

Scars, Our Stories

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Scars tell our stories—sometimes our very personal stories. Scars are symbols we carry – traces of hurts that have healed, of victories over injury. And not all scars are physical. If we reflect on scars, both our own and those of others, what can they teach us? What stories can your scars tell you? What scars have we left on others?

What is more beautiful than a newborn child? The baby's unblemished skin shines. It has been protected inside its mother's body. It has been nurtured and kept safe from the wounds that it will suffer in the world—a world of natural hazards, accidents, illnesses – even the life-giving light of our sun will attack its body with ultra-violet rays and radiation.

The baby's mind also is a clean slate – happily nourished by the mother's own body. But, in being born, the baby is subjected to its first trauma as it experiences being pushed and pulled from the comfort of the womb. It experiences being cold, it experiences the trauma of hunger, and it cries to be fed.

We all start life as beautiful, unblemished, un-traumatized, newborns. But soon the protected, unblemished child begins to acquire scars of many kinds – as it begins a lifelong accumulation of scars.

Do you have scars? I won't ask for a "show-and-tell" today. But just take a moment and inventory your scars.

Scars are the symbols of our experiences with this real world – symbols of injury, pain, and trauma.

Some scars are visible. They remind us of our wounds from accidents, surgeries, and even from heroism – risking injury to help others.

But also, many scars are invisible. Emotional scars. They may be reminders of

- successes and failures
- loves and illusions
- adventures and catastrophes
- bad luck and misfortune

Emotional scars may be reminders of abuse. They may result from intentional abuse by others. But also, many times emotional scars result from the unintentional abuse of a well-meaning parent whose intent is to "perfect" the child. Emotional scars may result from severe trauma – from childhood bullying, or as we have so often seen in young men and women in combat (PTSD), or in people who experienced abuse or violence by others. The loss of a loved one leaves lifelong scars.

What are physical scars? Looking into the science of scars, we are informed by medical texts:

*Scars are areas of fibrous tissue (fibrosis) that replace normal skin after injury. A scar results from the biological process of wound repair in the skin and other tissues of the body. **Thus, scarring is a natural part of the healing process.** With the exception of*

very minor lesions, every wound (e.g., after accident, disease, or surgery) results in some degree of scarring.

Emotional scars resemble physical scars. Even though the emotional wound appears to have healed over, it hides a hurt, a sensitivity, that may be with us the rest of our lives.

Scars – both physical and emotional – are personal. Our scars are ours alone. No one else, no matter how empathetic, can wear our scars. No one can feel the pain we felt. No one else can understand what each of our scars means to us. Sometime back I wrote a few lines about this.

*We cherish these signs,
These disfigurements,
Some are our shame,
Some are our pride.*

*Bold women and men
Gather more scars,
Courageous souls
Undiminished by blemish.*

*In reflective moments
We touch each scar,
Gently trace it,
The sensation evokes memory.*

*Our scars may be visible to others,
But others cannot sense
The messages of our scars.
They are ours alone.*

Can we be rid of our scars? Some seek to erase their scars. A recent movie, “Violet,” tells the story of a disfigured girl. The New York Times review by Charles Isherwood, describes the plot.

Violet, from a hilltop town in the Blue Ridge Mountains, is going on a journey that she hopes will transform her life. Twelve years before, the blade on her father’s ax slipped loose as he was chopping wood. Violet, watching him work, was left with a deep scar slashing across her cheek. We don’t see the scar here, only the startled reactions — a look of fear, an instinctive recoil, a sympathetic but patronizing word — of the people Violet meets on her long bus trip to Oklahoma, where she fervently believes a faith healer she’s seen on television will erase her scar.

Others wear their visible scars with resignation, or even a sense of pride. In such cases the scar has redefined the person and conveys the victim’s courage, fortitude, strength, resilience, and ability to overcome.

A few years back I had arranged for a prominent author, Robert Timburg, to give a presentation to a large group in Washington. I knew Timburg was a decorated veteran of the Vietnam war. I was unprepared for his visage. Essentially his face had been burned beyond recognition. He had been so severely burned that the usual facial features had been destroyed or disfigured – his nose, ears, lips, and

eyebrows. His only remaining original human facial feature was his bright, intelligent eyes looking out from a mass of scar tissue.

But Robert Timburg had become a highly successful journalist with the *Baltimore Sun*, and a prize winning author including the best selling *The Nightingale's Song*. In addition to his physical scars he was, I'm sure, scarred emotionally. His ability to confront his scars, to overcome, to wear his scars for all to see, and to move on in life, was a powerful inspiration.

One could curse their scars if they can't erase them, as Violet wished to do. One could withdraw, regard their scars with anger, or with self-pity.

Renee Martinez, a contemporary scholar, artist, and author, wrote about the value of resignation, or better yet, acceptance and moving on. She wrote:

Unfocused anger has self-destructive properties. Destruction may purge and even on some levels purify, but I'm no longer convinced it facilitates healing – perhaps even the opposite. Our answers somehow lie in building and creating, moving forward and beyond, allowing wounds to heal and scars to fade gracefully. Not to forget or deny pain, but to embrace it and move on.

Karen Armstrong, the former nun and author of the “History of God,” agrees. She wrote in her subsequent book, “Buddha” about the Buddhist way of dealing with pain. “It is only when people become aware of the inescapable reality of pain that they can begin to become fully human.” Pain must be regarded as a fact of life.

The reverse side of this, denial of pain, or considering pain as something unnatural, or considering pain as punishment, is counterproductive. She writes:

There is a creeping new orthodoxy in modern society that is sometimes called “positive thinking.” At its worst, this habit of optimism allows us to bury our heads in the sand, deny the ubiquity of pain in ourselves and others, and to immerse ourselves in a state of deliberate heartlessness to ensure our emotional survival. The Buddha would have had little time for this. In his view, the spiritual life cannot begin until people allow themselves to be invaded by the reality of suffering, realize how fully it permeates our whole experience, and feel the pain of all other beings, even those whom we do not find congenial.”

Ms. Armstrong states that such denial “imprisons people in a delusion that precludes spiritual development.”

Perhaps we could even consider our scars, visible and invisible, physical and emotional, as gifts. Psychologists have been looking into the phenomenon of “post-traumatic growth. The results of a recent study on post-traumatic growth are cited as follows:

University of British Columbia psychologist Alyssa Croft describes a study of nearly 15,000 French adults. Those who had gone through painful life events, ranging from divorce to serious illness, were more likely to take time to appreciate transitory delights, such as gazing at a waterfall they happened upon while taking a hike. This heightened ability to enjoy the moment (which is not shared by people still struggling with traumatic experiences) helps explain the phenomenon of ‘post-traumatic growth,’... . It suggests we’re more likely to stop and smell the roses once we’ve already felt the prick of a thorn.

The key here is to fully confront the pain – then to MOVE ON. Dr. Richard McNally, director of clinical training at Harvard University’s Department of Psychology, is author of the book: *Remembering Trauma*. He warns against letting the trauma we have experienced become central to our identity. He notes that for sexual assault victims, replacing the word “victim” with “survivor” connotes empowering. But, he warns, clinging to the concept of “survivor” as central to one’s identity “bodes poorly for mental health.” In controlled studies of women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, he concluded that

the more central their abuse was to their identity...the worse their PTSD symptoms. In particular, seeing one’s future through the lens of one’s abuse was especially associated with the severity of the PTSD symptoms. These data suggest that acknowledging one’s abuse but not allowing it to dominate one’s sense of self may foster resilience against the long-term psychologically toxic effects of childhood sexual molestation.

In other words, acknowledge the wound, then MOVE ON.

One of the quotations in your bulletin this morning is by the author, Harry Crews. Harry Crews was an over-comer -- a fighter in the face of adversity. He served in combat as a Marine during the Korean War. He went on to write many successful novels and articles – usually on themes of grit and determination. A number of musical groups have named themselves the “Harry Crews Band,” or similar. And many songs were written with titles embodying the name, Harry Crews. He published a monthly column in *Esquire* magazine entitled “Grits.” One of his published novels was entitled, yes, *Scar Lover*. He dedicated *Scar Lover* to Sean Penn after appearing with him in a movie. Harry Crews wore a self-inflicted scar – a tattoo – on his right arm. Under a skull were the tattooed words: “How do you like your blue eyed boy Mr. Death.” Harry Crews, a hard-living man, wrote the following:

There is something beautiful about all scars of whatever nature. A scar means the hurt is over, the wound is closed and healed, done with.

Another quotation in our bulletin is by W.E.B. Dubois, the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University, a sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, author and editor, wrote about the gifts of scars in this way:

So in our lives it is storm and stress and hurt and suffering that make real men and women bring the world’s work to its highest perfection. Let us learn then in these growing years to respect the harder sterner aspects of life together with its joy and laughter, and to weave them all into the great web which hangs holy unto God.

We don’t need to look for hurt and suffering. One way or another it will find us. Taking it as a gift – as “post-traumatic growth” – is living life to its fullest.

The most pithy quotation about the gift of scars, comes from Friedrich Nietzsche: “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

In the summer issue of *UU World*, Jonah Eller-Isaacs writes of his experience of severe trauma, survival, and growth. As a young man he went to see his doctor about a troublesome mole and lump on his leg. The doctor said, “You need to see a dermatologist – NOW.” Within two weeks he was in surgery with advanced skin cancer, malignant melanoma that had spread to the lymphatic system – a condition that gave him a median expected life expectancy of six to nine months.

Six years later he survives, after seven surgeries, three rounds of chemotherapy, two rounds of radiation, many hospitalizations, and, he says, “a list of side effects so long

that I can't even begin to remember them all." He continues, "I've lost track of all the colonoscopies. And let's not forget the psychological ramifications of being professionally poisoned all those years: memory loss, depression, anxiety, panic attacks. Mental wounds heal far more slowly than sutures."

Yet, strange as it may seem, he writes that the memory of all that has brought him joy!

He wrote in his journal of his experience this way:

*the path you will walk won't be easy
no, it will in fact be incredibly hard
the most difficult thing you've ever done
but down that path, though it is quite far, and treacherous,
there is a new you
a better friend-husband-lover-brother-son
with more compassion and empathy
with a deeper sense of purpose
with a greater respect for life
you will love more strongly
you will listen more carefully
you will take care of the people in your life
you will take care of yourself
you will do all you can to create positive forces in your life and the lives of
others.*

Jonah has moved on! He has become a successful artist and writer. He recognizes that he bears deep scars – both physical and metaphysical. He writes that out of trauma, even though one may feel initially utterly overwhelmed and destroyed, "yet there is something of the phoenix in it, for out of the ashes of yourself a new being arises."

Our scars do tell our stories. Those stories can end in defeat. Or, we, our individual selves, can make those stories end in triumph and joy.

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