

The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis

reviewed by Madeline M. Hafner – 2003

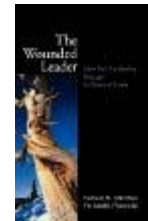
Title: The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis

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The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis (2002), a recently published book by Richard Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski, asks educational leaders to reflect on personal and profound questions - ones they are not likely to have been asked in a formal interview or performance evaluation. Ackerman, co-director of the International Network of Principals' Centers and Associate Professor of education at the University of Massachusetts Lowell Graduate School of Education, and Maslin-Ostrowski, an Associate Professor of educational leadership at Florida Atlantic University, have spent the past seven years asking school leaders about "wounding" or "crisis" experiences in their leadership practice, and how they make sense of this wounding in terms of their personal and professional lives.

The book's 12 chapters are separated conceptually into three main sections: first, an introduction to the concept of "woundedness," second, stories of "wounded" school leaders, and third, an interpretation of how "woundedness" informs the everyday practice of school leadership and the preparation of school leaders. The authors emphasize clearly that the goal of their work is not merely to chronicle "crisis experiences" of individual school leaders, but to offer an analysis of how school leaders make sense of their wounding in terms of its influence on their leadership practice.

In Part I (chapters 1 and 2) the authors provide the reader with a brief introduction to their conceptualization of the term "wounding." While they do not provide an explicit definition of a "leadership wound" the authors assert that "the wound is best understood where it hurts" (p. 16). They contend that a leadership wound - a term they use synonymously with "crisis experience" - impacts "a person's essential being... integrity, identity, fallibility, and spirit" (p. 17). They then go on to describe how, as a result of wounding, a leader experiences a sense of "vulnerability, isolation, fear, ... powerlessness" (p.17), "dissonance," (p. 11) and "the inability to trust their own leadership" (p. 4). Specifically, the authors discuss how role expectations of school leaders, both historically and currently, are unique in that they "often do not fit with deeper personal needs of a leader... that the very [leadership] role itself can put a person at odds with his own needs and identity." (p. 8). Since the role of the school leader, then, is at odds with their internal needs, a "collision with the organizational environment" (p. 5) is likely to bring about a leadership wound.

Using different areas of literature and research - specifically "myth, medicine, and the personal" (p. 15) - to support their thesis, the authors describe how through a wounding experience school leaders have the opportunity to nurture and integrate their emotional selves with their work selves. After a brief glimpse at the role of wounding in mythic stories the authors explain how the medical literature powerfully informed their thinking about leadership wounding. Drawing particularly on the works of Arthur Frank (1995), Arthur Kleinman (1988), and Rachel Naomi Remen (1996) they suggest that stories of "wounded leaders" are similar to "illness narratives" (p.23) in how individuals are able to reframe a crisis experience. Illness narratives are constructed as individuals tell and retell stories of their illness and in doing so reframe "illness-as-enemy to illness-as-

teacher” (p. 23). One example the authors cite - *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997) - highlights the power of the “illness narrative” for both the storyteller and the listener. Lastly, the authors extrapolate from general leadership and education literature (Ackerman, Donaldson, and van der Bogert, 1996; Callahan, 1962; Carmichael, 1985; Eisner, 1985; Evans, 1996; Jackson, 1976; Lutz & Wisener, 1996; McClelland, 1975; and Rogers, 1961) four issues of “the personal” in leadership work that are impacted by wounding - issues of vulnerability, isolation, fear, and power (p. 26).

In Part II (chapters 3-9) the authors provide the reader with seven stories of school leaders who have experienced a leadership wound. The stories offer the reader diverse representations of “crisis experiences” that lead to wounding as well as how individual school leaders made sense of their wounding in terms of their leadership practice. Each “storyteller” describes their unique response to a “dilemma and crisis in practice” and how that experience impacted “their professional as well as personal growth and development” (p. 135). One of the stories the authors share involves an elementary school principal who was “shaken to the core” (p. 47) when she discovered a student in her school was assaulting younger students outside of the school building after school hours. The principal felt helpless in her role as leader because she was unable to ensure the safety of the students in her care. As a result of this wounding the principal reassessed the limitations of her role and realized that she alone could not prevent the violence that touched the lives of her students and was rededicated to working with the larger community to address a problem she alone could not solve. While distinct in scope and depth each of the seven stories illustrates “three core understandings” presented by the authors in the first chapter of the book: “First... leadership roles often do not support, confirm, or resonate with the psychic needs of the person who becomes a leader... second... wounding is an inevitable part of leadership.... [and] third... woundedness is a double-edged (at least) sword” (p.7).

In Part III (chapters 10-12) the authors present their synthesis of the themes prevalent across the seven stories chosen to be a part of this book as well as other stories that have informed their research over the past seven years. In addition, they provide the reader with their analysis of how leadership wounding impacts the practice of educational leadership and what this analysis means to the broader educational community. Using a typological structure developed by Frank (1995) the authors categorize the stories of wounded leadership into “stories of restitution, chaos, and quest” (p. 96).

In chapter 11, appropriately titled “What Wounding Teaches,” the authors share three “lessons” they have gleaned from their work with wounded school leaders:

1. Learn to trust the unattended areas of your leadership - especially your feelings.
2. Listen honestly and deeply for the questions that are feared or left out of your work life altogether.
3. Find folks to talk to whom you really trust (p. 107).

These three findings are substantially supported and expanded in the final two chapters. The authors include practical strategies that have assisted wounded leaders, including adapting the practice of a “clearness committee” as outlined by Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (1998), and developing a circle of friends to create a “safe professional support system” (p. 122).

Drawing on a diverse assembly of literature including experiential education, emotional intelligence, Buddhist philosophy, organizational change, educational leadership, brain research, and their own personal experience, the authors solidly support their assertion that historically emotional aspects of school leadership have been devalued and excluded and that it is imperative that practicing school leaders, as well as those individuals who prepare them, begin to include the emotional life of leadership as an essential element of healthy and effective leadership practice.

Appendix A provides a full description of the qualitative research methods utilized by the researchers as they conducted the four research studies that have been melded to create the content of this book. Over the past seven years the authors interviewed 65 school leaders that they claim “represent wounding experiences that have taken place in diverse socioeconomic settings, in a number of regions of the country... [and] vary in terms of school and district levels” (p. 36). Every step of the research process is delineated, including research questions, the interpretive nature of the research, sampling strategies, interview protocols, and analytical approaches. The authors discuss in a natural and personal manner how their relationship with participants over time created an environment that made asking and listening to stories of leadership wounding

possible. They report honestly about their search for a different kind of response to their research questions; their search for "... the story within the story, what Schaefer (1992) calls "self-story" or the self-narrative (Huberman, 1990) - that is, the self that is being formed in what is being told" (p. 95).

Although the fundamental arguments presented in *The Wounded Leader* contribute significantly to the field of educational leadership, two aspects of the text hinder the reader from engaging completely in the message presented. First, the stories presented in the book do not communicate the depth and breadth of synthesized knowledge obtained by the authors regarding leadership wounding. And second, a larger body of literature that could inform the reader's understanding of woundedness is overlooked.

The stories the authors share with the reader - seven of the twelve chapters - are presented in a manner that intermittently leaves the reader longing for more intimate details from the storytellers themselves. The reader is unable to discern the intensity of woundedness sustained by many of the storytellers. As the authors describe in one story how a superintendent experienced a leadership wound in his practice they fail to tell the reader until several chapters later that within the scope of his wounding he had suffered a heart attack - a physical manifestation of the depth of his wounding. This is one example of how the intimate knowledge the authors possess about the participants is not translated to the reader. Throughout the book the authors - as research insiders - provide a comprehensive analysis of the 65 participants across their four studies but do not provide stories comprehensive enough for the reader to come to the same conclusions.

Although they acknowledge their intimate role in the research that is the cornerstone of the book in the introduction to the book, the authors do not provide the reader with the natural flow of the research process until Appendix A - p. 135. The details of the research design offer the reader a map of sorts - a key that enables the reader to put together the book's stories, related literature, conceptual framework, and conclusions. Providing the reader with this detailed description of the process they utilized to uncover the main ideas presented in the book would have been more helpful to the reader in the beginning of the text. Without being able to view the bigger picture the authors utilized to frame the stories and their lessons the reader is left looking around during several of the chapters for information to fill in the gaps.

In the first several chapters of the book the authors assert that a leadership wound "by its nature and in this particular context, ultimately eludes precise theoretical comprehension. We know of no simple conceptual framework or technique that can account fully for the kind of story described in this book" (p. 16). Although what the authors are calling leadership wounds are highly personalized and individual, I disagree that these types of experiences cannot be understood in relationship to previous theoretical or conceptual work. I believe the authors leave out crucial work utilizing feminist and postmodern conceptualizations of the practice of school leadership that would assist the reader in situating this work in terms of broader literature in the field.

While the authors specifically acknowledge how the ideas presented in *The Wounded Leader* build on Parker Palmer's work regarding the need for educators to listen, that ambiguity is an essential component of our work, and that both internal and external components are equally essential in our work lives (Palmer, 1998), they fail to include alternative perspectives of the impact of wounding experiences from authors in the field of education who have contributed to a growing body of knowledge that supports their thesis - specifically perspectives rooted in feminist and postmodern theoretical frameworks.

Margaret Grogan (2000) speaks specifically about the role of ambiguity in the work of school leadership. She reconceptualizes a new theory of school leadership rooted in feminist postmodern theories that encourages leaders to "be comfortable with contradiction, work through others, appreciate dissent, develop critical awareness of how children are being served, and adopt an ethic of care" (p. 132). The idea of honoring both internal and external components of our lives as equally essential in our work as educators has clear roots in feminist scholarship (Boler, 1999; Collins, 1991; Neumann & Peterson, 1997).

The authors are careful throughout the book to use many different descriptions of a leadership wound. They contend that a school leader experiences a wound as "a crisis or critical event in their leadership practice that had profoundly affected or wounded them" (p. 137) and that this wounding impacts "a person's essential being... integrity, identity, fallibility, and spirit" (p. 17) "their self" (p. 28). As I read the book, however, I found myself fluctuating between embracing the idea of leadership wounding as

either a significant trauma to one's self, identity, and spirit, or merely a blow to the ego or self-image of school leaders.

In addition to the medical literature that was utilized as the basis for this book other authors have explored the impact of trauma experiences and woundedness of the self, identity, and spirit on educational work. Susan Brison's work on trauma narratives, specifically the self, identity, and rape; and Brenda Daly's work on authorship, specifically voice, identity, and childhood sexual abuse, both illustrate how lived experiences impact both the personal and professional lives of educators, but are qualitatively different than the stories presented here. Work rooted in feminist and postmodern theoretical perspectives in the field of education offer insights of wounding that would only serve to support the authors' point of view. And as a result of not acknowledging alternative conceptualizations of how wounding impacts the self, identity, and spirit the reader receives only a partial view of this powerful topic.

Although the authors do not provide criteria for what constitutes woundedness, and therefore provide a somewhat murky interpretation of the difference between a leadership "wound" and a "lesson learned" from leadership practice, the authors bring to the foreground several very important ideas for the practice of school leadership and the preparation of school leaders.

One of the most significant insights this book has to offer is the passionate plea by the authors for those of us in the world of school leadership to simply listen. They remind us of the transformative power of storytelling - of listening to and telling one another our stories. The authors suggest that "when leaders share their story of crisis, they potentially gain insight into their leadership practice, enhanced self-awareness, empathy for others, and affirmation of self. If the storytelling and listening conditions are right, the experience can be powerful; there is promise of learning, growth, and healing" (p. 105).

While not emphasizing emotion over intellect the authors make a grounded case for the inclusion of emotional considerations in the development of school leadership. In addition to the time and energy we spend strengthening the external skills necessary to be effective and efficient in our work - what can be considered the "doing" components of school leadership - the authors ask us to honor the internal components of our work - the "being" part of who we are as school leaders. The idea that educators need to nurture both internal and external elements of their work lives stays with the reader long after the book is finished.

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