

Open a Vein

By Melissa Hatfield

"Writing is really quite simple; all you have to do is sit down at your typewriter and open a vein." Red Smith

Opening a vein . . . quite simple? I think not. Painful . . . most definitely. Messy . . . usually. In the days of early medicine, bloodletting or phlebotomy was an art. As early as the 5th century, doctors and barbers were skilled in ridding individuals of "bad blood" in an effort to heal them of their illness. Incisions were made in various locations on the body and blood was drained into a shallow bowl. When the patient was on the verge of passing out, the treatment was stopped. Our very first President, George Washington, supposedly died from bloodletting gone bad. It was until the early 19th century that phlebotomy was ruled quackery.

Bleeding is a metaphor used quite often in our culture. In fact, the very phrase "bleeding metaphors" is known well by those in the writing world. We talk about our hearts "bleeding" and the gushing wounds that life inflicts upon us. Is it true that successful writers open a vein? Do writers who resonate with readers know how to bleed out on the pages of their manuscript? Does the opening of the vein benefit more the writer or the reader? Perhaps there is a lesson here for the church.

It seems often that Christians don't want to admit they bleed. There doesn't seem to be much blood-letting in the church these days. Few people speak honestly of hurts and pains. Even fewer people confess their failures or the temptations that they struggle to shake. We put a lot of work into making sure no one knows we bleed. How tacky and weak to open a vein in the church.

But in private, oh, do we bleed. We gush. Having worked so hard to hide it from others, by the time night makes its appearance we can no longer hold it in. How scary and frightening to bleed alone. To wonder if it will ever stop. To fear that someone will see the stains or that perhaps one time in the light of day you will not be able to stop the flow. And then your secret will be out. You're a bleeder.

Then one Sunday you stand up timidly in your pew piercing the quiet of the sanctuary with your presence. You slowly roll up one sleeve revealing bloody bandages covering wounds. Without saying a word or meeting a glance, you tear the bandages off and open the vein. You pour out to this community, this gathering of people who have no visible scars or blood stains. When you finish, a young woman stands up in the back and rolls up her sleeve revealing her truth. An older gentleman rises to his feet behind you, removes his tie and unbuttons his shirt to reveal the bandage across his heart. One by one they stand. They open the vein. In that moment with all of our wounds exposed and our pain gushing from each wound, we see what church should be. The family that bleeds together stays together.

Who will stand and bleed first?