

# IN THE MARGINS: The angel that troubled the waters

*By Tony Martin*

*Editor*

If there's one thing we often miss about our hidden struggles, it's that those very struggles can be our greatest gift to others. They give us the unique ability to connect deeply and meaningfully. Thornton Wilder captured this beautifully in his short play, "The Angel That Troubled the Waters." It's based on a story found in John 5:1-4.

It dramatizes the power of the pool of Bethesda to heal whenever an angel stirred its waters.

A physician comes periodically to the pool, hoping to be the first in line and longing to be healed of his melancholy. The angel finally appears but blocks the physician just as he is about to enter the water. The angel tells the physician to draw back for this moment isn't for him. The physician pleads for help in a broken voice, but the angel insists that healing isn't intended for him.

The dialogue continues, and the angel shares a prophetic word:

*"Without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve. Physician, draw back."*

Wilder reminds us that our hidden wounds – those very struggles we so carefully keep tucked away – hold within them unique power. They allow us to reach others in ways that

perfection, success, and even angels themselves cannot.

And here's how the story continues: After the angel denies healing to the physician, another man enters the waters first, receives healing, and celebrates joyfully. Yet moments later, that very healed man turns to the still-wounded physician and begs him:

"Please come with me. It is only an hour to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I don't understand him but only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour ... there is also my daughter. Since her child died, she sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us but she will listen to you."

You see, the physician's melancholy, the wound he wished so desperately to remove, was exactly what allowed him to speak comfort and courage into the lives of others. His wound was, paradoxically, his greatest gift.

Here's what I want us all to remember:

Our hidden wounds aren't just burdens to carry silently; they're the very things that qualify us uniquely to help, encourage, and deeply connect with each other.

Wilder teaches us something profound: when we embrace our authentic selves – scars and all – we become powerful, compassionate, and effective healers in ways no one else can be.

So here we are, face-to-face with this powerful idea that our hidden struggles – the ones we've worked so hard to conceal – might actually be our greatest strengths.

But let's acknowledge something important: authenticity, especially the kind that reveals those hidden parts of our lives, takes courage. It takes courage because we're not just revealing our wounds – we're challenging the very expectation that says, "Keep it hidden. Don't let them see who you really

are.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke to this beautifully. He said:

*“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”*

Let’s think about what that really means for a moment. Every single day, we feel pressure – sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious – to be somebody slightly different from who we truly are. Maybe it’s at work, maybe among friends, or even in our families. We get nudged toward presenting an image rather than reality. And when we give in, it leaves us drained, dissatisfied, and disconnected from the people around us – and from ourselves.

But when we embrace Emerson’s challenge to truly be ourselves – even if that self feels messy, imperfect, or vulnerable – we achieve something genuinely extraordinary.

We find freedom.

We find meaningful relationships.

We find that our authenticity actually becomes a gift – not only to us but to those around us.

Here’s my gentle challenge to you today:

Take a quiet moment – maybe now, or later today – and ask yourself:

“What’s my hidden story? What’s the experience I’ve quietly carried, the victory I’ve celebrated alone, or the wound I’ve carefully hidden? And how might thoughtfully sharing even a small part of it change someone else’s life?”

Because here’s the truth:

Someone in your circle of influence right now – maybe at your work, maybe in your family, maybe among your friends – needs

exactly the story only you can share.

Your hidden struggle might be exactly what gives someone else the courage to face their own challenge. Your quiet victory might be precisely what gives someone else hope in the middle of their battle.