

Journey of the Heart

Reading the Psalms has launched many a soul into a journey of finding God all over again. Try it some day when you have the time. We find it contains expressions of joy, anger, praise, and despair. It's all about being human.

Emotional wounds hurt as much as physical wounds. Both types will heal, but without the attention of a competent care giver, healing is slow and scars run deep.

Understanding self-esteem is at the root of it all. Next to God's grace, self-esteem is the most important treasure we have. When we feel positive about ourselves, we are happy, productive and clear thinking. But, esteem is like fine, delicate crystal that shatters when struck the wrong way and we learn to unconsciously protect it. So, most people create a surrounding layer of emotional insulation which serves as an instinctive mechanism to get them through the potholes in life, but sometimes there's a gap in that protection and the inner self takes a hit. In so many ways, self-esteem is potentially wounded any time there is a sense of loss. There is a minute sense of loss even when you can't find your car keys, but it takes only a nanosecond to recover. How quickly do we get over the big losses like loss of a loved one, loss of a marriage, loss of a job? We may silently ask ourselves, did I love that person enough before she died? Was I fair in our relationship? Should I have done something different? If we are not sinking in self-judgment, we may find ourselves immersed in total chaos and confusion as our jumbled thoughts make no sense. We ask, "Why can't my feelings return to normal? I thought I was tougher than this."

We have all heard about the value of talking to a friend. Yes, good advice, but pick your friends carefully. We all live in a fix-it world. Our society lives at a fast pace and many people who want to help often offer the wrong kind of help.

We all focus on results because we were taught to do so. It's how we manage to go from day to day. But for those trying to extract themselves from the pit of grief struggle to just get through the day are swallowed by depression and sorrow. They don't need a "fix-it", they need a process. It's good and kind for others to make material fixes for you, but when the last well-wisher has gone home, it's just you and your tangle of thoughts. Oddly, family members can sometimes be the worst of the "Fix-it" folks.

The need is for someone who listens effectively and focuses on the process. Someone who will confidentially share your most personal thoughts without judging you. Someone who will give you unconditional positive regard, share your tears and assure you that your feelings are valid.

Good listeners are hard to find. Pastors are usually regarded as good listeners. They extinguish the flames like firefighters and would like to stick around to help with the re-building process, but they can't because there's another fire somewhere else. Stephen Ministers are extensions of their pastor and they can stay for the long haul. They are not professional counselors, psychologists, or therapists. Rather, they are caring Christians who want to help in the best way possible and have received 50 hours of training in basic topics such as the art of listening, understanding human emotions, the mechanics of human crisis, confidentiality, recognizing signs of depression or potential suicide, and above all else – knowing their limitations. Stephen Ministers do not attempt anything that should be reserved for professionals.

Effective care giving is a team effort. Stephen Ministers do not operate in a vacuum. They meet twice each month in peer supervisory sessions and, in total confidentiality, discuss the relationships they have with their care receivers. Names are never mentioned in these meetings. Care receivers should feel safe and private when talking to a Stephen Minister.

Stephen Ministry is a total program designed to recruit, organize, train, and support lay ministers who give confidential one-on-one pastoral-type care to those who have gone through losses of any kind and need emotional and spiritual healing.

Stephen Ministers will gladly tell how they receive a deeply fulfilling, healthy combination of God-pleasing self-esteem and humility because we know we have answered a calling and feel like a useful part of the body of Christ. Over time, the experience of caring for someone in a distinctive way will take you far down your Christian pathway and you will see more of the whole context of God's meaning in the world. Your priorities and your vision will change. Your relationship to God will become more intimate.

For most, there is always the issue of finding time for this ministry. God always has a way of providing the time. If you love what you're doing, the question of time is usually a moot point. Rest assured, Stephen Ministry is like a good book you can't put down.

Most people find they already have the tools to be Stephen Ministers and the training shows how to use them. Have you ever crossed paths with someone who just lost a loved one and you just didn't know what to say? Stephen Ministry will teach you what to say.

Some may think Stephen Ministers should be expert theologians. Make no mistake, this is a caring ministry. People in pain need love and caring, not theology.

In Matthew 25, Christ said, "When you do this to the least of my brethren, you do it to me." It tells us when you give of your time, when you listen, really listen to someone else's grief, when you validate the feelings of someone who feels alone in a cruel world, when you help someone heal from the wounds of loss and fear, you do it for Jesus.

Do you leave church each Sunday with the feeling that you are not fulfilling your life's purpose in God's plan? Stephen Ministry is looking for those who want to help on a personal level. You will learn that God does indeed operate on our level, not in some mystical, puzzling context that we are not supposed to understand. The tools of Stephen Ministry make sense.

Our congregation has currently suspended involvement in Stephen Ministry. Should we dust it off and bring it back to life?

Mike Slayter