

## **The Four Needs for Daily Sanctuary Need #2: Relief from Life's Discomforts** **by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD**

Perhaps the second most common way people discover they need sanctuary is as a response to a sense of woundedness, trauma, illness, grief, inner turmoil, or stress. Sometimes we are unprepared for some of our life experiences and our mental, emotional, or physical well-being suffers as a result. This is different than mere burnout or a sense of world-weariness at the end of the day. Life's discomforts jar us or perhaps catch us by surprise. Such jolts to our soul may happen at home or work, between family members or friends. They may also happen *to* us, as in abuse, oppression, severe illness, or an accident. In any case, sanctuary may be a powerful and necessary intervention.

### **Relief in Intimate Relationships**

Intimacy, for example, may have as many episodes of tension and conflict as kindness and respect. A person may have had an argument with their partner and now needs a little space to think things over. In our marriage, the opportunity to take momentary space from each other at times of tension has been an unexpected and beneficial gift of the concept of sanctuary. We have learned to be noble in our approach, reassuring the other that our personal state of inner turmoil can be best dealt with introspectively before resuming strategies for resolution.

Of course, years ago, when we first began charting such sanctuaries from intimacy, we each clumsily tipped the boat — a lot! I, for example, always resented Tricia's need to take space to recompose herself. I wanted immediate resolution, which really meant I wanted immediate control over both the process and the outcome. But I came to value Tricia's need to take momentary respite from an otherwise loaded situation in which we could have verbally harmed each other.

If you are in a marriage or partnership consider the value of discussing each of your unique needs for sanctuary at certain times. Explore what issues rise up to create tension and in what ways inner calm can be restored. Create strategies that recognize the early warning signals of an individual's need for alone time and space. Finally, create opportunities for the two of you to have sanctuary time together.

### **Relief from the Stress of Work and School**

Intimate relationships are invaluable for exploring the waters of sanctuary, but people also find stress and turmoil at work, school, or home. Sometimes one needs a little comforting space alone. Progressive employers, for example, have been creating innovative ways for employees to take space away from their workstations. In the 1970's, such leisure from work used to be called "schmoozing." Today it qualifies as pure sanctuary time. Here, one may seek out interactive time with their child at a company-based childcare facility. Or, one may "hang out" in a lounge or game room. Some companies have even provided sleep rooms, workout spaces, or meditation rooms. A couple of years ago, we visited a very progressive new hospital on the Big Island of Hawaii. They had one such meditation room for use by staff, patients, and family members. The room was beautiful yet simple, and the energy in it was quite peaceful.

In every instance where workers can voluntarily step away from their work, researchers have determined that the overall quality of their work has not suffered (and in fact, increases!), their morale is higher, and they do not abuse the privilege. Of course, employers have recently had to deal with workers

“cybersquatting” on the internet at their workstations when they should be working. But this has nothing to do with sanctuary. (talk about school)

### **Relief from Personal Crisis**

Mental, emotional, or physical woundedness also leads one to the shores of sanctuary. Years ago, during the height of the so-called “men’s movement” in the early 1990’s, I became involved in a large weekly gathering of 30-50 men. We usually started off by drumming and moving around before settling into a circle to talk. During the first meeting I attended, I quickly discovered that many of the men overtly expressed their sense of male woundedness at the hands of insensitive, angry or absent fathers, broken families, authority figures, and society’s pressure for men to live up to what sociologists call the “male mystique.” Then, the Gulf War broke out, and the next two months of meetings found well over a hundred men gathered, many now pouring out their anger and grief over war. A number of men were Vietnam veterans, and I noted that their psychic wounds were deep and unresolved. Nonetheless, this weekly gathering offered an invaluable safe asylum for us men.

Reflecting on this men’s group also reminds me of the sanctuary that society has offered abused women and children in the form of free shelters and counseling. In fact, during the Gulf War crisis (at the time of my men’s group), assault on women by their spouses increased dramatically across the country. Most women try to seek the sanctuary of a close friend or priest during crises. But recently I read an article about a trend among hair salons. Because many women feel very comfortable with their hairdresser, they are apt to share personally troubling information. Hair stylists are now beginning to learn skills in crisis management and empathic listening. They are also becoming more informed about local resources and agencies that may be of help to troubled customers.

Sometimes one’s sense of woundedness may lead to self-imposed solitude. The two famous poets, Petrarca and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are good examples. Both withdrew from society seeking to discover and cultivate their individualism, but in both instances their retreat was initiated by a personal sense of woundedness.

In the case of Petrarca, the poet first saw and fell in love with Laura in 1327, in the church of St. Clare in Avignon, and his pure and unrequited love for this married woman became a main theme in his life. Rejected by Laura, Petrarca sought to smother his “burning love, a simple and honorable love” by retiring to Vaucluse with his pain. Undoubtedly, it was in his consolation that he wrote his now famous treatise *De Vita Solitaria*. Petrarca did not actually become a recluse at Vaucluse, for he lived in the middle of the city and saw friends. But, from his point of view, he was living in solitude out of the woundedness of love.

During the time of the Enlightenment, the French poet Rousseau sought seclusion with nature for different reasons. His was self-imposed by feeling rejected and unjustly criticized by his contemporaries. This emotional woundedness became a driving force in his subsequent sociological and philosophical theories: treatises about the goodness of nature and the natural man (“le bon sauvage”) that have impacted succeeding generations. Once again, like Petrarca, Rousseau wasn’t in complete isolation: he lived in the country with his wife and mother-in-law in L’Ermitage, a little country house which Madame d’Epinay lent him.

Sometimes we take refuge exactly at the time and place where we are meant to find some modicum of healing. History is ripe with journeys into sanctuary in which figures seek resolution of inner turmoil. Buddha, for example, disheartened by so much suffering in the world, sought the ultimate sanctuary of

the bodhi tree under which he vowed not to move until enlightened. In my own life, after a sudden and traumatic divorce many years ago with my former mate, I found immediate sanctuary in a shower, letting my tears meld with the warm spray. I performed this despairing ritual several times a day for weeks before I could begin to feel hope anew within my broken heart.

### **Relief from Loss**

Familial break-up, midlife crises, loss, and gender issues — such life events can only find relief by periodic solace. The loss of a loved one or dear friend can be especially traumatic. One day I began a conversation with a woman in a local grocery store. Eventually the conversation came around to my being an author. When I told her about our book, *The Sanctuary Garden*, her eyes immediately lit up. She then said that her therapist had just recommended it as a way to come to some sense of resolution about her grief over the loss of her beloved son. Using the inspiration from our book, the therapist suggested she create a sanctuary garden on her back porch, planting it with his favorite flowers, as a way of memorializing her son's life. I asked her if he had died recently, for her grief felt at the surface. I was totally surprised when she said he had died over eight years earlier! I hope her newfound sense of sanctuary has helped in her healing.

Expand about grief

### **Relief from Illness or Trauma**

I don't want to leave this need for sanctuary without finally touching on how illness or physical trauma can find relief in thoughtful support from others, or how a special place can aid in healing or preparation for death. This aspect of sanctuary is very promising, especially in creating bedroom sanctuaries for the severely ill or dying.

My first awareness of how immediate asylum for physical trauma is so important came at the hands of Tricia on a stormy Oregon night. We had only been together a couple of years, and I had yet to understand her fierce determination and independent way of thinking. Now I fully appreciate her intuition in all manners of healing. She called me about mid-evening from a phone booth at the scene of an accident she had just been in. The head-on collision totaled both cars, with no apparent injuries to both drivers. Tricia was in great discomfort, however, but did not want to go to the hospital. Instead, she asked me to pick her up and take her to a friend's home. Here was a group of Reiki practitioners who gathered weekly to practice and improve their craft. Being a practitioner herself, Tricia knew the powerful use of Reiki (an age-old Japanese form of healing with the hands, similar to therapeutic touch) for traumatic emotional and physical injuries. I was incensed by her relative lack of regard — she destroyed our car and now asked me to provide “taxi” service to someone else's home! But her decision was right, the Reiki treatment by an exceedingly compassionate group of healers created a quick healing miracle.

Over the years, Tricia has provided me with numerous opportunities to understand the power of offering immediate sanctuary for physical trauma. I resisted and resented her accidents or illnesses by being insensitive and much too rational. But we are each other's teachers in courageous ways and my heart has softened and surrendered to this power of necessary refuge for any condition. Another person's illness, grief, woundedness, or inner turmoil is no reason for our passing judgment on their life or turning our back on them. The concept of sanctuary teaches us that we are not islands unto ourselves, even if we want so badly to be just that! If we are to err, let us err on the side of compassion, love, forgiveness, hope, and charity. This type of behavior opens up a new landscape where the heart can dwell and the mind can find peace.

Take a moment now and reflect on those times in your life when seeking sanctuary was a natural consequence or need to find relief from a significant feeling of discomfort. Think about your childhood. Were you able to find safety and comfort in the loving sanctuary of a parent, relative, or other caring adult? What did you do when you felt somewhat pained by the world? My father was unnecessarily abusive to our family, but I finally found refuge for all my wounded emotions in the comfort of music and sitting alone with nature. This still holds true today.

As you matured, how did your need for periodic asylum from life events change? Do you carry within you a type of wounded spirit that needs special care? If you are employed, how do you deal with stress from work? Can you seek solace in the comfort of a close friend?

These are just a few of many questions you can ask yourself regarding your need for sanctuary in response to life issues and concerns. The main point is, be prepared for your need for sanctuary. By experimenting with its use and value on a daily basis, you will be able to use sanctuary with larger issues as they appear in your life. Sanctuary is invaluable in helping you deal with life's discomforts.

Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell

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