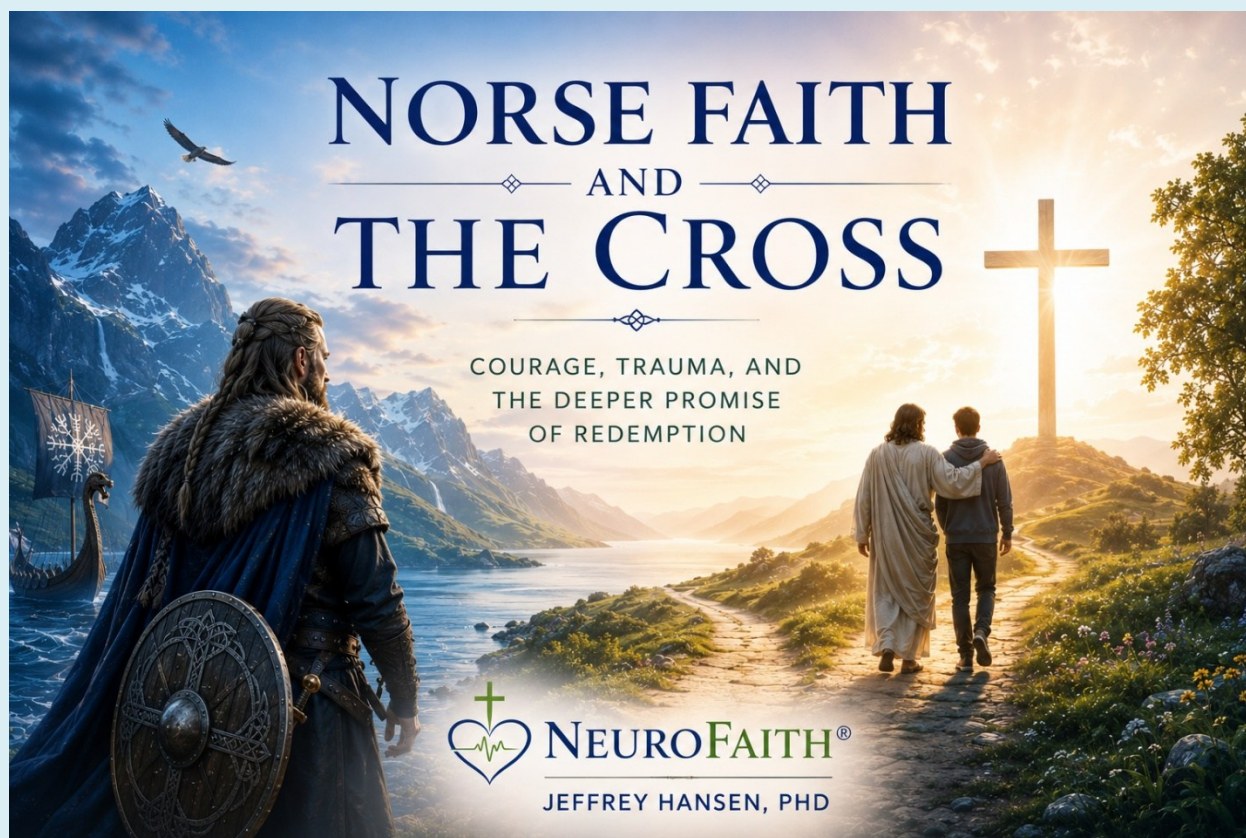




"Courage can help us face the wound. But courage, by itself, cannot redeem the wound."

There are some wounds in life that courage alone cannot heal. We can stand tall, endure what comes, summon every ounce of strength within us, and refuse to surrender. These are noble things, beautiful things, and sometimes they are the very things that keep us alive.

But eventually, many of us arrive at a deeper place where the question is no longer simply, *Am I strong enough to survive this?* The questions become far more intimate and painful. They reach beneath what happened to us and begin to shape what we believe about ourselves.

I am not lovable.

I have no value.

I do not matter.

Something is fundamentally wrong with me.

These are the deepest wounds of toxic shame. They are not simply thoughts that pass through the mind. Over time, they can become woven into the very story of who we believe ourselves to be, embedded in the body, the nervous system, and the neural networks involved in self-referential thought. The wound becomes more than something that happened to us. The wound begins to tell us who we are.

And it is here that I find myself contemplating two great faith traditions, the ancient Norse faith and Christianity, and what each may offer to the wounded human heart.

What My Friend Has Taught Me About Norse Courage

I have been beautifully introduced to the Norse faith and its traditions by a friend, a man whom I deeply respect and admire. He is a man who has worked hard, who serves others, and who has devoted much of himself to helping people survive trauma and abuse, suffering that he himself knows intimately.

Through him, I have come to appreciate a tradition I once knew mostly through history, mythology, and the popular image of the Viking warrior. But the Norse tradition is far richer than longships, battlefields, and romanticized images from popular culture. At its heart is a worldview shaped by courage, honor, loyalty, personal responsibility, hospitality, kinship, endurance, and the determination to stand firm in the face of suffering.

There is much here that I deeply admire.

The old Norse gods themselves embody different dimensions of life and the human struggle. Odin, the All-Father, is the relentless seeker of wisdom. He sacrifices an eye for a drink from the well of wisdom and hangs for nine nights upon Yggdrasil, the world tree, wounded by his own spear in pursuit of deeper knowledge. There is something profoundly compelling in that image: wisdom has a cost, and transformation demands sacrifice.

Thor, perhaps the most widely recognized of the Norse gods, embodies strength, courage, protection, and the defense of both gods and humanity against the forces of chaos. His strength is not merely strength for its own sake. It is protective. He stands between order and destruction, wielding Mjölnir not simply as a weapon but as a symbol of protection and the courage to confront what threatens the community.

Týr represents duty, justice, courage, and sacrifice. When the monstrous wolf Fenrir must be bound, Týr alone is willing to place his hand in the wolf's mouth as a pledge, knowing what it may cost him. When Fenrir realizes he has been deceived, Týr loses his hand. Yet the sacrifice has been made for something larger than himself. Courage here is not bravado. It is the willingness to pay a personal price for the greater good.

And Freyja embodies dimensions of love, beauty, fertility, war, magic, and death, reminding us that the Norse imagination was not simply about masculine strength or battlefield valor. It wrestled with the whole of human existence: love and grief, creation and destruction, beauty and mortality.

The Norse gods do not inhabit a universe in which suffering simply disappears if one believes strongly enough. They themselves live under the shadow of Ragnarök, the final catastrophic battle in which even the gods know that many of them will fall. Odin will face Fenrir. Thor will

defeat the world serpent Jörmungandr but die from its venom. The old world will pass through fire and destruction.

They know what is coming.

And yet they fight anyway.

There is something deeply moving in that. The Norse warrior does not require a guarantee of victory before choosing courage. He stands because standing is honorable. He fights because some things are worth defending. He endures because surrendering one's integrity to fear would be a greater defeat than death itself.

I understand why my friend finds strength here. More than that, I have learned from him why these virtues matter. For someone who has survived trauma, abuse, betrayal, addiction, or profound loss, the call to stand again can be enormously powerful. Trauma can leave us feeling helpless and defeated, robbed of agency and convinced that we have no strength left. The Norse warrior tradition answers with a call to rise, reclaim one's courage, face what must be faced, and refuse to surrender.

There is beauty in that, and there is dignity in that. I would never want to take any of it away.

But as a psychologist who has spent much of his career thinking about trauma, shame, the nervous system, and healing, I find myself asking another question:

Can courage, as beautiful and necessary as it is, take us all the way home?

When the Warrior Must Enter the Wound

The Norse tradition certainly values kinship, loyalty, and community. Yet its heroic ideal also carries a distinctly individualistic flavor. Ultimately, the warrior stands before his fate. He must summon his courage. He must endure. He must fight.

There is great nobility in that, but there can also be loneliness. The message can become, *This is my battle. I must find the courage to fight it. I must stand. I must endure. I must overcome.*

For the trauma survivor, there is something both powerful and potentially limiting in this vision. It can give us the courage to approach the wound, but it may still leave us believing that the deepest battle is ours to fight alone. And trauma already isolates us. Shame isolates us even further. The wounded person retreats inward, hides what hurts, distrusts others, and often comes to believe that no one can truly understand. Toxic shame whispers that if people really knew us, they would leave.

But here is what I have learned from psychology, neuroscience, and decades of sitting with wounded people:

Healing is relational.

This is not merely a beautiful spiritual idea. It is written into our biology. Polyvagal-informed therapy helps us understand that the human nervous system continually reads the environment for cues of safety and danger, particularly through relationship. HeartMath® and neurocardiology help us appreciate the extraordinary communication among heart, brain, body, and emotional experience. Attachment science teaches us that we are formed in relationship, often wounded in relationship, and again and again, healed in relationship.

A safe face matters. A compassionate voice matters. A trustworthy presence matters. Being accompanied into places we have been terrified to enter alone matters. Connection can help the nervous system move from defense toward safety, from isolation toward belonging, and from mere survival toward restoration.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes says it beautifully: *"Two are better than one... If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."* That is not weakness. It is not surrender, nor is it the abandonment of courage. It is the recognition of something fundamental about being human.

We were not created to heal alone.

When the Self Becomes Both Battlefield and Enemy

Trauma does more than frighten us. It can become a full-body state, reorganizing how we experience ourselves, other people, and the world around us. When an experience is too much, too fast, or too soon for the nervous system to integrate, the brain's adaptive capacities can become organized around survival. The amygdala may become increasingly sensitive to threat. The hippocampus may struggle to properly locate traumatic memory in the past. Under overwhelming survival load, the medial prefrontal cortex can lose some of its regulatory influence over limbic activation, while the autonomic nervous system may become organized around chronic mobilization, hypervigilance, withdrawal, or collapse.

The danger may be over, yet the body continues to live as though it is happening now. As I wrote in *The Neurobiology of the Cross*:

The body begins to live a story that the conscious mind may not even be able to tell.

But trauma does not only change how we experience danger. It can change the story we tell about ourselves. The default mode network, a collection of interconnected brain regions involved in self-referential thought, autobiographical memory, and our ongoing sense of identity, plays an important role in the internal narrative of *who I am*. When trauma and toxic shame become woven into that narrative, the person no longer simply thinks, *Something terrible happened to me*.

The story becomes, *Something is fundamentally wrong with me*.

This is perhaps the deepest cruelty of toxic shame: it turns the self into both the battlefield and the enemy. The warrior is no longer merely fighting what happened to him. He is fighting what he has come to believe about himself.

And this is precisely where courage, for all its beauty, reaches a limit. Courage can help me approach what frightens me. Strength can help me endure. Honor can guide my choices. Discipline can help me continue when I would rather quit. But how do I defeat the enemy when I believe the enemy is me? What happens when I can fight every battle placed before me but still cannot believe, in the deepest places of my own body, that I am worthy of being known and loved?

This is where, for me, Christianity makes its most astonishing claim.

The God Who Enters the Wound

As a Christian, I have come to believe that no other faith makes quite the same claim about the wounds of the human soul: God Himself takes on flesh, enters the full embodied reality of human suffering, and meets us not from outside the wound, but from within it.

The Christian story does not begin with humanity becoming strong enough to climb upward toward God. It begins with God coming down.

The Word becomes flesh.

This is the Incarnation, and I believe its significance for trauma is enormous. God does not save humanity from a safe distance. He enters the human body. He takes on flesh and a nervous system and enters the full reality of vulnerability, exhaustion, grief, attachment, friendship, rejection, betrayal, abandonment, humiliation, physical agony, and death itself.

Christianity does not give us a God untouched by the wound. It gives us a God who enters it.

This is why Christ offers something fundamentally different from a purely performative model of healing. He does not stand outside our suffering and tell us to become stronger. He does not say, *Prove yourself worthy, and then I will come closer. Conquer your weakness, and then you may belong. Overcome your shame, and then you may be loved.*

He comes toward us first. The message of Christ is that we are loved before we perform, that our value is not something we must prove, and that we matter before we accomplish anything. Most importantly for the wounded person, we do not have to enter the darkest places of our story alone.

This is not performative faith. It is participatory redemption.

The Neurobiology of the Cross

We see this powerfully in Gethsemane, when Jesus says, *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."* This is not a detached Christ floating serenely above human anguish. This is sorrow experienced in the body. The Gospel of Luke describes His sweat becoming like drops of blood falling to the ground. Whatever precise medical interpretation we give that description, the theological picture is unmistakable: Christ does not bypass the body's response to overwhelming distress. He enters it.

And yet, in the midst of anguish, Jesus remains relational. He speaks to the Father. He brings His distress into relationship. He does not deny the fear, suppress the anguish, or pretend that the coming suffering is insignificant. He says plainly what He desires: *"If it is possible, let this cup pass from me."* Then, still within relationship, He says, *"Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

Surrender does not occur instead of anguish. It occurs within anguish and within connection. In the language of NeuroFaith®, this is regulation through attachment.

On the cross, Jesus does not leave His body. He experiences thirst, tissue trauma, public exposure, physical agony, humiliation, and the anguish of perceived abandonment. There is no spiritual bypassing here and no denial of the body. This matters because trauma is embodied. The person who has survived abuse may intellectually know that the abuse is over while the body still braces for danger. The combat veteran may know he is home while a sudden sound launches his nervous system into survival. The abandoned child may become a successful adult while still carrying an embodied expectation that everyone he loves will eventually leave.

The conscious mind says, *That was then.*

The body says, *It is happening now.*

Christ enters this territory. He knows betrayal by a friend. He knows abandonment, humiliation, physical agony, and the cry of desolation: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Yet the story does not end in abandonment. His final movement remains relational: *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."*

The wound is real. The suffering is real. But relationship is not finally destroyed.

And this is what I mean by the Companioning Christ.

The Companioning Christ and the Rewriting of the Wounded Story

Human beings heal in relationship. We are biologically wired for co-regulation. A safe face, a compassionate voice, a trustworthy presence, and the experience of not being abandoned in distress can help the nervous system move from defense toward safety. The deepest wounds are often relational, and so is the deepest healing.

Within the NeuroFaith® framework, the Companioning Christ is more than a comforting metaphor. Christianity speaks of an indwelling presence: *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."* We are invited not merely to believe things *about* Christ from a distance but to participate in relationship *with* Christ.

We can bring the wound, the shame, the frightened child within us, and the parts of ourselves we have hidden, hated, exiled, or desperately tried to overcome into the presence of One who already knows them and does not turn away.

This is the difference between being told to become strong enough to conquer the wound and discovering that we no longer have to enter the wound alone. Courage can help us approach

what hurts, but relationship allows us to remain present there. Strength can help us survive, but love teaches us that survival is not the end of the story. Honor helps us take responsibility for the lives we now choose to live, while grace reminds us that our worth was never dependent upon perfect performance.

And perhaps this is one way of understanding redemption neurobiologically. It is not the erasure of memory, the denial of suffering, or the pretense that what happened did not matter. Rather, it is a transformation in our relationship with the wound so that the past no longer possesses the same power to organize the present.

If the body can learn a story of danger, shame, and disconnection, then through repeated experiences of safety, relationship, compassion, and secure attachment, it can begin to learn another story. Previously isolated neural networks can begin to communicate again. Implicit memory can become connected with explicit narrative. Regulatory capacities can strengthen. The autonomic nervous system can gradually learn that it is possible to move from defense toward safety without losing coherence.

We can remember without always reliving. We can feel without always being overwhelmed. We can inhabit our bodies without constantly fleeing from ourselves. Slowly, the body can become a place that can be inhabited again, and the wounded story of who we are can begin to change.

The Scars Remain

After the resurrection, something extraordinary happens. Christ still bears His wounds. The risen Christ is recognized by His scars: *"Put your finger here and see my hands."*

I find this profoundly moving. Resurrection does not erase the wounds. The scars remain, but they no longer represent defeat. Healing does not require us to pretend that we were never wounded, and redemption does not rewrite history by claiming that terrible things were somehow not terrible. The cross does not call evil good. The resurrection does not pretend there was no crucifixion.

The scars remain. But their meaning is transformed.

They are no longer evidence that suffering won. They become evidence that suffering did not have the final word. Our history is real. Our wounds are real. Our scars may remain. But none of them possesses the final authority to tell us who we are.

My Brother, Bring Your Courage With You

And so I return to my friend, my brother, the man who first opened my eyes to the richness of the Norse tradition. I stand better for having known him. Through him, I have come to understand more deeply the beauty of courage, honor, loyalty, endurance, and the refusal to surrender when life becomes difficult. These are not small virtues, and I would never ask him, or anyone who draws strength from the Norse warrior tradition, to lay them down.

Perhaps I recognize and admire these qualities so deeply because of my own history. I served for ten years as an Army officer and nearly another decade as a psychologist within the Department of Defense. I understand something of the language of duty, courage, service, and valor. I understand the call to stand your ground when retreat would be easier, to protect those who need protecting, and to keep moving forward when the road is hard.

The old Christian hymn *Onward, Christian Soldiers* begins, "*Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.*" There is something in those words that speaks to me differently now. Christianity does not ask the warrior to stop being courageous. Christ does not ask us to surrender our strength, honor, loyalty, or willingness to enter the battle.

He asks us to bring them with us.

And so, my brother, bring your courage. Bring your strength, your honor, your loyalty, and your refusal to surrender. Bring the part of you that has survived battles others may never fully understand. Bring the wisdom-seeking determination of Odin, the protective strength of Thor, the costly duty of Týr, and the courage to stand even when victory is uncertain.

Bring all of it into perhaps the deepest battle of all: the journey into the wounds we carry within ourselves.

But perhaps allow your heart to consider one more possibility.

You do not have to go there alone.

You taught me something about courage, my brother. I stand better for having known you. I would never ask you to surrender the courage that has helped you survive. I would ask you to take that same courage and go deeper, into the places where shame lives, into the wounds that strength alone cannot heal, and into those hidden rooms of the heart where perhaps even the strongest among us are afraid to go.

But do not go alone.

Christ does not stand outside the wound and shout instructions from a safe distance. He enters it. He knows betrayal, abandonment, humiliation, agony, and the deepest reaches of human suffering. And the risen Christ still bears His scars.

Perhaps, then, we do not need to choose between courage and connection. Perhaps we need both. We need the courage to face the wound and the strength to remain present when every instinct tells us to run. But we also need relationship. We need connection. We need the presence of another when the road becomes too difficult to walk alone.

The Norse warrior teaches us to stand. Christ does not ask us to stop standing. He stands with us. The warrior teaches us to face the battle. Christ does not take away the battle. He enters it with us.

So bring your courage, my brother. Bring all of it. But when you enter the deepest wound, let Christ enter with you.

The scars remain, but they no longer get the final word. They no longer say, I am unlovable. I have no value. I do not matter. In the presence of the Companioning Christ, a new narrative becomes possible:

I am loved.
I have value.
I matter.
I belong.
And I am not alone.

That, to me, is the deeper invitation. Not to abandon the beautiful courage of the Norse warrior, but to discover that courage may not be the end of the journey.

Courage can help us face the wound. Connection helps us enter it. And in Christ, we discover that we never have to enter it alone.

That is not performative faith. It is participatory redemption.