

# Leading from the Ashes: Can the Wounded Lead?

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Leadership forged in trauma often walks a dangerous line—between deep empathy and unresolved pain, between the drive to change the world and the unrest within. We like to tell stories of people who rise from the ashes, turning suffering into strength. But not all wounds heal cleanly. And not everyone who's suffered is ready to lead.

The Prophet Muhammad lost both parents before he could speak in full sentences. Abandoned —not once, but twice—he knew grief early and carried it quietly. When he grew into leadership, it wasn't theory that moved him—it was memory. He knew what it meant to be voiceless. So, he became a voice for others. His compassion wasn't polished philosophy; it came from walking barefoot through loss. He didn't lead to repair himself. He led to protect others from the loneliness he never forgot.

Nelson Mandela offers a more recent example of a leader who transformed personal suffering into moral vision. Imprisoned for nearly three decades for daring to demand dignity in a nation built on fear and segregation, they took everything from him—his family, his freedom, even his name. Yet when the gates finally opened, he didn't step out with bitterness. He stepped out with a plan. To reconcile, not retaliate. To build a new South Africa, not burn down the old. To forgive—not because they deserved it, but because he needed to be free. He didn't want his enemies to suffer. He wanted his people to breathe.

Even Batman—cape and cowl and a closet full of trauma —belongs to this strange fraternity. He watched his parents die and decided no one else should feel that kind of loss. So, he turned grief into a mission, vengeance into nightly patrols, and unresolved pain into a very expensive hobby. He's fiction, sure, but the kind that sticks. He reminds us: you can lead from pain, but only if the pain doesn't lead you.

These are the exceptions. But not everyone finds clarity through pain.

Sometimes, trauma doesn't heal—it settles deep in the psyche, festering. It may catalyse action, but not always direction. It whispers lies: "You're not enough until they see you." These lies push people to the front—not to serve, but to be seen. Not to uplift, but to be vindicated. The speeches sound right. The cause is real. But beneath the slogans lies something else—something raw.

The leader isn't speaking for the wounded. They're bleeding through the microphone. They're not healing others; they're trying to heal themselves in public.

And herein lies the danger: when leadership becomes a form of therapy, it risks turning others into proxies for unresolved pain.

You can hear it sometimes. At rallies. In movements. The rhetoric is impassioned, the cause undeniably just. But beneath the chants and cheers, there's a jarring note—grief masquerading as certainty.

The speech lands every line, but something feels off. The words are right, but the tone is cracked. The slogans don't inspire; they plead. The message isn't just about justice—it's tangled in identity. The leader no longer speaks for the broken. They speak from the break.

This isn't an attack on pain. It's a reckoning—with the difference between carrying a wound and casting it as a banner. Between leading from healing, and leading to be healed.

Pain, when unprocessed, distorts how we see the world. It breeds resentment—especially toward those who seem to possess what has been lost: power, security, innocence, love, stability. When that resentment hides behind the banner of justice, things begin to fall apart. It confuses followers. The movement loses its way. What began as a fight for something good becomes a projection of something unresolved.

There's a difference between a leader who says, "I've been there. Let me help you," and one who, without words, pleads, "I'm still there. Please don't leave me." The first builds trust—and hope. The second builds dependency—and chaos.

Many of the leaders we admire—past and present—come from liminal spaces. They live between cultures, identities, or histories, carrying both promise and pain. Strangers in their own skin, they rise not from peace, but from silence. For some, leadership isn't a calling—it's survival. They speak out not because they've found peace, but because the silence has become unbearable.

Sometimes, we meet people who yearn to love but don't know how. Their leadership reflects that same struggle—driven to uplift, yet unable to trust; eager to guide, yet quick to retreat. Their cause is real, but it becomes a container for unspoken grief. When you try to care for them, they pull away—or worse, push you out. The walls go up. The kindness they offer the world is the very thing they can't accept for themselves. They're not dishonest; they're just wounded. And over time, their pain begins to write the script for who they are in public.

This is why true compassion needs boundaries. A Jesuit priest—my own Waraqah ibn Nawfal, a spiritual mentor—once told me, "There will come a time when you realise your love isn't enough to heal someone. And if you don't step back, their wounds become yours."

There is nobility in wanting to help. There is also wisdom in knowing when to stop.

So, can the wounded lead? Yes—but only if they've faced their wound, not run from it. Only if their cause isn't a surrogate for healing. Only if their empathy flows from reflection, not projection.

Because leadership isn't measured by how much you've suffered—it's measured by what you do with that suffering once you've walked through the fire and returned with open hands and a clear voice.

The ones who carry the burden without breaking.

Who turn pain into presence, wounds into wisdom, vulnerability into vision, and chaos into care—these are the leaders we need most.