



WHERE IS THE MEANING OF SUFFERING FOUND?

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Thirty years ago my father died unexpectedly after knee surgery. Within months my mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Both were gone within 17 months.

My father's suffering was quick, but my mother's went on for more than a year with chemotherapy, nausea and deterioration of her body. Mother showed us her faith and dignity throughout her ordeal.

We walked with her daily in her pain and in our grief. I could have become overwhelmed – numbed in my capacity to address this pain, but her witness in my capacity to address this pain, but her witness gave meaning to my own belief and understanding of redemptive suffering.

It was a shock to realize that at age 37 I was the older generation of my family.

I learned from the death of my parents that I was not in control. My self-absorption and ego could not control what I did not want to happen. I had, then, to trust that through my pain I could enter – without angst or anger – into the human condition in which I found myself. And I was called to be a loving image of God in my daily encounters with others.

Jesus died an excruciating death on the cross to redeem us. His coming did not take away human problems. Instead, He taught the meaning of suffering and how to manage it, how to have faith in God and communal joy with others despite suffering.

God doesn't cause our pain. He doesn't want that! What God wants is for us to love Him and others in whatever life He gives us.

Loneliness often accompanies suffering. However, we are not truly alone in our suffering because the communion of saints on earth and in heaven – the Church – prays with and for us.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen has studied the relationship of mind, body and spirit in human health. She says in her book "Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal" (Riverhead Books).

"Everyone alive has suffered. It is the wisdom gained from our wounds and from our own experiences of suffering that makes us able to heal . . . Expertise cures, but wounded people can best be healed by other wounded people. Only other wounded people can understand what is needed, for the healing of suffering is compassion, not expertise."

My deacon husband visits a neighborhood nursing home regularly. He told me of a young African-American woman paralyzed from the neck down who smiles constantly and tells those she meets how much she loves them. This woman entered into her suffering and is attempting to bring joy to others. She has found meaning with her suffering.

With God's grace, we can find meaning in ours.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

We can grow through suffering – become more mature. This point is made frequently today in books and articles about spirituality.

Still, I'm sure most of us, given a choice, would rather grow through some other means. The problem with suffering is that if it's real, it hurts.

Of course, a new maturity through suffering isn't automatic. In fact, just the reverse is always a possibility. Bitterness or fury in the face of suffering may prove debilitating. And some people profoundly resent suffering, growing more distant from others and from God.

But it happens that people are transformed for the better through suffering. They discover unexplored dimensions of themselves, perhaps their potential because they've suffered to be a support to others who suffer.

Or perhaps they reconcile with someone they wrongly thought at first caused their suffering.

Or perhaps they commit on a whole new level never to contribute to the suffering of anyone else.

People who have suffered will say they grew more patient, more understanding, more able to listen to others.

One great thing about the small groups that meet for prayer and discussion in so many parishes today is that they provide a forum where people can share the insights they've gained as they've grown spiritually – insights that allow others to see the very possibility of this kind of growth.

HOW SUFFERING IS TRANSFORMED

All suffering brings loss: loss of a loved one, a friend, a home, work we loved, a way of life we had embraced, the future we had planned, the capacity to move about freely, to laugh, to play.

We are not mere victims, though no matter what we lose. We may not have chosen to suffer, but we can choose how to cope. Not immediately, perhaps. Not until we have caught our breath, licked our wounds, wept out our hurt and raged at our fate.

But eventually we can, must and do make choices. Suffering can enlarge or diminish us. Choosing how to deal with loss is a key.

First we must face the empty, hollow spaces left by our loss. At first we may run from them, pretend they are not there, fill them up with frenetic activity, cram them with new furniture, stuff them with food and drink, do anything to put off the dreaded moment when we have to go in, sit down and listen to the sound of emptiness bouncing off the walls.

But like mountain caves carved by time, water and wind, these hollow places offer their own kind of peace. It is not true that time heals all wounds, but it is true that time at least stops the worst of bleeding.

Tears contribute to the healing. A healthy human outlet, tears can soften the sharp edges that reopen the hurt. Tears can put out the angry fire that loss kindles, wash away the confusion that clouds memories we want to cherish and leave our empty places fresh and clean.

But first we have to go to these hollow places ourselves. Often we have to take the trip to stages – five minutes, half an hour – until we lose the fear that the emptiness will destroy us.

Inhabiting our hollows makes room for us to grow, to make friends with ourselves in a new way, makes way to discover God in unexpected places. And if you've ever climbed up to a high cave and sat there looking out over the landscape below, you know what surprises a new perspective can bring to places we thought we knew.

But inhabiting our hollows does not mean walling ourselves into them or gnawing on memories and regrets until they start to rot. Self-preoccupation, self-pity, jealousy of those who seem untouched by pain, abandonment of moral discipline. These are hungry beasts that swallow up the human spirit.

It is not for nothing that 1 Peter 5:8 warns: "Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for (someone) to devour."

If, instead, we sit in our newly hollowed caves and look out, we will find that the great wind which is God's Spirit will blow through the emptiness, carrying away all the remnants of our morbid feasts.

Let them go.

We will find that instead of predators, God sends honeybees. Some species of bees build their hives in the dark safety of a cave. These bees – the thoughts that busy us – gather all the flavors of the world around us and transmute them into wild honey. Soon friends, neighbors and strangers will climb the path to our empty places not simply to bring us comfort but to take comfort away with them.

The wisdom distilled from our suffering will strengthen these others to deal with their own burdens. The compassion that has grown will sustain them. The love that has deepened through our decision to refuse entry to the roaring lion will feed them in ways they themselves may not understand.

That's the only thing about the Gospel, you know. Jesus gives us only two commandments: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27). Nowhere is it written that He added, "Except, of course, when you are suffering."

When – through the alchemy of God's grace working through our own choices – we find our most bitter suffering turned into honey to feel the multitudes, we are freed from one of the worst of our losses: the loss of a sense of purpose.

Suffering transformed into love fulfills the central purpose of human life as God intends it. We have only to look at Jesus on the cross to see it.

You know, this transformation was promised: “If My people would listen, if [they] would walk in My paths, I would . . . satisfy them with honey from the rock” (Ps 81:114, 17).