

\* CHAPTER 1 \*

*Healing the  
hurt places*

When I was being introduced, I clung tightly to a quarter in my pocket. Rubbing its rough edges against my fingers seemed to reduce my tension slightly. Like many speakers, I am always a little tense before I speak; I believe they call it preperformance anxiety. This time I felt it keenly.

One of the members of the diocesan renewal committee that had invited us to do the retreat, a young family practice physician named Kate, had greeted me with scarcely veiled skepticism and hostility at supper. "As a physician, as a medical scientist, I have a question for you. Do you really think prayer

can bring about emotional healing? Isn't emotional healing accomplished through therapy and medication?"

I put on a calm face, though I didn't feel calm inside. I answered her that I thought therapy and medications played a central role, but opening up to God's love in prayer can also bring us to wholeness. God's touch can change us wonderfully not only in cases of entrenched sadness or anxiety, but in our everyday emotional lives. I wanted to tell her that scientific studies backed up that truth, but decided that challenging her on her own turf would just confuse things further.

Though I hoped my short answer would help her understand, her words had stung, and I let them throw me off balance.

I was about to give the first session of a weekend retreat designed to lead people into deep inner peace and healing, even though at that moment my own heart was less than peaceful.

As I began the talk, I looked down into the audience and saw Kate's sterile, antiseptic expression that scarcely masked her skepticism and anger. I stumbled through the first few sentences, and then realized I couldn't finish the talk. I moved on to the guided prayer experience, playing a slow version of Bach's "Jesu" on the audio system as soft background to the meditation. As I paused in the stillness, I realized one more time that it was not my words or style or knowledge of theology or psychology that would bring healing, but God's all-feeling compassion and love. We were just providing the spiritual and emotional space for people to open up to that love.

As I began to enter into the quiet myself, my anxiety receded. I felt a loving and warming energy pour over me as if I were in a shower of light. I sensed others entering that shower of light with me. Tears softly coursed down people's faces. A

thick, warm, loving calmness came over us, knitting our hearts together. It was as though in the silence we were now breathing one breath and experiencing the reality that one Heart beats in all of us. I gently and slowly continued the meditations, leading the group in remembering past joys and imagining a scene from Scripture.

Toward the end of the prayer experience, I noticed that Kate was sobbing. Hers were not the shallow, tight, frantic sobs that come from hopelessness, but the deep, purifying sobs that come from finally letting loose deeply entrenched pain. After we finished the session, Kate took me aside and told me her story, letting me know what had happened to her during the prayer experience.

She started off telling me that her initial hesitation about healing prayer was not really from scientific skepticism but from her own fear of looking inward.

Her mother had died of cancer when Kate was eight. In his grief, her father had become more and more dependent on Kate, his only child, for emotional nurture; he was asking for an adult emotional support that no child is capable of giving. As his drinking habit developed into alcoholism, he abused her first with violent words and then with violent actions. She showed me a scar on her hand from a cigarette burn and another above her eye from a belt buckle. A crash into a bridge abutment killed her father when she was 11, after which a loving aunt reared her and sent her through school.

The shock, the scars of what had happened to her, bored into the center of her being. Deep inside her heart she blamed herself for her father's death. Her emotions shut down, her personality became rigid. If only she had loved him enough,

she had always thought, he wouldn't have turned to alcohol.

She then told me what happened during the prayer experience: "I felt an injection of love warming my heart, warming my body," she said. "When you asked us to remember joyful times, I went back to the time before my mother got sick. I saw the three of us happy, laughing, enjoying homemade ice cream on the back porch. We were happy then. In that memory, for the first time in my adult life, I felt my daddy's love. I know he cared for me, cherished me. He just couldn't handle Mother's death. I felt grief and pain too, grief that he is gone, grief that he didn't recover. The hurt and the grief I felt as we prayed were immense, but the sense of love and caring was even greater."

Kate continued the journey that began during the retreat. She started seeing a Christian psychotherapist so that the healing would continue. She initiated a daily program of healing prayer. When I saw her next, the hostility that had covered shame had been replaced by a gentleness and strength that drew from the wellsprings of her being.

### Loved deep within

The majority of caregivers no longer share Kate's initial hesitation about healing prayer. More and more they see spirituality playing a vital role in not only emotional but physical healing.

How much useless energy is spent digging for painful memories when the real hunger is for loving affirmation—affirmation that allows the hurt we cannot reach despite all our searching and desire to come to the surface. The deeper levels of our psyches won't let go of the tightly guarded hurt until confronted with love and nurture strong enough to replace the hurt. Then, our inward parts that clutch so tightly to pain be-

gin to trust and let go.

Many of the prayer experiences we use in this book and on our retreats are designed to feed our deeper selves with affirmations of God's love. The prayer experiences instill hope, but not the surface kind of hope that suggests we can avoid reality by thinking "nice" thoughts. The prayer experiences bring hope by filling the inner recesses of our being with the central reality of faith: that we are created by a loving God who sent his Son to redeem us. We are grasped by God's affirmation. We experience his love at the very heart of things—a love that cannot and will not let us go. And that love makes all things fresh and new.

When we open our hearts wide to God's caring, the deeper roots of our nature find the permanent soil of an infinite love. We find in the cellars of our souls an ocean of infinite rest that gives meaning to our seemingly endless activities. There is a place within where the sea is always calm and the boats are steady. Christian healing prayer takes our awareness to that place. The kingdom of God, Jesus said, is within us.

When we enter into this kind of deep prayer, we are taken into the arms of a God who will never forsake us from his embrace. As we surrender ourselves to the power of Another, to something greater than ourselves, a force is mobilized within that helps affirm our goodness and wholeness.

Yet many of us, like Kate, fear this opening to love. We know that as we relax our guard and let love in, we will feel the hurts we spend so much energy trying not to feel, and we fear these feelings will overwhelm us. But like Kate's experience and that of many others I have known show, when our guard relaxes because love has touched us, it goes down at just the right pace.

Our pain didn't come in an instant, and our healing doesn't come in an instant. Real and lasting healing resembles the gentle and gradual changing of seasons rather than an overpowering summer thunderstorm.

We may never discover the origin of some of our pain, and that's okay. We don't always need to know where it came from to let it go. Romans 8:26 tells us that when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit prays through us with sighs too deep for words. Each of us is a fathomless depth and only God can know us fully. In meditation we give the Holy Spirit permission to search those depths. As our healing unfolds, at times we will find that a hurt is welling up inside and we don't know why. When that happens, we can grieve and weep and let go of our grip. This is what I believe Paul meant by sighs too deep for words.

Over a period of time, as prayer deepens the work of healing in our lives, a deep joy will root itself in the wellsprings of our being. The sunshine will appear to have more splendor and we shall be able to feel the warmth of words expressed by others rather than suspect ill will hidden in them. We learn to drink in the beauty of each present moment. The trees, the stars, the hills, the touch of another human being appear to us as symbols abiding with a meaning that can never be uttered in words. Nature begins to reflect the eternal. Water does more than wash our limbs; it brightens our hearts. The earth we walk on does more than hold our bodies; it gladdens our minds, transmitting to our being the almost maternal tenderness of God.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux on the curative power of prayer:

*"O good Jesus, from what great bitterness have you not freed me by your coming, time after time? When distress has made me weep, when untold sobs and*

*groans have shaken me, have you not anointed (me)...with the ointment of your mercy and poured in the oil of gladness? How often has not prayer raised me from the brink of despair and made me feel happy in the hope of pardon? All who have had these experiences know well that the Lord Jesus is a physician indeed..."*

### PRAYER

Dear Lord, teach me to open up the torn parts of my soul to your deep redeeming love. Like most people, at times I have gone through times of pain and loss. Teach me to pray that quiet prayer in which I take a long, lingering look at your infinite beauty. May your beauty draw me outside of myself, so that I may spend and give myself to your world and to your church in the same way you gave to us all. Amen.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have there been times in your life when prayer eased your stress or pain? Tell about such a time.

Many of us, like Kate in this story, have losses we have not grieved. At some point, the touch of God gave us the courage to finally grieve. Has there been such a time in your life?

3. What have been some of the times God has touched your life with his love? Tell about one of them.