

OUR HEART
IS STRONGER
THAN OUR
WOUNDS

Finding Hope in Suffering

RONALD ROLHEISER



PARACLETE PRESS
Brewster, Massachusetts

2026 First Printing

Our Heart Is Stronger than Our Wounds: Finding Hope in Suffering

ISBN 979-8-89348-069-6

Copyright © 2026 by Ronald Rolheiser

The Paraclete Press name and logo (dove on cross) are trademarks of Paraclete Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rolheiser, Ronald author

Title: Our heart is stronger than our wounds / Ronald Rolheiser.

Description: Brewster, Massachusetts : Paraclete Press, [2026] | Summary:

"In this book of hope and wisdom, Rolheiser assures us that God's grace, understanding, and love are stronger than our wounds, our collapses, our failures, and even our moments of despair"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026015955 (print) | LCCN 2026015956 (ebook) | ISBN 9798893480696 paperback | ISBN 9798893480702 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Suffering--Religious aspects--Catholic Church | Spiritual healing--Catholic Church | Spirituality--Catholic Church | Christian life--Catholic authors | BISAC: RELIGION / Spirituality | RELIGION / Christian Ministry / Pastoral Resources

Classification: LCC BT732.7 .R65 2026 (print) | LCC BT732.7 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026015955>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026015956>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in United States of America

To my religious community, the *Missionary
Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, for giving me a
home and mission for more than fifty years and
for serving the poor for more than 200 years.
Ad multos annos.



CONTENTS

PREFACE	9
---------------	---

I. OUR HEART IS STRONGER THAN OUR WOUNDS

1. Our Heart Is Stronger than Our Wounds	15
2. Our Wounds, Our Gifts, and Our Power to Heal Others ...	19
3. Taking Pain to the Heart	23
4. Taking Our Wounds to the Eucharist	27
5. Our Grandiosity and Our Wounds	31

II. ON MOURNING AND DANCING

6. Permission to Be Sad	37
7. On Mourning and Dancing	41
8. Mourning	45
9. Mourning Our Barrenness	49
10. Sacred Permission to Be Human and the Tools to Handle Frustration	53

III. DARK NIGHTS OF FAITH IN OUR LIVES

11. Dark Nights of Faith in Our Lives	59
12. Why Faith Feels Like Doubt and Darkness	63
13. The Ups and Downs of Faith	67
14. Dark Nights of the Heart	71
15. Fear	75

IV. ON HALLOWING OUR DIMINISHMENTS

16. On Hallowing Our Diminishments.	81
17. Moving Beyond Mistakes and Weaknesses	85
18. Coming to Peace with Our Lack of Recognition.	89
19. Lessons Through Failure	93
20. Despair as Weakness Rather than Sin	97

V. INADEQUACY, HURT, AND RECONCILIATION

21. Inadequacy, Hurt, and Reconciliation.	103
22. Bridging the Unbridgeable Gap	107
23. Opening Our Secrets to the Light	111
24. How Can It All Have a Happy Ending?	115

VI. A MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT

25. A Magnificent Defeat.	121
26. Surrendering to Love.	125
27. Choosing Our Own Storm	129
28. Praying So As Not to Lose Heart	133
29. Groaning Beyond Words—Our Deeper Way of Praying	137

VII. LISTENING TO CHRIST'S HEARTBEAT

30. Listening to Christ's Heartbeat.	143
31. God's Quiet Presence in Our Lives	147
32. Only in Silence	151
33. Turning Inner Chaos into a Peaceful Garden	155
34. Facing Our Tough Hours	159

VII. LISTENING TO OUR SOULS

35. Listening to Our Souls.	165
36. Coping With Our Own Souls.	169
37. Struggling to Be Inside the Present Moment.	173
38. What Has Been Given You to Carry?	177

IX. THE PASSION OF CHRIST AS PASSIVITY

39. The Passion of Christ as Passivity.	183
40. When Our World Is Falling Apart.	187
41. Every Tear Brings the Messiah Closer.	191
42. Sacred Permission to Be in Agony.	195
43. Staring into the Light.	199

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	203
------------------------	-----

NOTES.	205
-------------	-----

PREFACE

*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts
are restless until they rest in you.*

St. Augustine wrote those words seventeen hundred years ago, and they are still the key to our self-understanding. We are complex beings, and that complexity is not a disease. It's a gift from God. We are complex because we are made in God's image and likeness, meaning we have within us something of the divine which can never find full consummation in this life. The infinite in us cannot find full rest in the finite. In this life there can be no finished symphony.

Because of this, the gift of having the kiss of God forever branded deep inside us, all of us at the very center of our awareness have a fundamental *dis-ease*, a disquiet, a restlessness, a loneliness, a complexity, a nostalgia for a home we can never quite find in this world. Hinduism calls this a nostalgia for the infinite. Plato believed that we are born with a madness inside us that comes from the gods. Moreover, this disquiet lies at our very center. We are not restful creatures who occasionally experience restlessness. Rather, we are restless creatures who occasionally find rest. Being a human being is not a simple task, let alone being a

person who can put herself or himself under the discipline of faith and Christ.

The renowned spiritual author Ruth Burrows begins her autobiography with these words: *I was born into this life with a tortured complexity and my spiritual journey has not always been easy.* For good reason. Sometimes, half-jokingly, I tell my students that the difference between humans and animals is this: Cattle contentedly munch grass in pastures while humans discontentedly smoke grass in bars. Cattle don't have timelessness branded into the depth of their souls. There is a reason why humans sometimes smoke grass in bars, why sometimes the complexity of lives causes breakdowns. As the renowned novelist Philip Roth once put it, a blizzard of details constitutes the confusion of human biography.

I believe that, for all its goodness, where Christian spirituality has not always served us well is in that it has not always given us sacred permission to be fully inside our lives and to honestly name and own our own complexity.

I highlight this as a preface for this book because I hope that these essays will give you permission, sacred permission, to feel and own your own complexity and to know that while God gave us this *dis-ease*, God also gave us a heart strong enough to deal with our complex selves. We need to be less a mystery to ourselves and need to stop feeling guilty for

being the complex persons that God made us to be, even as we know that our hearts are strong enough to deal with all that besets us.

I chose the title for this book, *Our Heart Is Stronger Than Our Wounds*, from a particularly poignant line from Henri Nouwen. While in a clinic struggling to recover from a clinical depression, he wrote these words:

The great challenge is *living* your wounds through instead of *thinking* them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your hurts to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down into your heart. Then you can live them through and discover that they will not destroy you. *Your heart is greater than your wounds.*¹

Our lives are pathologically complex, but our hearts are up to the task!

I.
OUR HEART
IS STRONGER
THAN OUR
WOUNDS



CHAPTER 1

Our Heart Is Stronger than Our Wounds

*God's grace, forgiveness, and love are stronger than our wounds,
our collapses, our failures, and our seeming despairs.*

Ten years before his death in 1996, Henri Nouwen was beset by a depression that nearly broke him. While in treatment, he wrote a powerful book, *The Inner Voice of Love*, in which he humbly and candidly shared his struggles and the efforts it took to overcome them. At times, he felt completely overwhelmed by his wounds and obsessions and was on the edge of drowning, of collapse, when the only thing he could do was cry. Eventually, though, he found his inner strength again and emerged resilient, ready to re-enter his life with renewed energy. Remarking on what he learned from this inner collapse and his eventual return to health, he wrote that, in the end, *our hearts are stronger than our wounds*.

That's a powerful affirmation of a hard-earned truth; but is it always true? Are our hearts always stronger than our wounds? Do we always have the resources deep down to overcome our wounds?

Sometimes yes, as in the case of Nouwen; but sometimes no, as we see in the broken lives of so many. Sometimes, it seems wounds overpower the heart. Perhaps one poignant example can serve to illustrate this. There is a sad, tragic, haunting line in the well-known song “I Dreamed a Dream,” from the popular musical *Les Misérables*. The story told in *Les Misérables* is based on Victor Hugo’s classic book by that title which tells a series of stories about how poverty and oppression can break the hearts, backs, and lives of the poor. One of Hugo’s characters, Fantine, is a single mother, abandoned by the man she loves and nursing a broken heart. She is also struggling to provide her daughter with the basic needs of life, struggling with a job and working conditions that are ruining her health, and struggling with sexual harassment from her boss that culminates in her unfair dismissal from her job. At a certain point, it’s too much, her health breaks, she collapses, and in her dying farewell, she sings out a lament that suggests that our hearts aren’t always stronger than our wounds; sometimes *there are storms we cannot weather*. Sometimes the heart cannot weather the storm and collapses under the weight of its wounds.

Who’s right—Nouwen or Fantine? I suspect they both are, depending on one’s circumstances, inner health, and emotional resources. An old adage says, *Whatever doesn’t kill*

you, makes you stronger! True enough, providing it doesn't kill you. Sadly, sometimes it does. Sometimes what weighs us down does kill us. I suspect that everyone reading this has had a firsthand experience of someone you knew and loved breaking down and dying, either by suicide or some other collapse of this sort, due to a broken life, a broken heart, a broken psyche, a wound that overpowered his or her heart.

When we look at the truth of Nouwen's affirmation that our hearts are stronger than our wounds and the (seeming) antithetical truth that sometimes our wounds can kill the heart, we need to add a further truth which embraces both sides of this: *God's grace, forgiveness, and love are stronger than our wounds, our collapses, our failures, and our seeming despairs.*

Sometimes in our struggles we can access the inner strength buried below our wounds that will enable us to rise above them and walk again in health, strength, and enthusiasm. However, sometimes our wounds so paralyze the heart that we can no longer access the strength that lies deep within us. In this life, that kind of brokenness can look and feel like a terminal collapse, a sadness for which there is no healing, a despair, a wasted life. Whenever a collusion of bitter circumstance and mental fragility breaks someone, when a person's heart is no longer stronger than his or her

wounds, we can take refuge in a deeper truth and consolation, namely, the strength that lies within God's heart: *God's grace, understanding, and love are stronger than our wounds, our collapses, our failures, and our seeming despairs.*

What sets Christian faith apart from most other religions (as well as from all prosperity gospels) is that Christianity is a religion of grace and not primarily of self-effort (important though that is). As Christians, we don't have to save ourselves; we don't have to get our lives right all on our own. Indeed, nobody ever does. As St. Paul says so clearly in his farewell message in Romans 1–8, none of us ever get our lives right based on our own strength. That's also true in terms of overcoming our wounds. All of us are weak and break down sometimes. The point is, when the storms of life overpower us, when we reach down for strength to withstand the storm only to find that the storm is stronger than we are, we need then to reach still deeper, and there we will find that God's heart is stronger than our brokenness.

CHAPTER 2

Our Wounds, Our Gifts, and Our Power to Heal Others

*God calls each of us to a vocation and to a special work more
based on our wounds than on our gifts.*

More than fifty years ago Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled *The Wounded Healer*. Its reception established his reputation as a unique spiritual mentor, and he went on to become one of the most influential spiritual writers of the past half-century. What made his writings so powerful? His brilliance? His gift for expression? What set Nouwen apart from other writers was that he was a deeply wounded man, and from that disquieted place inside him issued forth words that were a healing balm to millions.

How do our wounds help heal others? They don't. It's not our wounds that help heal others. Rather, our wounds can color our gifts and talents in such a way that they no longer evoke resistance and envy in others, but instead become what God meant them to be, gifts to grace others.

Sadly, often the opposite is true. Our gifts and talents become the reason we're disliked and perhaps even hated. There's a curious dynamic here. We don't automatically, nor easily, let the gifts of others grace us. More often, we're reluctant to admit their beauty and power, and we resist and envy those who possess them. Sometimes we even hate them for their gifts. That's one of the reasons we find it hard to simply admire someone.

This reluctance doesn't just say something about us. Often it says something too about the persons who possess those gifts. Talent is an ambiguous thing; it can be used to assert ourselves, to separate ourselves from others, to stand out and to stand above, rather than as a gift to help others. Our talents can be used simply to point to how bright, talented, good-looking, and successful we are. Then they simply become a strength meant to dwarf others and set ourselves apart.

How can we make our talents a gift for others? How can we be loved for our talents rather than hated for them? Here's the difference: We will be loved and admired for our gifts when our gifts are colored by our wounds so that others do not see them as a threat or as something that sets us apart, but rather as something that gifts them in their own shortcomings. When shared in a certain way, our gifts can become gifts for everyone else.

Here's how that algebra works: Our gifts are given to us not for ourselves but for others. But, to be that, they need to be colored by compassion. We come to compassion by letting our wounds befriend our gifts. Here are two examples.

When Princess Diana died in 1997, there was a massive outpouring of love for her. Both by temperament and as a Catholic priest, I'm normally not given to grieving over celebrities, yet I felt a deep sorrow and love for this woman. It wasn't that she was beautiful and famous; many women are and are hated for it. Princess Diana was loved by so many because she was a wounded person, someone whose wounds colored her beauty and fame in a way that induced love, not envy.

Henri Nouwen, who popularized the phrase "the wounded healer," shared a similar trait. He was a brilliant man, the author of more than forty books, one of the most popular religious speakers of his generation, tenured at both Harvard and Yale, a person with friends all over the world. However, Nouwen was also a deeply wounded man who, by his own repeated admission, suffered restlessness, anxiety, jealousies, and obsessions that occasionally landed him in a clinic. By his own repeated admission, amidst success and popularity, for most of his adult life, Nouwen struggled to simply accept love. His wounds forever got in the way. His wounded self colors basically

every page of every book he wrote. His brilliance was forever colored by his wounds, and that's why it was never self-assertive but always compassionate. No one envied Nouwen's brilliance; he was too wounded to be envied. Instead, his brilliance always touched us in a healing way. He was a wounded healer.

Those words, wounded and healer, ordain each other. I'm convinced that God calls each of us to a vocation and to a special work here on earth more based on our wounds than based on our gifts. Our gifts are real and important; but they only grace others when they are shaped into a special kind of compassion by the uniqueness of our own wounds. Our unique, special wounds can help make each of us a unique, special healer.

Our world is full of brilliant, talented, highly successful, and beautiful people. Those gifts are real, coming from God, and should never be denigrated in God's name. However, our gifts don't automatically help others; but they can if they are colored by our wounds so that they flow out as compassion and not as pride.

CHAPTER 3

Taking Pain to the Heart

“There is no shortcut to wisdom: the soul’s path lies through the thorny wilderness.” —George Eliot

Writing in his journal during a time of bitter heartbreak, Henri Nouwen wrote these words: *The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or your heart.*

Part of us understands exactly what Nouwen is saying here, even as another part of us congenitally resists his advice: There’s place in us that doesn’t want to cry, doesn’t want to feel our hurt, doesn’t want to take our pain to a place of silence, and doesn’t want to take our wounds to our heart. Instead, in our heartaches and wounds, we grow anxious and obsessive, we struggle to understand, we talk endlessly to others, and we try to sort things out with our heads rather than letting ourselves simply feel them with our hearts.

That isn't always a bad thing. Nouwen's counsel, for all its wisdom, needs some qualification: It is important that we also take our wounds to our heads. Our hearts and heads need to be in sync. What Nouwen points to here is something that he, a man blessed with an extraordinary sensitivity to the things of the heart, learned only through crushing heartache and breakdown, namely, that we more easily take things to the head than to the heart, even when we think we aren't doing this.

The way we take pain to our heads and block healing tears in our hearts is by denial, by rationalization, by blaming, by not simply and honestly admitting and owning our own pain, our own helplessness, our own weakness, and our own inadequacy.

We all have plenty of occasions to do this: The more alive and sensitive we are, the more we will experience excruciating heartaches. The more honest we are, the more we will be aware of our own limits and inadequacies. The more generous and pure we are, the more we will be aware of our own sin and betrayals.

So Nouwen's counsel contains a healthy challenge: When we are brought to our knees by heartache and pain, we shouldn't try to deny that pain, deny its bitter strength, or deny our helplessness in dealing with it. To do so is to

risk becoming hard and bitter. If we give our deep pains and heartaches their honest due, they will induce the kind of tears that soften and stretch the heart. It is helpful to remember that tears are saltwater, of one substance with the waters of the original oceans from which we sprang. Tears connect us to our origins and allow the primal water of life to again flow through us.

Moreover, when we take our pain to our hearts, when we honestly admit our weaknesses and helplessness, God can finally begin to fill us with strength. It is only when we are brought to our knees in utter helplessness, only when we finally give up on our own strength, that God can send an angel to strengthen us, just as God sent an angel to strengthen Jesus during his agony in the garden.

One night, some months before his death, Martin Luther King received a death threat on the phone. It had happened before, but on this particular night, it left him frightened and weakened to the core. All his fears came down on him at once. Here are his words as to what happened next:

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this

state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.

“I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can’t face it alone.” At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before.²

It is only after the desert has done its work on us, says author Trevor Herriot, that an angel can come and strengthen us. That is why it is better to feel our wounds than to understand them and why it is better to cry than to worry.