HEALING RELATIONSHIPS

By JACQUES PASQUIER

THE WOUNDS are opened, longing for a gentle touch. And yet the man is still lying on the ground, untouched, unhealed. The levite, the priest passed by on the other side. They had no time to stop.

The story of the man robbed, beaten and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is the story of us all.[1] It touches each one of us at one time or another in our lives. For anyone engaged in a therapeutic ministry, or involved in any type of inter-personal relationships, the awareness of suffering, pain, loneliness can become paralyzing. How can I heal? No one is a healer without having experienced what it means to be wounded, to be touched, to be vulnerable. It is because the levite and the priest of the parable had never allowed themselves to be wounded that they were unable to reach out to the man lying on the road.

Carl Rogers, in a very well-known article, has written about the characteristics of a helping relationship.[2] From his experience as a psycho-therapist, he came to establish some criteria for the growth of the human person. Though his experience is that of the professional therapist, his observations are relevant to all those who are constantly engaged in relationships which are, or should be, healing of their very nature.

Within the limits of this article, I would like to address myself to certain aspects of healing relationships in order to discover what exactly makes a relationship 'healing': and this in the light of personal experience and of reflection on the gospel-vision of Jesus the healer.

First of all, what do we mean by relationship and by healing? Two people are in relationship, when each makes a difference to the life of the other. Though this definition is a very wide one, it reflects the different directions that a relationship can take. If every relationship 'makes a difference', no single one can ever be neutral. If we tend to think that some of our relationships are neutral, we should ask ourselves whether we are talking about relationship, or

[1] Lk 10, 29–37.

[2] Rogers, C.: *On becoming a person* (Boston, 1961), pp 39–58.

simply about co-existence. A relationship is either growth-producing or life-destroying. And a moment's reflection on our own relationships makes us painfully aware that, in spite of their multiplicity, very few of them are, in fact, growth-producing or life-giving.

The term 'healing' is more complex, and can be used in many different contexts. For some, every relationship which is positive in its direction is healing. Personally, I prefer to give the term a more specific frame of reference: healing has to do with being wounded. It is only by reflecting on the causes of the wound that one can begin to create a healing relationship.

Misuse of power and the lack of freedom

In reflecting on my own experience in working with religious in groups or in individual counselling, I am always surprised and touched by the amount of suffering and pain encountered in so many religious of all ages. Very often they are maimed by fears and are unable to open themselves; they tend their wounds with a strange mixture of self-pity and self-protection. How can it happen that so many people living in so-called christian communities could have reached such a point? It is not just a question of family background, of not having been loved in their early childhood. Many have known the warmth of a loving family; and yet after ten, fifteen or forty years of religious life, they have become unable to love, unable to escape from their self-centredness, unable to allow themselves to be loved. Why?

The term 'power' is very ambiguous. We talk of the power of God and of our own powerlessness; yet it is our experience that power can be as much life-destroying as life-giving.

In one respect love and power are antithetical forces. A person may seek to order his life and his relations with others either on the basis of love or on the basis of power. And to the extent that he develops his capacity for power, he weakens his capacity for love.[3] There is no other choice in such a situation than to reject power as bad, as leading to human suffering and strife. Is this the basic choice confronting us? One that is inescapable, because each of us is over against the other in a relationship which is predominantly one of love or of power? Such a conclusion would presuppose that power is intrinsically evil.

Another approach would be to say that in itself power is neutral,

[3] Sampson, R.: *The psychology of power* (New York, 1968), pp 2–3.

but that its use or misuse leads to different types of relationships. Paul Tillich, for example, writes that every encounter 'is in some way a struggle of power with power'.[4] This struggle is tolerable, says Tillich, because each one of us has his own power of being, of developing, of becoming. If institutional power – external power – does not recognize the basic, intrinsic power of each individual, the struggle becomes unavailing. Many have jettisoned their own personal power in the unjust struggle: they have abdicated their own being in the face of external forces.

Many have been hurt, wounded, by an authority – whether personal or institutional – which never gave them the necessary space to develop, to become. The word authority is cognate with the word author: to be the author of life in others. When, therefore, authority places itself beyond criticism, beyond any possibility of dialogue, it is in fact destroying in the other the only power he has: his power of becoming. It disregards the intrinsic claim of every human being to become responsible for his ultimate decisions.

Though many have never experienced their own freedom, their own power, this is not always because of the imposition of forces from without. It can and does happen that the sinfulness in us is what makes us refuse to assume our own freedom. The story of Adam and Eve is not foreign to our experience . . . 'The man said: The woman you gave me for a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate . . . The woman said: the serpent tricked me, and I ate'.[5]

Paul's words to the Galatians, 'You, my friends, were called to be free',[6] is a call to accept one's own responsibility, to act and not merely to react, to be free to make choices. We very quickly develop patterns of behaviour which are a constant refusal to accept our own responsibility. Protected by an institutional system, we can easily shift the responsibility to someone else, denying in ourselves the centre of our humanness. The hurt which makes us build a shell around ourselves comes mainly from our lack of freedom, from within or without, and our refusal to take the risks involved in freedom. This leads to a lack of self-confidence, of self-esteem.

Responsible for – responsible to

One of the greatest difficulties experienced in the area of relation-

---

[4] Tillich, P.: *Love, Power and Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1974), p 88.
[5] Gen 3, 12–13. [6] Gal 5, 13.

ships comes from the fact that we are creating – and very often under the name of charity – relationships which are a constant denial of the other's freedom. I can be responsible for another person, or I can be responsible to another person, even as I can be responsible for myself or to myself.

To be responsible for the other creates a relationship of domination, power, or constant striving either to protect the other or to push him, to lead him or to restrain him. With such an attitude, I never allow the other person to be free, to be 'separated' from me, to be what he/she is called to be.

Rogers, in the article mentioned earlier, asks the question: 'Am I secure enough within myself to permit him his separatedness . . . Can I give him the freedom to be?' Our wanting to protect the other from his own hurt, from his own mistakes, from his own freedom, is the most damaging element in the relationships we create. It would seem that many of our relationships in ministry are characterized by this being 'responsible for': making decisions for the other who is often too willing to let someone else make a decision for him; sheltering him from the consequences of his own choices; bandaging wounds which need to remain open in order to be healed. And all this in the name of charity, when in fact all that we are doing is simply protecting ourselves.

Being responsible to another person is a very different thing. 'Responsible to' means being able to respond, able to respond to the person where he/she is, independently of his/her choice. It involves a relationship of listening, caring, of respecting the freedom of the other – whoever that person is.

Henri Nouwen makes the distinction between caring and curing. Most of our time is spent trying to cure, when the ministry of healing requires an ability to care.

> From experience you know that those who care for you become present to you. When they speak, they speak to you. And when they ask questions, you know it is for your sake and not for their own. Their presence is a healing presence, because they accept you on your terms, and they encourage you to take your own life seriously and to trust your own vocation.[7]

The experiences of being wounded in relationships and the recognition of some of the causes of these wounds should help us to

[7] Nouwen, H.: *Out of solitude* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1974), p 36.

appreciate this distinction between caring and curing, and help us towards learning about healing responses in relationship. The ministry of healing is first of all a ministry of compassion; just as Jesus's ministry of power sprang from his ability to 'be moved with pity'[8] by the needs of those among whom he lived and moved. However, such phrases have lost their initial force: 'to be moved with pity' often means no more than a vague and superficial emotion, or a general intellectual assent that a person or persons 'need help'. For Jesus, to 'be moved with pity' entailed a movement, a physical movement even of going out to the other in his need, of responding to the person through a gesture, a touch, a life-giving word. It was a liberating movement, in the sense that it revealed to others their own power of being, of becoming what they were created to be.

For the sake of clarity, but also to increase our awareness – the awareness of our own gift and of how our compassion is to be given, I suggest that the process of healing consists of three degrees or stages. These three degrees are very much inter-related, and do not strictly reflect a chronological order. However, I believe that they represent different stages in our ministry, and maybe some of us are more gifted in one rather than another. They may be termed the ministry of listening, the ministry of affirming, the ministry of freeing. These different ministries are beautifully exemplified in the attitudes and responses of Jesus to the woman taken in adultery, which have so many applications in our own lives.[9]

The ministry of listening

The loneliness and isolation of contemporary man – so much underlined in our current literature – reveals very strongly the ambivalence of our personal situation. We want to communicate, and yet we experience over and over again that nobody listens to us. Why is it that we see and hear the same people repeat the same complaints, the same stories, for months and years? For the simple reason that they have never been heard. Whether their stories are objectively true or not is irrelevant. The point is that as long as a person has not experienced what it means to be heard by another, he will either withdraw or will become more and more aggressive. The more he tries to rid himself of his loneliness, the more he experiences this feeling of not being heard, and the more he strives

[8] Cf Lk 7, 13; Mt 20, 34; Mk 6, 34.

[9] Jn 8, 1–11.

to protect himself behind walls of his own making: walls which hide the message but reveal to those with eyes to see how deep the hurt is. The first step in the healing process is when the pain is truly perceived. This is what listening is all about: to appreciate the pain behind the words, the fears behind the aggressiveness, the insecurity behind the rigidity, the bitterness behind the cynicism; to hear it all without judging, evaluating or even minimizing it. The stance of Jesus in John's Gospel is that of one who really listens. He says no word to the woman until the end. He listens to the Pharisees, to their words, and to their anger with him. But he also listens to the silence of the woman: her guilt, her fears, her need to be accepted for what she is without being judged and condemned. Behind the many different attitudes of those who approach him, Jesus hears their need for forgiveness.

Why do we find it so difficult to hear – or even to listen? Essentially because we are afraid of what we will hear, afraid of being confronted with a hurt to which we would not be able to respond. Our inability – or unwillingness – to listen becomes our best self-protection. The experience of powerlessness is the most difficult thing to accept in oneself because it is extremely damaging to a particular self-image. To realize that 'I am not as good as I thought I was' is difficult to accept. Can I hear without feeling responsible for curing the wound? Can I hear without experiencing that I have to be the saviour of the other? To be able to listen to the other without feeling threatened requires that we have accepted our own powerlessness, and maybe come to the point that it is in our own powerlessness that God's healing power is manifested. Our image of being Messiah (or God!) is the greatest obstacle to our listening.

The ministry of affirming

Jesus's response to the woman is an affirming response: 'Neither do I condemn you'. He has heard the guilt and the fear, and his response affirms her inner power to accept herself as she is, to accept her own responsibility, her own choice, her own sinfulness. To affirm is to say 'yes' to whom this person is: to recognize and affirm that there is in each person the power of self-reconciliation, of growth, of becoming whole again. True healing can only come from within the person, from his own resources. And the greatest act of trust we can give to one another is to allow this inner power to operate. Doctors know that the success of their treatment depends

upon the inner resources of the patient, whether physical or psychological. No antiseptic environment or drugs will cure without this inner desire of being healed.

We all need to discover and recognize in ourselves our own potential. But it needs to be affirmed by others from outside. Educators know that they obtain the best results by trusting those with whom they work, by saying to them – and not only in words – 'you can do it'. To affirm is to trust that the other has the power of making choices, the power of being co-creator. Created in the image of God, we have in ourselves the empowering strength to be life-giving for ourselves as well as being life-giving to others. We recognize the latter, but find it difficult to accept the former. To affirm requires that we are ready not to give crutches to the lame, but to say to him 'get up and walk', because we believe that he has this power in himself. This is in many ways far more difficult; it takes more time, more patience, and maybe more humility.

The ministry of freeing

The third aspect of the healing ministry, its goal and effectiveness, is freedom. Once we are freed from internal bonds, we can begin the long process of becoming. When Jesus forgives and heals, he also sends on mission. The words 'go' and 'sin no more', or 'go in peace' and 'your faith has saved you'[10] are very much inter-related; it is through the experience of forgiveness that one finds the freedom to enter into mission, to enter into the liberating experience of death and life. There are three essential elements of this growth in freedom: forgiveness, acceptance of one's own responsibility, mission.

Forgiveness entails first of all an experience of self-acceptance, which is possible only when a person knows he is accepted, not merely in spite of his weaknesses but because of them. Forgiveness is possible when one has accepted to be vulnerable to God's continuing self-revelation, the revelation that he is Love. To say 'yes' to the Father begins with saying 'yes' to oneself, because one accepts the reality of being loved, of being accepted without any strings attached to this love: 'no one has condemned you . . . neither do I condemn you' are words of forgiveness because they are words of acceptance. Again, the ultimate point of forgiveness is when we come to the point of forgiving ourselves. To be forgiven by others is a first but a necessary step.

[10] Jn 8, 11; Lk 7, 50.

If sinfulness is the refusal to accept one's own responsibility, the freedom which comes from forgiveness will lead to the acceptance of one's own responsibility. The whole problem of freedom is so much bound up with the fact that we find it difficult to 'own' our choices, to be accountable for our own freedom. It is incompatible with being constantly evaluated, judged against an arbitrary 'yard stick', confronted with external norms which are never integrated. The freedom to be and to become what we are is possible only when we experience that we no longer need to be constantly self-protective by hiding ourselves behind walls, façades, roles. In the whole mystery of death and life, what I am afraid of is not so much the death-part as the life-part: because it calls me to be more than what I am; and that can be very threatening indeed.

Finally, one is freed for mission. The aspect of being sent is essential to the Gospel; Jesus freed the sick that they might be sent. 'I have come so they may have life and have it abundantly'.[11] Through forgiveness and the experience of our own freedom, we are empowered by God for creativity and life, accepting that our own giftedness is at the service of creation. The experience of being missioned is possible only when we come into touch with our own giftedness, and realize that our gifts – those unique personal gifts – are for creation, the creation of life, the realization of our own power. To conclude: the healing process is not only part of any growth process; it also belongs to the mission of the christian. It involves for the healer an experience of powerlessness. We cannot heal another person; but through our own powerlessness we can reveal to others their inner power for self-healing, their strength, their giftedness. The only thing that the healer can do is to be present to the wounded: totally present in a listening, affirming, freeing way. To reveal to others that they have been chosen, loved, named by God, that they are free, responsible, co-creators: this is to give life, to heal.

[11] Jn 10, 10.