls, tired of trying to make things work, and oh so tired of being tired. Learning the terrible truth that every healer must learn to survive is critical, and maddening: *we cannot fix anyone, except, perhaps, perhaps, ourselves*. That day when one recognizes, as Mary Oliver wrote in "The Journey," is the day one finally leaves home, when one is determined to do

the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.

THE PERIL OF BEING A WOUNDED HEALER

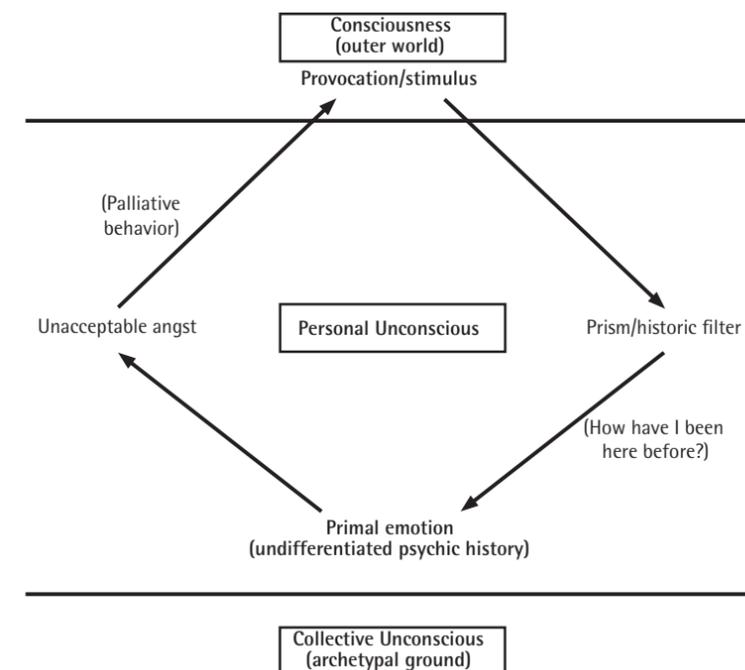
The continuing price of being a wounded healer is omnipresent, whether one hangs out a shingle for practice, or one stays in locked relational strategies, reflexive responses assembled years ago, and honed through repetition. These prices include:

1. Anxiety:

Anxiety is triggered by the continuing activation of our own psychological history. (Though it did not seem funny at the time, we students in training in Zurich often felt that our first patients had all been sent to us by an omniscient Kuratorium to befuddle us because they so often presented the same problems we were wrestling with at the time). Such conversations with others, naturally evoked our own complexes, the omnipresent clusters of history we carry from our past into all new relationships.

And given that those personal stories generate the affects attendant upon their generation, the wounded healer is almost always bathing in the waters of anxiety. This anxiety activated so often leads to stress, somatic aches and pains, and either passive suffering or unconscious acting out.

Here is how the complex looks when diagrammed:



The activation of the history produces a charge of energy. The unconscious quickly sorts through the history, and via the filter of personal lens, identifies the threat. This "threat" confronts the person with one or both of the twin risks to survival: *overwhelmment* by the environment, or *abandonment* by it — either one of which can be lethal.

Along with the usual mechanism of *projection*, given that the stimulus is actually new, the second mechanism of *transference* imports the entire range of fight, flight, or freeze responses from our personal histories. Accordingly, the new situation is loaded with energy imported from our psychic basements, which accounts so often for our over-charged behaviors which we may come to regret later. It also prejudices the new moment because it is now filed under the subject heading where our fastidious clerk at the "Office of Living History: Complex Division" placed it. Given that this circuitry takes milliseconds, we are seldom conscious of its presence until we look at the messy terrain from afar. This is how the wounded healer is fraught with anxiety at almost all times though may be wholly unaware of its interference in the conduct of daily life. This is how we live so much of the same old story so many, many times. *La plus ca change, la plus la meme chose.*

2. Depression:

One of the central features of depression is the feeling that its origins are irresolvable, what therapists call "learned helplessness." If one takes depression literally, it is something *pressed down* upon us. If we feel incapable of resolving it, depression is a logical expression. According to students of classical Hell, the worst part of that dismal zone was that it was forever, without resolution. That, and no room service, would certainly lead anyone to a number of bad days.

Given that we take in the toxins of others, allied with toxic features of our own history, our personal darkness is activated once again. And how inescapable it often feels, in particular because it catalyzes the whole archaic field of a child's powerlessness, so familiar, so persisting. Why would the evocation of learned helplessness, feeling tied to that awful place forever, not lead to depression? Only if we can consciously sever, at least for this moment, this particular arena, the linkage between the powerlessness of childhood past and the much larger powers of the mobilized adult that we are also, may we break through the depression into either action, or acknowledgement of the excess baggage of the past.

3. Passivity:

Closely allied to the experience of depression is its dismal sibling called *passivity*. Therapists, most caregivers, cannot overtly solve or fix what ails the other in our purview. We confront our powerlessness over and over and so often must wait, wait, wait as opposed to our natural impulse to problem resolution. Patience is often supplanted by its distant cousin passivity, along with attendant features of guilt for not fixing the problem. For those who sit hour after hour and listen, as therapists do, the stress of those energies with nowhere to go turn inward onto the body and all sorts of somatic features accumulate. Stiff neck, upper shoulder pain, spinal stress often receive the run off from blocked action, contained emotion, into the body.

4. Alienation:

Still another cost of being a wounded healer, whether designated as a professional in the field, or as a family member or friend, is the privacy of those moments. You know it, you face it, you suffer it, and you can't share it. In the nineteenth century, what we today know as therapists, were called

"alienists," mostly because they dealt with folks estranged from themselves or social expectations. It is also fair to employ that word to refer to the secret-keeping that good healing often requires. When clients themselves have too often shared their therapeutic experiences with others, the accumulation of energy needed to break through an issue often bleeds out and dissipates. This work is private for more than reasons of confidentiality; it is private because the psyche has to attend the healing in its own, more effective way. The energies processing within the container have to brew, and reach a catalytic pressure to produce serious change.

It is our privilege, as a professional care-giver, or even as a friend, to be invited to share the suffering of the other, and yet that adds to our own accumulating silica of suffering as well. The ancient seer Tiresias once said that sometimes we see things not meant to be seen, and yet they must be for being emotionally present, open, and available is critical to the healing dimensions of relationship. We all remember some physician or nurse or therapist or clergy who was so clinical in their attitude that we were put off by them.

To share and bear in silence is essential to healing, but it does lead the healer to feel estranged sometimes from the normal activities of life which feel so trivial, so superficial, and so ignorant of the mass of suffering all around one. I recall a colleague once saying to me, "I do this work so that someone can help me bear my loneliness." I fully understand that comment, and yet it can, and sometimes does, set the healer up for violations where the needs of the healer supersede those of the client.

There is an ancient Jewish legend of the *melamed vovnikim*, also known as "the Thirty-Six Just." The idea of the story is that no matter how bad things get on earth, God leaves thirty-six just souls who can hear and hold one's story of suffering. And, having been heard, the suffering soul may be assured that its story has been heard by God. It is a lovely legend. While one should never presume that one is one of those "Just," it is still a standard to which to subscribe. And, while thirty-six isn't enough to cover all the bases, perhaps the number is negotiable from time to time so that more of us ordinary folk can be included in that company.

The price of this alienation can lead to too much emotional separation, including repressed feeling reactions, too much isolation, too much spiral downward. Staying open to the wounds of others is critical, and yet dangerous. Still, there is a community of exiles. And it is an honor to belong to such a community.

MAKING WOUNDS WORK

When asked my secret of work ethic, I often jokingly answer, "well, mental illness works for me...". It may not be much of a joke, but close to the truth. One may use one's wounds for the good of others. History is filled with examples of those who rose from their own difficult days and brought an enhanced consciousness and resolve to the common good of humankind. As Jung put it once, behind the wound often lies the genius of the person. The point of entry often becomes the point of quickened awareness as well. The key is that one is drawing on this well of experience to serve a different future, rather than just recapitulate the past, which is what will happen if one is still in the grip of the original traumata. This is why psychoanalytic training institutes insist that the therapist undergo a long term analysis to learn more about these blocking and causal factors in their own history. Such analysis is not a guarantee of course, but it is a good faith effort to be less of a problem to others. Perhaps most of all, wounds make one especially conscious around certain experiences, the addressing of which can be healing for self and other. Therefore, the traumata

can, *can* become sources of common good, and enlarged meaning.

And yet, wounds can *pathologize and contaminate* the work of healing as well. So the victim of sexual abuse may see it everywhere, and its over-diagnosis has led to some celebrated malpractice events. People in recovery have sometimes discouraged newbys from undertaking therapy at the same time, as if they were rivals for the soul of a person. More commonly, the two folks working together can fall into a joint complex, a so-called *folie a deux*, get along quite well, and yet miss the larger picture because of the gravitational pull of the common wounding experience.

But this suffering can, and mostly does, bring greater emotional and cognitive differentiation and growth to the healer. In short, we learn from our clients just as they learn from us. We learn not only what they may know in their separate life, but we learn how various paths of healing may occur and help both parties. Jung was quite emphatic that at its heart, therapy was about two dedicated individuals working on the same existential problems. Being in the soup with someone, one is obliged to look at oneself as well.

It is always a healthy question to ask oneself, "*what would I be doing with my life without this wounding?*" Perhaps one was meant by the gods to be a tree surgeon, or a country and Western singer, and not to be so caught up in the now-contaminated and miasmal field of caregiving. This question can and has led some thoughtful colleagues to walk away after many years and return to a left-behind talent or enthusiasm. *What does this history make me do, and what does it keep me from doing?* These two questions have freed a lot of folks doing good work to learn that there is even better work for them in a field far away. As Jung put it, when is the good the enemy of the better?

WHY BE IN HELPING PROFESSIONS?

Among the students in Zürich at the Jung Institute in the old days, it was rumored that the question "why do you want to become a Jungian Analyst" should never be answered by "because I want to help people." The desire to help people is not a bad thing, of course, but a deeper exploration into the question reveals that one begins because one is seeking to heal oneself. The phantasy that one might heal another is considered an inflation, a hubris, given that we all have so much healing of ourselves to do first. Helping others is a secondary phase, and remains always dependent on being in right relationship to one's own soul.

When, back in the 1970's, I was asked a version of that question in an early interview of the many to come, I think I mumbled something like the work being the best way I had yet found to make sense of my own mental chaos and suffering. At that time, I had no plans to leave a comfortable world of tenured academia to attend the never-ending world of human suffering. But one of the things I learned through analysis was that some of that love of academia was my own way of avoiding how much was hurting inside of me. Ivory towers, and all that. When further down the line when I was shuttling between working in a closed ward of psychotic souls in a state psychiatric hospital and a well-tailored campus, I came to realize that the conversations at the former felt more real, and went deeper, than those at the latter facility. Slowly, the shift occurred over several years, and slowly felt more and more right. While I enjoyed teaching, and still do, hence this book and others, I was backing into my true vocation after some years of ambivalence and avoidance. Vocation comes from *vocatus*, to be called. We may not wish to be called, but we all are to something, and like listening to the Daimon, it is better to respond than to flee. Artists who follow their path do not "choose" to be an artist in face of suffering, uncertainty, failure, impoverishment, and cultural marginalization, but real artists do serve the calling.

While there may be more than one vocation in the course of our lives, each

one perhaps speaking to our interests, talents, situations, the call is always there, even when lost in the cacophony of outer demands, and inner urgencies. For this reason, some of my colleagues have left the work, and it was right that they answered that new call. It was not burn-out, but rather the stirrings of the soul seeking new seas to sail.

So, the concomitant question naturally rises: how does the wounded healer address self-healing? I am glad you asked that question.

SELF-TREATMENT

Just as Nietzsche once asked, who will teach the teacher, we are brought back to this question: who will heal the healer? Here are some thoughts along those lines for you to consider.

Not surprisingly, I favor each person who so wishes to engage in a personal therapy, including from time to time therapists also. Remember that the etymology of the word *therapy* means to listen to, pay attention to, attend, serve. Psychotherapy, then, would be attending to, serving your own soul—what could be so bad about that? The basic purpose of therapy is to engage in an on-going dialogue around the meaning of one's journey, asking such questions as:

1. What are my patterns, especially the self-defeating choices? What "complexes," cluster of energy in my history creates those patterns? What do they make me do, and keep me from doing?
2. What has always pulled at my sleeve, asked recognition from me, and even now wishes to be honored and lived in the world? What wishes to enter the world through me, rather than what does the world want from me?

Of course, a formal therapy is not required or appropriate for everyone. And it is sometimes hard to find a therapist these days who has lived the journey and therefore can go to those depths with you. But, and this is an important, but: one still has to ask these questions of oneself. Sometimes it is useful to bounce them off another and get a response that helps us see outside our frame, but when that is not possible, at least asking large questions of ourselves will lead to a larger life than when left to routinization and a government by complexes.

One thing I noted of the analysts with whom I worked in Zürich was that they, wise elders, had lived their lives, with all its vicissitudes, were not glib or naïve or formulaic. They also lived their lives with passion. Remembering that *passio* is the Latin for "suffering," it means engaging in something which one feels so much that it hurts, but which in engaging much meaning is experienced. Most of them also had alternative interests: gardening, art, music, sculpting, sport, and the like. They were curious, multidimensional, and had a life outside their work. As Jung noted, one cannot take a client further than one has traveled oneself. Thus, they had to have a life before they could look at the life of another with a measure of distance, and engagement, and passion.

Any wounded healer has also to continue to re-vision the journey, not only through therapy, but meditation, active imagination, dream work, body work, and continued study and reflection on the meaning of our immersion in the vast ocean of mystery in which we swim. Curiosity is our best guide, along with an open mind, and an open heart for discovery.

Any wounded healer, therapist, or any of us, must develop rituals of "*emptying*" or "*washing clean*." If we absorb toxic material in our work, in our relationships, what heals us, what frees us? I think each person must find a life outside the work through sport, body work, mediation, music or whatever brings another part of the psyche to the center, and thus compensates for the worry and stress of the work. At the end of the day, I never read a work of psychology, *per se*,

but rather history, and occasionally spy novels. One can learn a lot by "getting away," and what one learns brings one back to the work in a refreshed and more informed way.

Ultimately, any "healer," will survive only with a recognition of one's limits, and the limits of our various "sciences." The Twelve Step folks and the Buddhists have been there ahead of many of us. The former group say, "let go, and let God," which is a way of saying, "you can't fix this. Stop going crazy thinking you can. This work belongs to a pay grade several levels above you."

And the Buddhists have for millennia reminded us that the chief cause of human suffering rises from the ego's phantasy of sovereignty. The more it wishes control, the more life evades its program. The recent pandemic is a perfect example of this delusion. The best systems in the world failed, often complicated by human pathology, but underneath all of this is the terrible majesty of nature doing its thing. Thus Buddhism has urged us not to push the river, but to go with it, and seek to live in as much harmony with the Tao of nature as is possible.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, one must recover, or re-member, a participation in the grand mystery of it all. We are here a short while, and while imbued with large longings, we are equipped with finite tools. The more we simply sit back and puzzle, look at the stars, or the vast constellations whirling within each of us, and enjoy the view, our brief moment in this infinite pageant before us and after us, the more we feel fully here.

The wounded healer brings much good to this world. But our powers are so profoundly limited. Running from this summons is a flight from life itself, and an over-identification with its work, is a pathology of its own. How to attend the suffering of the other, hold to one's own agenda of growth and witness, is a continuing challenge. The wounded healer in each of us is asking each of us to attend this work more consciously, more vigorously, but it also wishes us to have more compassion for the parts in us that hurt so much. If we forget them, we aren't going to be very much good for others either. 🙏