

The Wounded Healer: Myth of our Time Chiron in the 21st century

In an increasingly fragmented world, we seek inner wholeness and spiritual purpose. Despite being told that living soulfully involves accepting our wounds as our greatest gifts, we are often held back by our sense of wounding. Could it be that in today's 'quick fix' society we have lost the capacity to endure? Revisiting the myth of Chiron, the Wounded Healer and outlining the importance of creative suffering in the development of consciousness and the healing process, the author suggests that the capacity to endure and transcend is an essential part of adult life, the healing process and the psychotherapeutic model involving both therapist and client. Presenting suffering as training in healing, I propose that Chiron in the 21st century is about creating a model of psychotherapeutic care that is empowered yet still vulnerable.

Jungian psychology uses myth and story to symbolically represent our human journey. The stories of Greek and Roman Gods for example, can help us learn about ourselves. Through identifying with the characters in these myths we can learn the spiritual qualities we need to help us heal our lives. One such myth is that of Chiron the Wounded Healer. Chiron represents the *ARCHETYPE OF THE WOUNDED HEALER*, meaning, he who is wounded also heals-that healing lies in the wound. Since the planet Chiron was discovered in the mid 1970s, we have integrated part of his teachings, we have allowed the consciousness of being wounded in to our awareness, but we have yet to fully integrate the healer. Why is this? Perhaps it is because we have not yet learned to value our suffering. Many of the qualities necessary for healing, such as patience and endurance is not part of our quick fix consumer society. Wounds cannot be fully healed without suffering, without the willingness to endure them and ultimately, learn from them.

In order to awaken the transformative aspect of the archetype of the Wounded Healer, we have to move through our wounds to find the wisdom hidden there. We have to ask ourselves, what did I learn from this painful experience? What for example, was the meaning for me of my painful childhood? Healing is not about repair or cure it is about acceptance and endurance. Chiron's message is about healing through our wounds. This is the myth of our time and if we want to heal, we need to embrace it.

Working With The Myth

What can we learn from the myth of Chiron the Wounded Healer? What can it teach us about healing today?

Reconciliation Of Opposites

The first thing it can teach us is that wholeness and healing comes through the union of opposites, the healing is in the wound and the wounded becomes the healer. Chiron was a Centaur, those half human, half horse characters we see representing the sign of the zodiac Sagittarius. Because born of the nymph Philyra (who had turned herself into a mare to escape the attentions of Zeus) and the God Zeus, he is also half man and half god. So he is a creature of opposites and symbolically, he represents our own duality in being human and also divine, a duality we work hard to reconcile. You could also think of him as representing our instinctive and also our rational thinking selves. Chiron is a creature both animal and human, combining the natural, instinctive elements with the rational. Remember that according to the myth, it was the god Apollo that reared Chiron, so he was versed in the higher arts as it were and not nurtured in the normal way all mortals are, since his mother rejected him at birth. So in fact, his first wound was that of rejection. Additionally, since later he was wounded in the thigh, his animal part, he receives a double wounding to his instinctual nature which no amount of rational thinking singing, poetry or music making could heal. To heal, Chiron had to connect with his animal side, where the wound lay. In terms of healing, Chiron teaches us that to find healing, we must enter into our wounds, feel them and live them and learn from them. It means that instead of berating our less than perfect parents and our traumatic or painful childhoods, we ask instead, 'what did I learn from this experience? What was the meaning for me of my painful childhood? What for example, did feeling rejected by my mother teach me?

Personal Suffering

Another lesson from Chiron is that we should value our suffering. Chiron is called the wounded healer because of a wound he received from a poisoned arrow. Because immortal (his God side), he could not die and be free from pain. In his attempts to heal himself he researched far and wide for a cure and so became proficient in being able to heal others. Due to his own incurable wound, he had intimate knowledge of suffering, in all its forms. This enabled him to tap a deep well of wisdom within himself, to help ease the pain of others. Chiron became a great teacher, holistic healer, astrologer, musician and teacher. A compassionate healer, his

suffering informed him, so that he understand pain and helped heal others. The glyph for Chiron has half of its cross missing, symbolising the broken state which is healed through finding and re-uniting the missing part. This theme of personal suffering, and what awareness and meaning we can derive from it is a central premise of the myth. I am told that in the astrological natal chart, where Chiron is placed represents not only the area of life where we feel wounded but also the area where we can derive great healing when we bring awareness to our woundedness. In my own natal chart for example, Chiron is in the sixth house, the house of work and everyday health. In our friend Richard's chart, Chiron is in the seventh house of marriage and committed relationships, meaning this is an area where he is wounded but has to heal by somehow working through the difficulties he has with his feelings and relating intimately.

Death: Dissolution and letting go

By trading his immortality for the freedom of the titan Prometheus, Chiron dies and thus ends his suffering. What does this mean for us when we are trying to heal? It means that we have to let go of what our egos want for us, and surrender to a greater force. It means we give up on the life we think we want to allow that which wants to be born in us to come through. Death symbolically always means rebirth, with the death of the old, something new can be born in us. Letting go of an old relationship or friendship that no longer serves us, for example, opens the door to new relationships. Chiron descends into the underworld, into the dark. Vision is limited in the dark, thus forcing you to face what lies beneath the surface, in the depths of your heart. There is nothing to be done here but endure. The dark night of the soul must be suffered if there is to be a return to the light, and new life. The descent into the unconscious, into the dark night of the soul, is like a death before a rebirth. There cannot be a rebirth, or true change, without such a death. Death and life come together, always.¹

Death in this sense signifies death of the old ego attitude, letting go of the struggle and the need to know, to do, and to solve. Chiron's death and descent into the underworld symbolises a change in attitude from one of 'doing' to one of 'being done to'. This surrender has to happen in order for divine grace to enter and healing to happen. I call it the still point, a place where we suspend thought, suspend judgment, suspend desire, and just be. Acceptance of what is and being receptive to what emerges is a

¹ Mauger, B., Love in a time of broken Heart-Healing From Within, p253

necessary part of the healing process. We await transformation we do not manufacture it. And we 'receive' grace. According to the ancients, sickness was always invested with a healing power and came from a divine, spiritual source. The sick were led to the temple of Asclepius, the ancient god of healing, where they slept and awaited a healing dream.

To Value our Vulnerability

Another very important lesson of Chiron is that we should value our vulnerability. Our vulnerability can be our greatest asset, because when we are vulnerable we are actually more open, and it is in times of greatest vulnerability that a deeper intelligence comes through. Earlier I wrote about this and the great learning I gained from my recent trip to Mexico where people generally live from the heart and where my own vulnerability after the sudden death of my soul mate was nurtured. The capacity to endure is what carries us through on the healing journey when we have to wait in the nigredo, in the darkness, in the 'not knowing'. In our quick fix society we find it hard to wait for anything: grab and go, heaven forbid that we have to wait for our cup of coffee. We can't stand to be in a vulnerable and uncertain position. We are afraid, afraid of descending into a place we will not be able to get out of so we hang on to what we know. When I arrived in Mexico and joined my group that June morning, I was tired, jet lagged and emotionally shut down, but two weeks later after I had allowed myself to descend into the darkest and most painful place in my over burdened heart, I emerged with a sense of freedom and sunshine in my heart. In the dark place I felt again the wisdom of my heart and how much I had loved and lost. And how much this experience would inform me in my work with others.

We need our vulnerability-it is a conduit to healing.

In the context of healing, I asked the audience of therapists I was speaking to that day, are therapists life rafts? A life raft is necessary on rough seas, but holding on to it condemns us to a life at sea... sometimes we simply have to be, have to embrace the darkness, to love it. I thought of the Buddha's teachings on this where he says. *'My teachings are a raft, meant to help you cross over the river. Once you get to the other shore, set them down and go on with your life'*. The other shore was the Buddha's way of describing enlightenment, the goal of his teachings. Once enlightened (becoming conscious), continue with your life-just don't carry the raft round with you!

Our wounds drive us into ourselves, and can genuinely allow us an immediate and intimate contact with our soul. This will only happen, to quote Jungian author Charles Ponce, "*If we are capable of receiving it as a numinous event, an archetypal moment that seeks to make us participants in an eternal happening.*" This involves a complete shift in our level of consciousness, in which we literally snap out of the narcissistic, hypnotic trance of the separate self and realize that we have been merely playing a role in what Jung would call a "divine drama."

An essential lesson of the myth of Chiron is that wholeness comes from the union of opposites-the healing is in the wounding, the wounded is also the healer. *In the astrological chart Chiron represents not only the area of life where we are wounded but also the area where we can derive great healing when we bring awareness to our woundedness.*

Three years ago now, I stood before a large group of senior psychotherapists at a major conference on mental health in Ireland and spoke about the role of the therapist in today's world. My talk, one of many at the one-day conference on '**Healing the Hurt**', was entitled *Chiron in the 21st Century: Wounded Healers, suffering and the therapeutic process*. In it I questioned the role of the therapist in today's world where finding the balance between promoting a culture of woundology and helping people heal had grown even more urgent. Using the myth of Chiron as a model to learning to heal, I explored such questions as: What is the psychotherapist's role in our society today? Reared on 'cup-a soup' relationships and instant gratification, does our 'quick fix' society equip us for suffering or has it eroded our ability to endure? Modern medicine has eradicated the meaning of pain by aiming a cure for all physical illness, and we are imbued with that ethos, somehow. I wondered were we creating a sanitised pain free world where suffering has lost its meaning? Have we lost the capacity to endure?

These questions are even more urgent today. People want to heal but often fall into the gap between psychology and spirituality where as yet, there is no map to healing. Those more drawn to a spiritual path can easily get caught up in using their spirituality as an escape route from their feelings even though there is no spiriting away of emotional wounds. And those in the psychotherapeutic camp are prey to becoming mired in their wounds and remaining victims of them. The problem is that our sense of wounding and our search for inner peace make uneasy bedfellows. We want to progress on our spiritual path but we are held back by our emotional wounds. So there is a split in us, between our spirituality and

our humanity, if you like, and we need to heal that. We need a new model on how to heal. The teachings of Chiron are clear: to heal, we need to not run away from our wounds but actually embrace them, move through them and learn from them. In therapeutic language, we need to transcend our wounds so that they become gifts rather than baggage. We need to become empowered by our wounds rather than be hampered by them.

Chiron: The Planet

Chiron is a new planet, only discovered some thirty odd years ago and coinciding with the global rise in 'healing' and therapy consciousness. This new planet was discovered orbiting between Saturn and Uranus. Accordingly, Chiron is said to have both a Saturnian and a Uranian influence. Saturn is the planet of structure and physical manifestation and Uranus, by contrast is the planet of sudden change producing new growth. The combination of both planets marries the awareness producing aspect of Uranus with the ability to materialize or bring that awareness into form, of Saturn. Uranus is thought of as the 'awakener', and in a sense world events in the past decades have awoken us to radical change and to the need for change. Astrologically, people with a lot of Uranus in their natal charts, are generally free spirited pioneers. Having this, I know too well how unsettling it is to always be on the cutting edge of life but I also value being able to forge new ground. What did the discovery of Chiron signify to the world? The recognition of a new planet suggests that an archetypal pattern was being activated within the collective psyche. (Archetypes are collective as well as personal). Chiron represents the *archetype of the wounded healer*, and its arrival could be interpreted as symbolizing our need to integrate the teachings of this archetype, which itself had become constellated in the collective unconscious in response to our global situation. It is interesting to note that around the time that Chiron was discovered we witnessed an explosion of alternative healing therapies and interest in mind/body awareness techniques. It seems we were ready for the archetype of the inner healer to emerge and be integrated into our awareness at a time in history when our evolution demanded change.

Chiron: The Archetype

From a psychological perspective, the archetype of the wounded healer has long been recognised as a model for healing. Jungian analyst Marie Louise Von Franz said of the archetype: "*The wounded healer IS the archetype of the Self, and is at the bottom of all genuine healing procedures.*" Kerényi, a colleague of Carl Jung, suggested the myth of

the wounded healer refers to the capacity "to be at home in the darkness of suffering and there to find germs of light and recovery with which, as though by enchantment, to bring forth Asclepius, the sun like healer."

The wounded healer's way of healing is to inhabit the pain and transform it, like the traditional shamans, who energetically actually take on the pain of their clients and transmute it before returning it as healed. The process of shamanistic healing involves recovery of the healing capacities of the true self that is generally buried in the wounded part of the individual. Psychologically, the process is the same. As a therapist, I do the digging into my client's past to find the wounded healer, the spirit of the client that can heal and that knows how to heal. To do this means travelling in to the interior of their souls, a different terrain to that of everyday ego life. It means recovering what lies in the unconscious as shadow, so named because it is not yet seen or recognised.

Our true self is generally hidden in our shadow along with other elements of our personality we are not aware of. Our ego self, we do know about, it is what dictates our everyday life and being. Odd as it may sound, to heal, we have to by pass the ego with its value judgments and controlling manner so that we reach a place of soul capable of healing. *Chiron the Wounded Healer* reminds us of this since as a shaman and alchemist, he is able to redeem the true self, hidden within the wounded, rejected and marginalized part of the psyche.

[The alchemical symbolism](#) in the myth can help us understand how this 'magic' happens. Alchemists turned lead to gold in the same way that the human psyche can transform itself. Metaphorically, the wounded healer is related to the stage in alchemy known as the nigredo. The nigredo, meaning black, is when we are at our darkest point in the dark night of the soul. This is the point where every effort of the ego seems futile, and we appear hopelessly stuck. We've tried retail therapy, we've tried candles and incense and meditation, we've even tried journaling, but we are getting nowhere. We still feel hopeless and powerless to change. If we continue to try and escape the pain of this situation, we are like a squirrel running around in circles in its cage, or like an eyeball endlessly spinning around trying to see itself. But when we realize that there is nothing that we, as an ego, can do, we have started to embrace our situation, which paradoxically, is the very thing that initiates the transformation in the deeper psyche. Even more paradoxical is that the very origin of the wounding is itself the source of the healing. [To quote the Delphic Oracle](#) "He who has wounded will also heal."

Chiron teaches us that healing happens holistically by [bringing the opposites together](#). The kind of healing which Chiron does is shamanistic. The shaman goes to the depths of the underworld to reclaim the lost soul, and healing is done through re-experiencing the pain and bringing the whole together.

Chiron in the 21st Century: Wounded Healers

As far as I know, psychotherapists, healers and analysts must be the only profession where our training is actually through exploring our weaknesses/our wounds! Those of us in the psychotherapeutic profession have had (or should have had) years of personal analysis to prepare us for working with other people. I am one of those therapists that feel that this aspect of the training is the most essential, and that if a therapist or healer has not done their own inner work, then they cannot expect to heal others. Carl Jung said you could only take someone as far as you have been yourself. Jungian analyst Michael Fordham stated that it is in the training analysis that the analyst to be has the opportunity to touch his 'own scars', some of which will never be healed'. It is through our knowledge of our own wounds that we learn the ability to help others, to be with other fellow wounded souls. There is a great difference between EMPATHY and SYMPATHY-and we can only empathize if we have been there ourselves. My incursion into traditional healing methods and healers in Mexico also taught me that not all healers do this, but those who do help others more. Another analyst Neumann writes that the '*creative man is always close to the abyss of sickness where his wounds remain open. His very suffering is the source, in depth, of a curative power and this power is the creative process*'. For this reason, '*only a wounded man can be a healer, a physician*'.

So we can see that healing ourselves is [to live the paradox of being wounded and healers at the same time](#). But as therapists we have a task, we need [to dispel the myth that our wounds determine our life](#). This to me is the most important message of Chiron today. We need to remember that the human spirit does not go to sleep within us because of negative life patterns, nor are most people's lives only a series of tragedies. Unearthing the positive is as effective a healing process as is clearing out the negative parts of our history. And we need to dispel the myth that everyone needs therapy in order to heal. Many people can heal themselves through inner work, through enduring and suffering their wounds, through journaling, and dream work. Spells in therapy can help, but staying over long can also be a block to healing.

What we need now, is a model of healing that is empowered yet still vulnerable.

Soul Work Pointers to help you heal

- Refer to your illness as a spiritual journey into a new part of yourself
- Practice gratitude whenever you feel overwhelmed
- Practice acceptance and being in the moment, mindfulness.
- Allow yourself to endure and to suffer
- Suspend judgment on what should or shouldn't happen
- Trust in the process
- Do not seek 'to do' but rather just 'be done to'.
- Trust that life has not forgotten you and that something is happening in you
- Hold on to your personal and spiritual truths

"My wish is always that you may find patience enough in yourself to endure, and simplicity enough to believe; that you may acquire more and more confidence in that which is difficult, and in your solitude among others. And for the rest, let life happen to you." Rilke