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## **Taking Pain to the Heart**

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Writing in his journal during a time of bitter heartbreak, Henri Nouwen wrote these words: *The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or your heart.*

Part of us understands exactly what he is saying here, even as another part of us congenitally resists his advice: There's place in us that doesn't want to cry, doesn't want to feel our hurt, doesn't want to take our pain to a place of silence, and doesn't want to take our wounds to our heart. And so instead, in our heartaches and wounds, we grow anxious and obsessive, we struggle to understand, we talk endlessly to others, and we try to sort things out with our heads rather than letting ourselves simply feel them with our hearts.

And that isn't always a bad thing. Nouwen's counsel, for all its wisdom, needs some qualification: It is important that we also take our wounds to our heads. Our hearts and heads need to be in sync. But what Nouwen points to here is something that he, a man blessed with an extraordinary sensitivity to the things of the heart, learned only through crushing heartache and breakdown, namely, that we more easily take things to the head than to the heart, even when we think we aren't doing this.

The way we take pain to our heads and block healing tears in our hearts is by denial, by rationalization, by blaming, by not simply and honestly admitting and owning our own pain, our own helplessness, our own weakness, and our own inadequacy.

And we all have plenty of occasions to do this: The more alive and sensitive we are the more we will experience excruciating heartaches. The more honest we are the more we will be aware of our own limits and inadequacies. And the more generous and pure we are the more we will be aware of our own sin and betrayals.

And so Nouwen's counsel contains a healthy challenge: When we are brought to our knees by heartache and pain, we shouldn't try to deny that pain, deny its bitter strength, or deny our helplessness in dealing with it. To do so is to risk becoming hard and bitter. But if we give our deep pains and heartaches their honest due they will induce the kind of tears that soften and stretch the heart. It is helpful to remember that tears are salt-water, of one substance with the waters of the original oceans from which we sprung. Tears connect us to our origins and allow the primal water of life to again flow through us.

Moreover, when we take our pain to our hearts, when we honestly admit our weaknesses and helplessness, God can finally begin to fill us with strength. Why? Because it is only when we are brought to our knees in utter helplessness, only when we finally give up on our own strength, that God can send an angel to strengthen us, like God sent an angel to strengthen Jesus during his

agony in the garden.

One night, some months before his death, Martin Luther King received a death-threat on the phone. It had happened before but, on this particular night, it left him frightened and weakened to the core. All his fears came down on him at once. Here are his words as to what happened next:

*I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.*

*“I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before.*

It is only after the desert has done its work on us, says Trevor Herriot, that an angel can come and strengthen us. That is why it is better to feel our wounds than to understand them and why it is better to cry than to worry.

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