

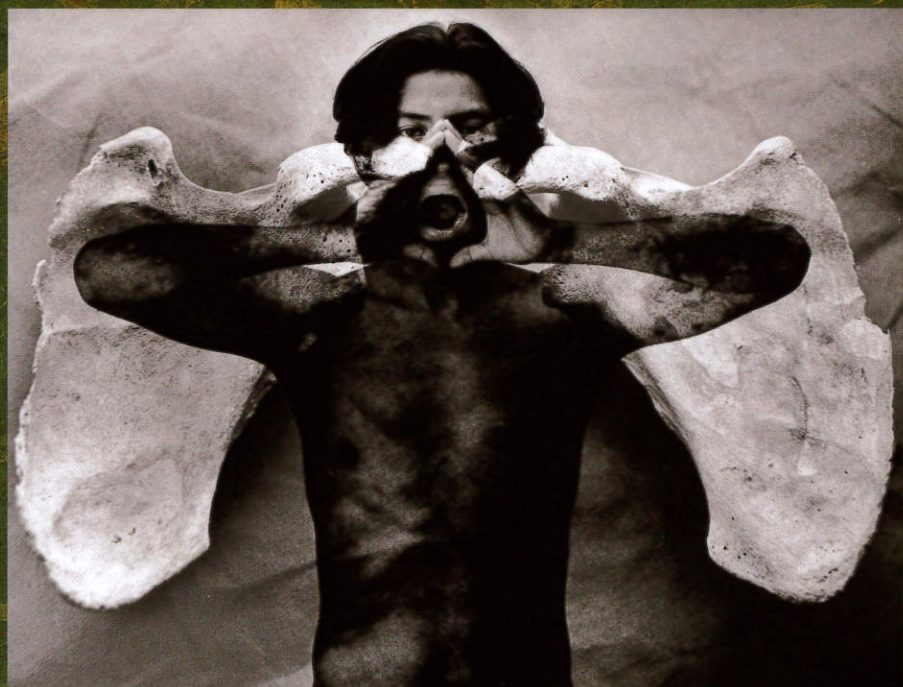
"A perceptive combination of spiritual wisdom,  
psychological insight, and biblical passion."

—Marcus Borg, author, *The Heart of Christianity*

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# A SACRED VOICE IS CALLING



*Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*

John Neafsey

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impossible in any given situation. After asking Jesus the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the young man was "shocked and went away grieving" when Jesus suggested that he sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor. The disciples also seemed discouraged and confused by Jesus' rather shocking prescription, perhaps because it appeared to place unrealistic and even impossible demands on those who would follow him. "Then who can be saved?" they ask in dismay. "For mortals it is impossible," Jesus responds, "but not for God; for God all things are possible."<sup>38</sup>

## 7

## SUFFERING

*The Call of the Wounded Healer*

*In his poor heart man has places which do not yet exist and into them enters suffering in order to bring them to life.*

—Leon Bloy, *Pilgrim of the Absolute*<sup>1</sup>

*Here's the thing. . . . The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search inside for it find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, Lord. Feeling like shit.*

—Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*<sup>2</sup>

PAIN AND TROUBLE often play a mysterious role in the unfolding of our callings. Experiences of personal suffering, or encounters with the pain of others, offer spiritual opportunities that have the potential to put us in touch with the sacred dimension of experience from which callings emerge: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."<sup>3</sup> This being said, it is important not to romanticize or spiritualize suffering, to assume that it always has redemptive or transformative effects upon our consciousness or character. Pain can call forth the best in us, but it can also bring out the worst.

In this chapter I want to explore some dimensions of the complex relationship between suffering and vocation. There

is a degree of pain that goes with the territory of any genuine calling. There is also a way in which certain life problems and symptoms themselves sometimes seem to have a way of conveying important messages to us about the direction of our lives. For some people, callings originate in painful life experiences that serve as a kind of initiation into the role of the "wounded healer." Many people in the helping and healing professions have had experiences of personal suffering that awakened in them a calling to compassionate service. At the heart of it all is the great mystery of redemptive suffering.

### GROWING PAINS

"Life is difficult" is the first line of M. Scott Peck's popular and influential book *The Road Less Traveled*.<sup>4</sup> The "road" to which he is referring is the path of emotional and spiritual growth. The title implies that most of us prefer to take the easy way because the path to genuine growth and maturity can sometimes be so rough, so rugged, so difficult. It is not easy to change and grow, to honestly face our problems, to be loving and authentic persons in an egocentric, artificial culture.

Because of our egocentrism, all of us are inclined to resist the process of growth. Something in us doesn't want to change, and so we cling to the known and familiar rather than take the risk of following the Voice into the unknown. This is completely natural and understandable because there are no guarantees that we won't end up hurt or disappointed when we allow ourselves to be led into the new or the different. Sometimes the only way to a new heart is through a broken heart. Sometimes letting go of an old way of being so that something new can come into being is so painful it

feels like *dying*. This, I think, is what Goethe is talking about in his poem "The Holy Longing":

And so long as you haven't experienced this:  
To die and so to grow,  
You are only a troubled guest  
On the dark earth.<sup>5</sup>

The call to authentic personhood involves a commitment to continual growth and change, which requires a willingness to undergo the emotional and spiritual pain and discomfort that are a necessary and inevitable part of the process of coming to know ourselves. Self-protective, defensive efforts to avoid the pain of self-knowledge almost always end up bringing us other kinds of trouble. "Neurosis," says Jung, "is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."<sup>6</sup> The neurotic misery of an inauthentic existence, it seems, is the price we pay for refusing to embrace the pain and risk of living an authentic life. We end up living as "troubled guests" on the earth, spending our precious time and energy anxiously trying to escape from the risky business of becoming the persons we are meant to be.

The call to love also entails pain and risk. We experience growing pains with every step we take in the direction of becoming more loving persons, with every increase in our capacity to give and receive genuine love. Mature love requires that we find the energy and will to make the moral effort to extend ourselves on behalf of others—even when we don't feel like it. "I am sorry I can say nothing more consoling to you," says Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams."<sup>7</sup>

Learning to love is a difficult, humbling, life-long process for all of us. Rainer Maria Rilke offered this encouragement in a letter to a young poet wrestling with his callings in love and work:

To love is good, too: love being difficult. For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation. For this reason young people, who are beginners in everything, cannot yet know love, they have to learn it. With their whole being, with all of their forces gathered closely about their lonely, upward-beating heart, they must learn to love.<sup>8</sup>

### SYMPTOMS AS A VOICE OF THE SOUL

We get sick in one way or another when we are living in a way that is out-of-synch with who we really are. At such times, the painful physical or emotional symptoms we experience can be interpreted as a wake-up call, as a kind of cry for help from our soul.

In *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore suggests that the soul sometimes uses painful or disruptive symptoms to get our attention, to convey a message to us from within when we are falling into error or living in a way that is out-of-synch with who we really are. From this perspective, the soul might speak through a feeling of nagging anxiety, a knot in the stomach, a stubborn depression we can't seem to shake, boredom or burnout in our work, or a persistent inner sense of spiritual restlessness or emptiness in spite of apparent contentment on the surface of our life. According to Abraham Maslow, when our deeper spiritual needs are ignored or neglected, we get sick:

If this essential core of the person is denied or suppressed, he [or she] gets sick, sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes in subtle ways. . . . This inner nature . . . is weak and delicate and subtle and easily over-

come by habit, and cultural pressure. . . . Even though denied, it persists underground, forever pressing for actualization.<sup>9</sup>

Our first inclination may be to try to fix or cure the annoying or uncomfortable symptom, to rid ourselves of the thing that is disrupting the status quo of our life. We might, for example, try to talk ourselves out of the troublesome feelings, to deny or suppress them, to do whatever we can to make them go away. This is understandable, because no one wants to be in emotional discomfort or pain. From the perspective of the soul, however, this may be exactly the wrong approach, because it signals that we are unable or unwilling to hear what our soul may be trying to tell us through the symptom. If it is a cry for help from our soul, then the right thing to do is to pay attention. Instead of ignoring our own pain, we need to begin by compassionately listening to it, by allowing it to have a voice. James Hillman says it beautifully:

The right reaction to a symptom may as well be a welcoming rather than laments and demands for remedies, for the symptom is the first herald of an awakening psyche which will not tolerate any more abuse. Through the symptom the psyche demands attention. Attention means attending to, tending, a certain tender care of, as well as waiting, pausing, listening. Precisely what each symptom needs is time and tender care and attention.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the best approach is to slow down, to try not to panic, to make an effort to listen patiently and carefully in order to learn what our painful feelings may be trying to teach us or tell us. "We should not try to 'get rid' of a neurosis," said Jung, "but rather to experience what it means, what it has to teach, what its purpose is. We should even learn to

be thankful for it, otherwise we pass it by and miss the opportunity of getting to know ourselves as we really are."<sup>11</sup> In Jung's view, the neurotic symptom itself offers an opportunity or invitation to learn something about ourselves; it is a potential blessing in disguise.

Careful reflection on our symptoms not only can help us to diagnose what is wrong or missing in our life but can also give us clues as to what we need to do to get better. "The unconscious," says Sanford, "knows what we do not know and what we must learn about ourselves and life in order to become well."<sup>12</sup> Appreciating the meanings and getting the messages of our symptoms can teach us what our soul needs, what it may be craving or longing for. Is there something missing in our life, some need that we are neglecting? Is there some unfinished emotional or spiritual business that requires taking care of? Is there something we must do, some action we are called to take, that can help us to recover our emotional or spiritual health?

A few examples might help to illustrate this. A man whose life choices have been overly influenced by his concerns about financial security could begin to experience a nagging sense of emptiness or meaninglessness that money, possessions, status, or financial security do not take away. The feelings of emptiness or meaninglessness may be an invitation to take a hard look at what is missing in his life; they may be a kind of call to re-evaluate his priorities in light of the recognition that there is more to life than money. Or perhaps a woman's neurotic guilt and fear have always held her back by inhibiting her inclinations toward personal authenticity and individuation, with the result that she ends up feeling emotionally constricted and spiritually trapped by the circumstances she has chosen for herself. Her mounting desperation may signal the stirrings of a calling to overcome her fears by taking steps to liberate herself from her self-imposed

bondage. Or maybe we have become depressed because our life has been so anxiously focused on conformity and pleasing others that we have forgotten who we really are. The depression itself may help us figure out what is wrong and what we need to do to live in a more authentic and satisfying way.

Finally, if we are willing to learn, symptoms can teach us *humility*. The spatial metaphor for where we are located emotionally or spiritually when we are sick or suffering is *down*. Spiritually, we find ourselves in the "valley of the shadow of death" or in the "belly of the whale." Emotionally, we are brought low by depression or disappointment or emotional trouble. We are reminded of our weakness, our vulnerability, our lack of control—including control over emotional states that cannot be overcome by the power of our own will:

Symptoms humiliate; they relativize the ego. They bring it down. Cure of symptoms may but restore the ego to its former ruling position. The humiliation of symptoms is one of the ways we grow humble—the traditional mark of the soul.<sup>13</sup>

Such humbling and even humiliating experiences serve as a reality check for our ego. They remind us that we are not God, and they put us in touch with our need for a power greater than ourselves to heal and save us from whatever is ailing us.

## THE WOUNDED HEALER

Sometimes callings originate in painful life experiences that serve as a kind of initiation into the way of the *wounded healer*—the person whose sufferings become a source of healing to others.

The vocational theme or pattern of the wounded healer can be discerned in many religious traditions through the ages. It is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the spirituality and healing practices associated with shamanism, an ancient, primordial form of religion that is still practiced in many indigenous cultures today. Parallels to shamanism are found in many of the world's major religious traditions. The theme of the wounded healer can be detected in the life pattern of the historical Jesus as well as in the lives of many people in the contemporary world. Henri Nouwen's well-known book, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, is centered around the idea that the minister's own wounds, if tended properly, can become a source of healing for others.<sup>14</sup>

Although a great diversity of spiritual beliefs and healing practices exists among shamanistic cultures throughout the world, certain universal patterns are encountered wherever shamanism is practiced.<sup>15</sup> One of the most striking is the phenomenon of the "initiator illness" in the calling of the shaman. In many cultures, it is common for the shaman-to-be to experience a painful physical illness or psychological crisis at some point during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. During the initiatory illness the young person typically has vivid visions and dreams (often while in a state of unconsciousness or delirium) that contain striking religious imagery centering around images of death and rebirth, spirit journeys, or encounters with various kinds of good and evil spirits associated with illness and healing. Black Elk, for example, received his calling through a complicated and remarkable vision during his own illness experience, which occurred when he was only nine years old and lasted over a period of twelve days while he was deathly ill in a coma-like state of unconsciousness.<sup>16</sup>

Eventually, the shaman recovers from the initiatory illness and begins a period of formal training and apprenticeship in

preparation for healing work with others. Significantly, the illness experience is interpreted by the community as a sign that the young person has a special calling to the work of healing. After young Black Elk recovered from his own severe illness at the age of nine, an older shaman by the name of Whirlwind Chaser said to his parents: "Your boy is sitting there in a sacred manner. I do not know what it is, but there is something special for him to do."<sup>17</sup>

The shaman's later wisdom and power to heal others are attributed to the profoundly formative—and transformative—experience of his or her own initiatory illness. This personal experience of pain and illness, according to David Kinsley, is seen as one of the shaman's primary qualifications for helping and healing others:

Healers become qualified to heal because they have experienced serious illness deeply and completely and have overcome it, survived it, learned from it, and been transformed by it. In dealing with people who are sick, shamans can help because they have experienced what the patient is suffering and have mastered it.<sup>18</sup>

There are many vivid accounts of initiatory illness experiences. Dorcas, a female shaman (*sangoma*) from southern Africa who was bed-ridden with a severe illness for three years, offered these thoughts on the initiatory illness:

No one becomes a sangoma without first getting sick. Everyone who is called by the spirits first gets a sickness, a bad sickness. No one can become a sangoma who does not get this. You must tell people what happens to us, all the sangomas when that spirit calls them. Oh! How hard it is and how we must work with those spirits!<sup>19</sup>

There are many parallels to shamanic themes in the life of Jesus. Although there is no evidence in the gospels that he experienced an initiatory illness, Jesus' forty-day ordeal in the wilderness prior to beginning his public life as an itinerant healer and teacher can be likened to a kind of shamanic initiation during which he personally "worked with the spirits."<sup>20</sup> From the perspective of shamanism, Jesus' assertive dealings with the temptations of the Satanic spirit in the wilderness would likely be seen as the source of his later power and "authority" over unclean spirits—which are often noted in the gospel accounts of his healings of tormented people. Jesus' visionary experiences in the wilderness (e.g., journeying with Satan to the top of a high mountain or to the pinnacle of the temple) are also reminiscent of the "soul journeys" or "spirit flights" of the shaman.

The gospels also suggest that, from the beginning of his public life, Jesus strongly identified with the mysterious "Suffering Servant of Yahweh" figure (the one who brings good news to the poor, heals the brokenhearted, brings liberty to captives) from the writings of the prophet Isaiah.<sup>21</sup> In Christianity, there is a long tradition of belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of this countercultural redemptive figure foretold by the prophet: the "man of sorrows" whose wounds would become a source of healing and redemption for others:

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? . . . He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down

by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.<sup>22</sup>

The image of the wounded healer also resonates deeply with many people who experience callings to compassionate service today. Many in the helping and healing professions are wounded healers who trace the early inklings of their own callings either to painful personal experiences or to close proximity to the pain of significant others at some point in their lives that sensitized them to suffering and awakened an interest in relieving it. Personal encounters with particular problems can give us an intimate, first-hand knowledge of what it is like to deal with them, what it takes to heal them. We become "familiar" with certain kinds of "infirmities" and develop a particular kind of wisdom and compassion about them.

Many people who work in the field of addiction recovery, for example, have themselves had a personal history of struggles with alcohol or drug addiction. They are familiar with the territory and know what it is like to have a drinking or drug problem. They have faced the "demon" and fought their way back to sobriety, and it is exactly this personal knowledge and experience that becomes one of their primary qualifications (not the only one) for helping others. Many in the mental health professions also can identify early stirrings of interest in the work of emotional healing with life experiences that forced them to become familiar with the territory of emotional suffering. Sanford has summarized the pattern:

Like the shamans, persons who are meant to work in the healing field are Wounded Healers. If a person has gone through a crisis, died to an old personality,

and fought his or her way back to health, that person may gain a certain quality that enables him [or her] to put others in touch with healing too. A certain faith in the healing process is generated by having found healing oneself, not to mention a capacity for empathy with those who are ill, which can only come through having suffered.<sup>23</sup>

There are also wounded healers whose vocation extends beyond personal work with individuals to the work of healing in the wider social and political realm. Sister Dianna Ortiz is a striking example. An Ursuline nun from New Mexico, Ortiz journeyed to Guatemala in the early 1980s as a missionary to work as a teacher with Mayan children in the highlands. In November 1989, she was abducted, raped, and brutally tortured in a notorious military interrogation center in the capital city. The harrowing story of her torture and subsequent battles to recover her emotional health and personal dignity are recounted in the compelling memoir *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth*.<sup>24</sup>

A crucial component of Ortiz's healing process—which she likens to a traumatic experience of death and a slow and painful process of rebirth—has been her determination to use her personal experience of traumatic victimization for the benefit of others. She now works to help others (especially women) heal from the wounds of torture through building supportive “communities of healing” for torture survivors. She is also a human rights activist who works for the abolition of the practice of torture in the contemporary world. As a survivor of torture, Ortiz speaks with great personal conviction and authority as a wounded healer:

What I endured is the suffering of millions of women around the world. That I live now is testament to my rebirth—death by torture followed by rebirth. Tor-

ture's ghost walks beside me every step of the way, reminding me that the past will always be there. . . . I feel the need to give special attention to women who have suffered a fate similar to mine. . . . Our faith calls each of us to live out the gospel, and that gospel insists that, like Jesus, we speak truth to power. To speak the truth about the horrors of torture and to challenge government, church, and other leaders to denounce torture is simply my moral obligation, and, quite frankly, I believe it is the moral obligation of every human being on this planet.<sup>25</sup>

Cindy Sheehan, the grieving mother of an American soldier killed in Iraq, is another current example of a wounded healer whose calling has taken on a prophetic public dimension. After her son Casey was killed in action in April 2004, Sheehan helped to found the group “Gold Star Families for Peace” for families who had lost a loved one in the war. She began traveling around the country, sharing the story of her personal loss as a way of raising public consciousness about the terrible personal costs of the war. As I write, she is becoming the focus of considerable media attention as a result of her public protest against the war from her encampment on the outskirts of the presidential ranch in Crawford, Texas.<sup>26</sup>

There is a way in which Cindy Sheehan's dramatic public grieving at the doorstep of the president is a modern manifestation of the spirit of the prophets of old. In ancient Israel the prophet's task was to gain the ear of the king; Sheehan boldly insists on a personal meeting with the president so that he can be confronted with the reality of her grief and anguish. As if he were writing with the Texas protest in mind, Walter Brueggemann says that the language of lament and grief is the “proper idiom for the prophet in cutting through royal numbness and denial”:

The task of the prophet is to invite the king to experience what he must experience, what he most needs to experience and most fears to experience, namely, that the end of the royal fantasy is very near. . . . I believe that the proper idiom for the prophet in cutting through the royal numbness and denial is *the language of grief*, rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit. It is indeed their own funeral. I have been increasingly impressed with the capacity of the prophet to use the language of lament and the symbolic creation of a death scene as a way of bringing to reality what the king must see and will not. And I believe that grief and mourning, that crying in pathos, is the ultimate form of criticism, for it announces the sure end of the whole royal arrangement.<sup>27</sup>

Whether by way of prophetic public efforts to heal a sick society or through compassionate personal attention to the hurt of individual persons, the wounded healer finds a way to use his or her own pain for the benefit of others.

### REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

Suffering does not always have a redemptive outcome. Painful life experiences have the potential to deepen and mature us, to make us wiser and more compassionate, but this is not always how things work out. Pain can also make us numb or bitter or self-absorbed. It can make us so preoccupied with our own discomfort that we have little energy or interest left over for anyone or anything beyond ourselves. Suffering can soften the heart—or it can turn it to stone. And so we should be careful not to romanticize or spiritualize suffering too

much, to assume that it will inevitably have ennobling or transformative effects upon our consciousness or character.

One factor that determines whether suffering will have a redemptive outcome is our *attitude* toward it. "Suffering by itself is no cure," says Sanford, "it only cures us when we have the right attitude toward it."<sup>28</sup> From this vantage point, the issue is not the particular form the trouble takes (e.g., illness, injury, depression, poverty, persecution) or even the degree of pain associated with it. Rather, what makes the difference is how we *look* at the difficulties life sends our way. How we see our problems has a profound impact upon how they are experienced, including the degree to which they are felt to be either meaningful opportunities for growth or meaningless obstacles that are better avoided.

The "right" attitude enables us to discern *meaning* in our sufferings. Meaning is what makes it possible for us to make spiritual sense of what otherwise seems senseless, to bear what would otherwise be unbearable. According to Victor Frankl, whether suffering becomes an occasion for spiritual triumph or defeat depends entirely on our capacity to discover a meaning or purpose in it. Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who wrote of his personal experiences of extreme suffering in the Nazi concentration camps in the classic *Man's Search for Meaning*, emphasized the human capacity to *choose* our attitude toward suffering regardless of external circumstances. "Everything can be taken away but one thing," he wrote, "the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. . . . Fundamentally, even in the worst of circumstances, we can decide what shall become of ourselves mentally and spiritually, retaining our human dignity even in a concentration camp."<sup>29</sup>

Finding the correct spiritual attitude in any given difficult situation determines whether we will experience it as a blessing or a curse. When we are contending with painful life

problems, finding the blessing has to do with discovering the hidden spiritual meaning or message contained in the problem, the "blessing in disguise." The temptation is always to give up the struggle prematurely before we have learned what we need to learn, before we have "gotten" the message. The mysterious biblical story of Jacob's wrestling match with God gives us a glimpse of the kind of attitude required of those who would obtain the blessing:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."<sup>30</sup>

The "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" attitude of Jacob is what keeps him fighting and struggling with his adversary long enough to receive the blessing, which, in his case, has to do with *learning who he is*. Jacob is given a new name, *Israel*, which means "Wrestler with God." He also ultimately learns the identity of the dark, mysterious adversary who has ambushed him: God. In my psychotherapeutic work, I have found many people to be mysteriously consoled and encouraged by this story when they are faced with dis-

couraging and demoralizing life problems. They get the idea that it is worth "hanging in there" a little longer until the meaning of the issue or problem, the message in the symptom, can be discerned. This almost always involves allowing the suffering or pain to reveal and clarify the truth of *who they are*—a process that seems to be inherently healing and redemptive. Interestingly, Jacob is also wounded in the struggle with God; he limps for the rest of his days.

Another issue related to the redemptive potential of suffering is the extent to which any particular painful experience becomes an occasion for deepened loving connection with God or other human beings. In *The Saints' Guide to Happiness*, Robert Ellsberg reminds us of this *relational* dimension of the experience of suffering: "Even in the midst of grave misfortune there is access to God."<sup>31</sup> For many of us, one thing suffering seems to do quite effectively is to remind us of our *need* for God, for "access" or connection to a higher power that can save or deliver us from misfortune or danger.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James offered his view of the universal underlying structure of the process of salvation or redemption—what he referred to as "the uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet":

The warring gods and formulas of the various religions do indeed cancel each other, but there is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts:

1. An *uneasiness*; and

2. Its *solution*.

1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand.

2. The solution is a sense that we are *saved* from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers.<sup>32</sup>

Victor Frankl's story offers a compelling example of the kind of "deliverance" James is talking about. For Frankl, the "uneasiness" or "wrongness" was the senseless cruelty and inhumanity of the concentration camp experience, which not only threatened the prisoners' physical survival but violated their basic human need and right to be treated as human beings worthy of respect and dignity. For Frankl, the "solution" to the uneasiness, the thing that *saved* him from the wrongness, was making "proper connection" with the higher power of love.

Concretely, Frankl's solution to the bleak and horrifying external reality of Auschwitz was to turn inwards, to recall and re-live loving memories of his wife prior to the Holocaust, and to have tender dialogues with her in his imagination: "My mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look."<sup>33</sup> These imagined conversations with his wife helped Frankl reconnect with the consoling, morale-building reality of love, to recover a sense of himself as a person *capable* of love and *worthy* of being loved:

In a position of utter desolation, when a man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position a man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment.<sup>34</sup>

Although Frankl did not know it at the time, his beloved wife had already been murdered in the gas chambers in an-

other area of the camp months before. Ultimately, it didn't matter, because "love is as strong as death":

I didn't even know if she was still alive. I only knew one thing—which I have learned well by now: Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved.... Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think I would have still given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying. "Set me as a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death."<sup>35</sup>

Frankl's tender inner conversations with his wife bear a striking resemblance to prayer—except, of course, that they involve a human partner instead of God. His "loving contemplation of the image of his beloved" allowed him to have access to her in spite of external circumstances, just as prayer can serve as a lifeline to God even in the midst of overwhelming pain and trouble. Human or divine, in the flesh or in the imagination, the sense of connection with the Other offers a blessed relief—not from suffering itself—but from bearing the burden of it in isolation. Access to the beloved makes possible a redemptive experience of shared suffering, a compassionate experience of "suffering with" in place of the crushing experience of suffering alone.

In the twenty centuries of the Christian tradition, contemplation of the image and reality of the crucified Jesus has served as a saving lifeline to God for suffering people. One evening, on a recent visit to Guatemala, I observed a group of very poor people in a church patiently waiting in line for their turn to pray in front of a life-sized statue of the crucified Jesus. Each person, in their turn, went to the foot of the

cross, and, as they prayed quietly about whatever was on their minds or in their hearts, they reached up and literally *clung* to the legs of Jesus. From the looks of life-long suffering etched into their faces, I suspect that some were hanging on to him for dear life.

Although distorted forms of Christian piety can become morbidly preoccupied with the passion and death of Jesus, authentic Christian spirituality is not about suffering for its own sake. It is about the redemptive breakthrough of love and compassion *through* suffering, or in the midst of it, or in spite of it. "Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" The crucified Jesus offers people an image of God that captures the heart and the imagination. This is a God with whom it is possible to connect—a *human* God, a God who suffers, a compassionate God who is able to appreciate what it is like to be a suffering human being. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses," reads the Letter to the Hebrews, "but . . . one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."<sup>36</sup> The One who is able to sympathize or empathize with human weakness and pain is accessible, approachable: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."<sup>37</sup>

In a mysterious way, the crucified Jesus not only provides us with a concrete image of God's love and compassion for suffering humanity but also evokes compassion in *us* for the God who suffers. The image of the crucified Jesus gives us a feeling for the radical vulnerability and helplessness of God. We are touched and moved by the suffering of God. There is a give-and-take of compassion, an experience of shared suffering: God feels for *us* and we feel for *God*. The evocative words of the African American spiritual "Were You There?" capture this poignant feeling for many people:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble,  
tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

The image of Jesus can also serve as a point of compassionate connection with suffering humanity, with the God who is suffering right now in suffering persons and in the "crucified peoples" of the world. We move from personal, private, inner contemplation of the suffering God into the world of social suffering, to the encounter with God in the lives of suffering human beings. We experience God very concretely in those whose pains and needs are crying out for our attention, in the experience of solidarity and sharing in their suffering, in our attempts to be of service in some way. "I am endeavoring to see God through service of humanity," wrote Gandhi, "for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in everyone."<sup>38</sup>

"Blessed are the merciful," said Jesus, "for they will receive mercy."<sup>39</sup> It is in the exercise of mercy and compassionate action that we mysteriously experience ourselves as the recipients of God's tender mercy and compassion. Sobrino makes a link between mercy and justice, using the striking image of the "crucified peoples":

We are speaking here not of the "works of mercy" but rather of the basic structure of the response to the world's victims. This structure consists of making someone else's pain our very own and allowing that pain to move us to respond. . . . We well know that in our world there are not just wounded individuals but crucified peoples, and that we should en flesh mercy accordingly. To react with mercy, then, means to do everything we possibly can to bring them down from

the cross. This means working for justice—which is the name love acquires when it comes to entire majorities of people unjustly oppressed.<sup>40</sup>

“Making someone else’s pain our own” through empathy and compassion enables us to feel and imagine ourselves in their world, to see and feel things from their vantage point. It can even make it possible for us to cross over from our limited human viewpoint to the ultimate perspective of God, to see this world and its troubles through God’s eyes. For Christians, this is accomplished by way of the heart connection with the merciful, forgiving Jesus. Perhaps the ultimate expression of Jesus’ great mercy is his forgiving attitude toward those who crucified him:

When they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>41</sup>

Even in the midst of his own torture, Jesus is able to give his crucifiers the benefit of the doubt, to generously allow for the possibility that they don’t “get” it. “On behalf of the world that has now sentenced him,” says Brueggemann, Jesus “enters a plea of temporary insanity.”<sup>42</sup> By crossing over to Jesus’ perspective, we are able to experience within ourselves something of the compassion and mercy of God for this insane and sinful world in which we live. In the words of Flannery O’Connor, we are able “to feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horrors, been found by God to be worth dying for.”<sup>43</sup>