Mending lives: The healing balm of friendship

by L. Gregory Jones in the July 26, 2003 issue

Toward the end of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a powerful novel about slavery and its aftermath, one of the characters reflects on the impact one woman had on his life: "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind."

We all long to have "a friend of my mind." Such friends are agents of healing and wholeness, people who mend our lives by gathering the tattered pieces of our selves and quilting them into a redemptive fabric. Such friends are a holy gift.

These friends are all the more important because there are others who play an opposite role in our lives. Some people carve us into pieces, or take the pieces that we are and break us into even smaller fragments. These people haunt us and make it difficult for us to imagine that we'll ever be whole, or manage to put the pieces into a right order.

The passage from *Beloved* was in my mind as I read Pat Conroy's book *My Losing Season*, the story of Conroy's senior year as point guard on the Citadel's basketball season, and what he learned from losing. It is also a memoir that describes people who smashed Conroy to pieces, and one man who became a key friend of his mind.

Conroy's father was a master at demeaning, attacking and undermining his son. He did it verbally and emotionally, as well as physically. Conroy writes, "There was nothing my father could not teach me about the architecture of despair. I knew all its shapes and its blueprints, the shadows of all its columns and archways. My father could send me reeling down its hallways and screaming into its bat-spliced attics with a curl of his thin-lipped mouth. He brought madness home every time he entered the many houses of my overlong childhood. His cruelty baffled me, shamed me, and I promised myself I would never be anything like him."

Conroy’s life is marked by the persistent and severe ways in which his father tore him apart—and ways in which he returned to irritate the most severe wounds so that they never healed. “My father possessed a genius for scab-flicking, for zeroing in on that tenderest spot of the psyche where healing was most difficult, exposing the rawness of the wound again and again.”

Conroy’s psyche was tested further by his coach, Mel Thompson. Although Thompson was not physically abusive, his harsh words and loathing attitude beat down Conroy and his teammates. Conroy is haunted by particular phrases: “You’re just mediocre,” and “Conroy, don’t shoot.”

Conroy and his teammates struggled against a coach who reduced them to pieces: “My teammates had found themselves reduced to a state that was birthplace and hermitage and briar patch to me—a despair with no windows or exits, a futility that made hope vain and the future unthinkable.”

Conroy has struggled throughout his life, especially in relationships. As he says, “We beaten boys have trouble liking the faces our fathers tore apart with their fists.”

Fortunately Conroy was sustained—and given a vocation—through an English professor who befriended him and encouraged him to become a writer. Colonel John Doyle guided Conroy as he discovered the constructive potential of words and began to write. When Conroy wrote poetry for Doyle’s class, he found a new world opening up to him: “For the first time, I knew the repleteness that comes from filling up with words. Language became a honeycomb brightening the eaves of my brain.”

It was not only language that brightened the eaves of Conroy’s brain; it was also the gift of Doyle’s friendship. Doyle had an unshakable faith in Conroy’s ability, and at a pivotal point told him: “You’re too hard on yourself. For reasons I don’t understand, you are deeply unhappy, and it pains me. Know this. I think you could be special if you only thought there was anything special about yourself. Someone has taught you to hate yourself. I hope I haven’t crossed some line, Mr. Conroy. I value our friendship very much.”

With those words and friendship, Conroy was able to begin putting the pieces of his life together in a right order. To be sure, the words and actions of others have continued to haunt Conroy throughout his life. But his friend of the mind was a powerful gift. As Conroy notes, Doyle even helped him cultivate “the form praying takes in me.”

All of us emerge in pieces out of complex factors that include our own sinfulness as well as the sins we suffer from others—haunting words, tattered emotions, in all too many cases physical wounds. We search for friends of our mind, people who mediate God’s grace in Jesus Christ to us in ways that give us back the pieces of our lives in the right order.

Because the world is so broken, and our own lives so often shattered, it often takes a lifetime to live into the right ordering of the pieces, and to discover the wholeness for which we were created. One Colonel Doyle may have the power to help us mend our lives. As we reflect on those people who have been friends of our minds and give thanks for the healing balm of friendship they offer us, the question rebounds: To whom are we called to be holy friends? Who needs us to give them back the pieces of their lives in the right order?