



PAINING
WITH
ASHES

M I C H A E L A D A M B E C K

P A I N T I N G
W I T H
A S H E S

Wounded Healer Grid



Plano, Texas

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to thank Rev. Laura Baber for helping me with this guide. Laura is one of my co-pastors at St Marks UMC Ocala, FL. She has been practicing the art of spiritual direction over 20 years. Her heart is to help people experience the deep well of God's love through creative contemplative practices. Her work has helped me along my own healing journey. Laura offered feedback and helped design some of the reflection questions. She made this resource much better!

INTRODUCTION

“my grace is sufficient for thee, for my power is made perfect in weakness”

We are a stressed-out generation. Extended exposure to chronic or extreme mental or physical stress ultimately becomes trauma. We are living through a series of unfolding crises that are causing individual and collective trauma on a massive scale. These overlapping crises include: a global pandemic, systemic racism, climate change, political extremism, rising mental illness, an overdose epidemic, and the disintegration of religion as we know it... just to name a few.

Unresolved trauma is carried in our bodies, communities, and societal systems. If it goes unresolved it spills out in patterns of harm and is passed on intergenerationally. As we say in the recovery fellowships, “hurt people hurt people.”

No one makes it through life unwounded. Every single one of us has been harmed, emotionally, physically, mentally, or spiritually. Some experience horrific levels of abuse that is completely debilitating. While there are varying degrees of trauma, every person has in some way been traumatized.

All wounds are not created equal, but all people are equally wounded.

Every person, organization, or community possesses a wound, a weakness, or unresolved trauma.

If people can go through a process of healing, they often discover that their greatest wounds and challenges can become their most powerful assets. This is true at both an individual and organizational level.

One of the spiritual writers in the Judeo-Christian tradition was experiencing an unresolved wound he called “a thorn in the flesh.” Paul the Apostle (5 AD – approximately 67 AD), one of the most influential figures in history, describes the ongoing struggle with this wound. In the midst of his battle, Paul believed he heard Jesus speak directly to him these words...

“my grace is sufficient for thee, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”¹

I believe this is a universal truth with transformative potential for all people. Paul was a very wounded person, but he found healing, and began to give that healing away to others. He went from being a “hurt person hurting people” to a “wounded healer healing people.” We live in a world obsessed with “Strength Finders” and “Gift Inventories.” We measure ourselves by our most exceptional traits, and we celebrate the heroes who use their superior strengths to attain epic levels of success. But what if we have that all upside down?

If God’s power is made perfect in our weaknesses, then our wounds become our super-powers.

I am a spiritual guide who helps people heal, love, and unleash imagination to create better lives and communities. My passion is to help individuals, organizations, and churches turn their greatest weakness into their superpower. I’ve done this primarily through coaching, consulting, and training people and their teams across the globe. I wrote a book about my own journey towards becoming a wounded healer. Within it I also documented some of the many people who turned their wounds, disabilities, and struggles into their greatest strength.

Painting with Ashes: When Your Weakness Becomes Your Superpower was my attempt at providing a tool to resource people in this transformative work. As I began to share the core ideas of the book with individuals and groups, a recurring question emerged:

1. 2 Corinthians 12:9

How might a person or group practically apply the principles in the book to our daily lives?

The guide you hold in your hands is my response. This is a companion guide, meant to help you move from being a wounded wonderer to a wounded healer. I don't believe there are "quick fix formulas" or "seven easy steps to a better life" that can facilitate this kind of journey. And it is a journey—one that will never be completed in this life. Yet there are some spiritual principles, embodied by a host of diverse persons across the ages, that can be a guide on that journey.

Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk psychiatrist, researcher, educator, and author of The New York Times best seller *The Body Keeps the Score*, writes, "Traumatized human beings recover in the context of relationships."²

While you can use these resources as an individual, this is a journey in which it's best to have company. Or as the often-quoted African proverb states, "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." One of the key ideas in *Painting with Ashes* is the African anthropological framework of *ubuntu*: a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu highlights the interdependency of humanity. All individuals are woven together in a single interconnected organism. We are harmed in community, a bundle of relationships, and we can only be truly healed in community.

As Fred Rogers was fond of saying, there are a lot of people who "loved us into being." We often think of healing as an individual enterprise, or we go to the specialist, therapist, or spiritual director, who helps us form a healthy sense of self. But we cannot truly have a sense of "self" that is not fully integrated in community. That kind of healing is illusory at worst, fleeting at best.

Regarding healing in the context of relationships, families, loved ones, AA meetings, veterans organizations, religious communities, or professional therapists, Dr. Kolk shows, "The role of those relationships is to provide physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and

2. Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, New York: Viking, 2014), 251.

to bolster the courage to tolerate, face and process the reality of what has happened.”³

My hope is that you would find a couple of close friends, co-workers, family, or church members, and work through this guide as a team. Additionally, the guidance of a spiritual director, therapist, or counselor can also be helpful. Or at least find an *anam cara*. Anam is the Gaelic word for soul, and cara is the word for friend. A soul friend is a safe person who acts as a teacher, companion, sponsor, or spiritual guide. The origin of a soul friend was grounded in the idea of confession. This was a confidant to whom you confessed and revealed the hidden intimacies of your life.

People share healing when they invite others to touch their wounds.

As an abandoned street kid, in and out of juvenile detention facilities, experiencing a healing church community that was accessible, safe, and real, changed the trajectory of my life. Let me unpack what I mean by those words:

Accessible: close, contextual, and speaks a shared common language.

Safe: an environment of grace and inclusion, a place of healing not harm.

Real: authentic, transparent, where people are honest about their real wounds, and real healing is taking place.

Weakness is transformed into superpower in a communal atmosphere of grace where people are free to be vulnerable.

Communities that are accessible, safe, and real, can allow people to process their trauma in an unfiltered way. Cultivating these healing communities, where people can paint with ashes, can help heal the world. I want to help you turn weakness into superpower by cre-

3. Kolk, 251.

ating healing communities that are accessible, safe, and real. This can happen in individual, religious, and organizational contexts.

I have seen teams apply these concepts even in the context of for-profit businesses. There is often an “elephant in the room.” The great weakness or challenge that organizations often can’t see because they are blinded by the accepted mental model. But when teams can become aware of these “organizational wounds” they begin a journey of helping their organization heal and become more resilient.

I am a Christian, and so I designed this guide to lean into the wisdom of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, but that is not a pre-requisite for this to work.

The guide you find in your hands or at the swipe of your fingertips is part of a bundle of resources. They are meant to work together:

- *Painting with Ashes: When Your Weakness Becomes Your Superpower* the book.
- *Wound Inventory*: take this online assessment before you begin this guidebook.
- *Wounded Healer Grid*: contained in this guidebook.
- *Video Reflections*: a brief reflection on the core ideas from the book are included each week.
- *Sermon Series*: for pastors and congregations who want to lead your people through the journey.

I hope that you will find this simple tool helpful in introducing a group of people to the idea that they can move through...

- Loss
- Surrender
- Restoration
- Flourishing

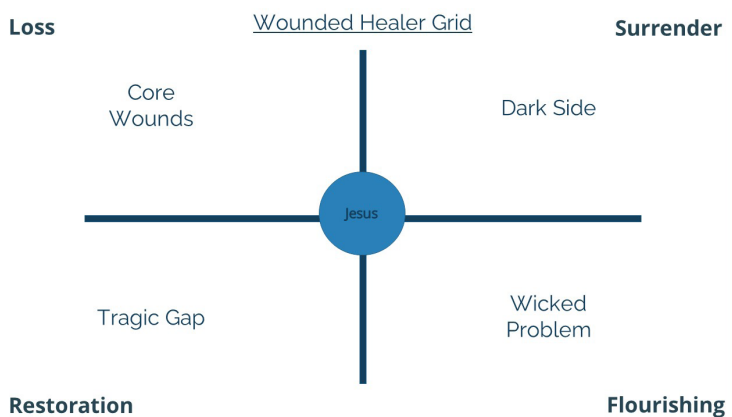
ANYONE can do this! Let’s go on a journey of turning weakness into superpower.

THE WOUNDED HEALER GRID

In *Painting with Ashes*, I describe the journey toward becoming a wounded healer in four movements.

1. Loss
2. Surrender
3. Restoration
4. Flourishing

Here I want to offer a framework that can help with these movements. The wounded healer grid can help you and your team move through your own wound, challenge or struggle. Here's the grid....



As you might notice, “Jesus” is the center of my grid. As a Christian, Jesus is my “higher power.” But this might not be true of you and your team. The key here is that a “power greater than your self”

is at the center of this grid, whatever that power might be for you. This will become clearer as we move through the grid.

In the part of the quadrant labeled “loss” this is about your core wound. Core wounds go back to the source of whatever trauma, challenge, or struggle that crippled you to begin with.

In the part of the quadrant labeled “surrender” we have become aware of this wound and we now see that it is a “dark side” that impacts other people. We have to use our free agency and will to surrender the reality of our core wound to a power greater than us. “Hurt people hurting people” may never get to this stage. They go through life unaware of their dark side.

In the part of the quadrant labeled “restoration” we start to see that we are not alone in our wound. Many others may also be struggling with a similar reality. Parker Palmer talks about the “standing in the tragic gap” that exists between what is and what could be.¹ He describes the tension one feels between a healed world, and the current realities of brokenness. The tragic gap is the uncomfortable spot where we offer ourselves to be a bridge of healing. Standing in the gap, makes the possibility of restoration real for us and others.

In the part of the quadrant labeled “flourishing,” we see how that tragic gap is manifesting in our own context. It is a “wicked problem.” I mean wicked not in the sense of being evil or morally wrong, but rather to describe a complex environment where success is not the most likely outcome. Wicked problems are social or cultural problems that are difficult or impossible to solve. We flourish when we find a way to give ourselves in the tragic gap for the healing of others.

Deep work

These questions invite you into the depths of yourself. They cannot be answered all at once. Be gentle with yourself as you seek to plumb your inner being. Again, it is highly recommended that

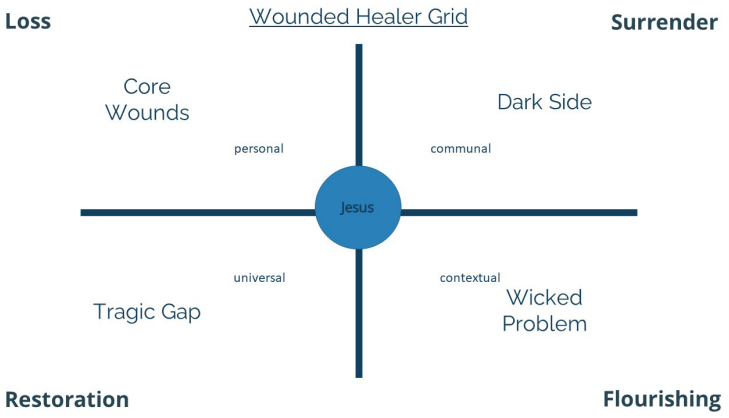
1. Palmer, Parker. *The Politics of the Brokenhearted: On Holding the Tensions of Democracy*, 2005, 254. http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_politicsbrokenhearted.pdf

you find support to process this work (spiritual director, soul friend, therapist, supportive community). It is normal to experience a full range of human emotions as you do this soul work. You may find it helpful to create a sacred space where you can do this work (under a tree, next to a candle, in a prayer closet.) It is very normal to need to either release energy (take a walk, garden, practice yoga, and so on) or rest after doing this inner work.

A Few Questions to Help Paint with Ashes:

1. In *Painting with Ashes*, abandonment is a significant core wound for Michael. Do you sense you have a core wound? If so, can you name it? Can you tell the story of how it came to be?
2. Michael's core wound has impacted relationships throughout his life. Can you begin to take inventory of your relationships and how they have been impacted by your wounds? As you remember these relational impacts, can you notice any red flags that could help you discern when you are operating out of woundedness when engaging with others? See if you can describe them and simply observe when they are most evident. What do you learn about yourself?
3. Michael describes his "tragic gap" as people experiencing abandonment and marginalization. What "tragic gaps" are rising in your consciousness in your life and community. Can you begin to tell those stories as a way to take the healing journey further?
4. In *Painting with Ashes*, a "wicked problem" is a societal ill that oppresses people and communities? Look around your community and begin to name the "wicked problems" that you are aware of. Notice your physical and emotional reaction to these problems.

5. Over time, take stock of the people and situations that lay heavy on your mind and spirit. As you begin to collect these observations what is becoming clear? How is your
6. own wound connected to the wicked problem you see? Could your wound be used to bring healing to others similarly wounded?
7. Spend some time with the four quadrants of loss, surrender, restoration and flourishing. Where do you find yourself in each section of the grid? Where do you sense God's invitation in these four quadrants?



Each movement of the journey focuses on a different relational aspect of our communally constructed self.

The core wound is personal, it's what happened to us. This wound somehow de-forms our soul, or the soul of an organization. It fractures our relationship with our own true self, we can become disconnected from our own thoughts, emotions, or even our body. We have to deal with this wound by reclaiming a true sense of personal identity.

The dark side is communal. When we are operating in our woundedness, we are often unaware of how it impacts those around us. In our own disillusionment, fear, or resentment, we harm the

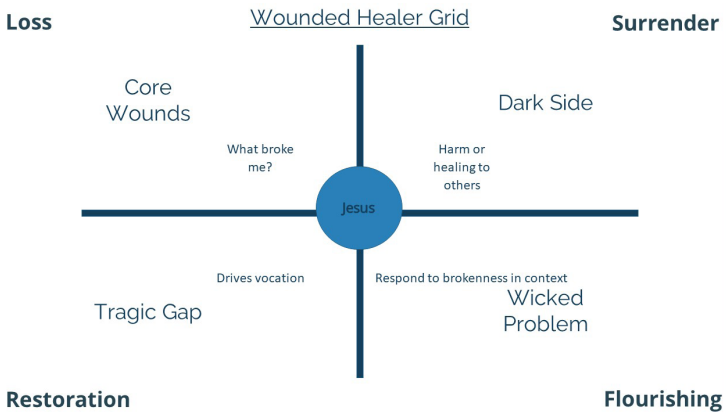
people around us. Because we are fragmented inside, we fragment the relationships that make us who we are.

The tragic gap is universal. It's where our wound touches the entire human race and creation itself. We are not terminally unique; our wound is shared by many others. We can notice it more clearly when we acknowledge our own dark side, surrender, and seek to make a difference for others who are suffering from the same wound.

The wicked problem is how that universal gap is manifesting in our family, home, work, or neighborhood. We can't make right all the suffering in our neighborhood, but we can start with one life at a time. This creates a sense of wellbeing that is connected to seeking the wellbeing of others. As we seek to use our wound as an instrument of healing, we may discover we are starting to flourish in different ways.

A Few Questions to Help Paint with Ashes:

1. How has your wound impacted you? In what ways did it make you unhealthy?
2. How has your woundedness played out in relationships with others?
3. Can you think of times you unintentionally wounded someone else in the same way you were wounded?
4. How common is your particular wound? How many people across the ages have faced a similar reality?
5. How do you see people carrying a similar wound not flourishing around you?
6. What might you do to create a greater sense of wellbeing for others in your community suffering in the same way you have?

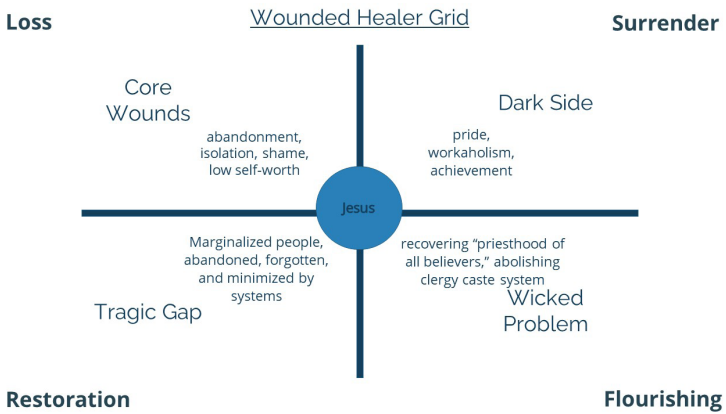


At the simplest level, every person is broken, the core wound challenges us to ask the question “what broke me?” Just like the impact of a weapon leaves an abrasion on our body, the impact of hurtful words, unwanted touch, violence, rape, accidents, death of loved ones, or disasters, can leave an open wound on our soul.

If not treated, the wound becomes infected. We might not be aware of that infection, and so we walk around bleeding on others, but in the process we infect them to. Our wound is causing harm to others and we might not even realize this.

When we do realize it, and seek to surrender and go a different direction, we might find a deeper sense of purpose or calling. No matter what we do for work or employment, a vocation is a calling, that may or may not be fulfilled in our job. Our vocation involves helping people who are hurting. It gets us out of our me centered fixation on self.

When we know we are called to bring healing to a particular gap in the wellbeing of others, we must formulate a response. We notice what’s broken in our community, then we ask ourselves, “what am I going to do about it?” or “how can I share the healing I’ve found?” We take responsibility for our part and at some level begin to make a difference.



Let me (Michael) use my own life as an example here. This is what the grid looks like in my own journey. I was abandoned by my biological parents at birth. My grandparents took on the burden of raising me, but they were cold and distant. I became isolated and began to question my own personhood. Later I was abused by people in my life who were supposed to protect me. I saw myself as a child not worth loving. I was told that I was the product of incest. Then I started to tell myself something was wrong with me. I was defective. That is called shame. This instilled in me a low sense of self-worth. This led me to begin self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, and sex at a very young age. So, these are some of the elements in my “core wounds” quadrant.

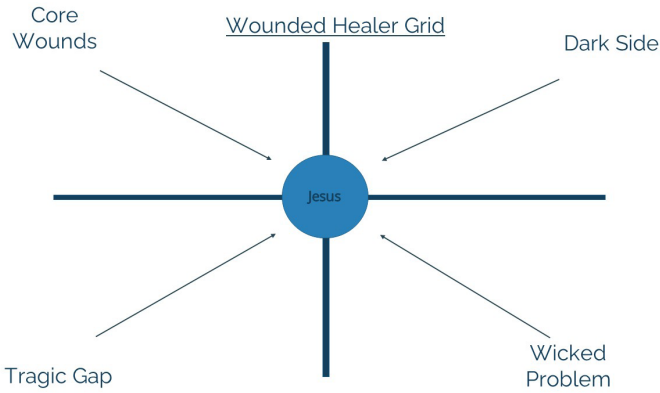
This led me to compensate by falling into the impostor syndrome. I built a persona and put on a mask. I projected strength and confidence when underneath it was a sham. I tried to earn a sense of self-worth through competition, working harder, achieving accolades, winning at any price. Eventually this meant even breaking the law and being incarcerated. Even today, my competitive spirit comes out as a first instinct. I can easily fall into a pattern of workaholism which is destructive to my family, friends, and coworkers. This is an aspect of my “dark side.”

When I become aware that my dark side is showing up, I try to surrender and turn it over to my higher power (in my case Jesus). When healthy, I’m empathetic towards the wounds of others around

me. There is a tragic gap, people who are marginalized, abandoned, forgotten, or even abused or minimized by established systems. I'm called to place my full self in that "tragic gap." To be a bridge between what is, and what could be for people.

This makes me hyper aware of the brokenness in my own family, work, and neighborhood. As a pastor and professor, I see abusive hierarchical church systems. I see inequality for women and persons of color. I see people who don't have access to education or attaining the proper credentials get minimized and discarded. I see a clergy caste system, where positional leaders exploit their power. I see a mass of lay people, with gifts, potential, and callings, that are suppressed. I see inequality in that system from the top to the bottom. So, I give my life as a spiritual guide who helps people heal, love, and unleash imagination to create better lives and communities. This drives my passion to help individuals, organizations, and churches turn their greatest weakness into their superpower.

I seek to challenge the clergy caste system. I believe in an insurgent, democratized form of Christianity, a community where everyone is an equal. I believe in being church differently. So I seek to cultivate communities of healing that are accessible, safe, and real. Or in historical theological terms, I seek to cultivate a "priesthood of all believers." This is the "wicked problem" in the context of my own life and ministry.



As noted earlier the center of the grid needs to be a power greater than ourselves. For me that power is Jesus. One never completes the journey toward becoming a wounded healer. Each of the four movements are an ongoing journey.

We become mindful of our core wounds and yield them up to God. We remind ourselves that we are beloved—of sacred worth and great value. We stubbornly believe that we are more than our wounds.

This requires us to be continually on guard for the emergence of our dark side and how we are affecting the people around us. Building a community of support, a therapeutic alliance, can help us point out when our character defects are showing up.

The tragic gap is not something we can ever fix. Only God can do that. Our role is to continuously yield and cooperate with God. The wound is universal, many people have suffered the same kind of de-formation that we have.

But we can dream big and start small. We can notice the tragic gaps in our own backyard and give ourselves to helping others. We can't keep our healing unless we give it away. We have to start with the people within proximity of our words, touch, and actions. We will never be able to heal our community, but we can give ourselves to helping one person at a time.

This means we keep bringing each quadrant back to the center. We keep accepting, surrendering, helping, and healing.

In so doing we become wounded healers. We paint with ashes. We turn our weakness into a superpower.

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