Traversing mountains

Learning about suffering from my African American friends

Mary Thiessen Nation

As I reflect on what my African American friends in inner city Los Angeles taught me about suffering, I recall Theresa's urgent admonition: "Remember who we are. Don't define us like people who never lived here do. Tell stories. Use real life, your experience." I am haunted by her words: "Tell them that a death of one of our children hurts as much as the death of a child in the suburbs. Remember what suffering and pain feel like here."[1]

I do remember, often. Sometimes unbidden memories surface. I draw deeply on those memories, attempting again and again to discern what my African American friends taught me. Thirty years of accumulated experiences. Mountains of suffering. But also mountain ranges of robust, authentic hope. The words of Elaine Crawford in *Hope in the Holler* ring agonizingly true: "Black suffering is *maldistributed* (i.e., it is not spread evenly over humanity, since blacks suffer disproportionately); it is *enormous in severity* (i.e., it is life-threatening, reducing life expectancy or one's ability to reach one's full potential); and it is *noncatastrophic* (i.e., it does not strike and leave quickly but is transgenerational, persisting over generations)."[2] I witnessed this kind of suffering for several decades. I fought against it. But I also saw that "Black women's *hope* ... is the mirror image of their distinctive suffering. It too is maldistributed, enormous, and transgenerational."[3]

I am haunted by Theresa's words: "Remember who we are. Tell them that a death of one of our children hurts as much as the death of a child in the suburbs. Remember what suffering and pain feel like here."

To be sure, not all suffering produces hope; some people succumb to despair. I almost did. My three African American friends accompanied me on my journey back to hope after near burnout and the bitter taste of post-traumatic stress disorder followed the murder of my good friend.

Space permits only a glimpse into the life of one of these women. Shirley taught me three lessons that summon me anew in times of trauma, tragedy, and terror. I often resist the path that leads to her levels of hope in times of suffering.

Humility and trust: "I know it deep down"

I vividly recall the first time I met Shirley. I was a young, naïve, white Canadian who had moved into Shirley's neighborhood after I graduated from college. During my early months there—when some local teenagers were breaking our windows and stealing our belongings, and anonymous men were threatening us with dismemberment, all in an attempt to try to drive us out of the neighborhood—Shirley came to visit me. She asked to speak privately. I didn't know what to expect. When we were alone, she asked if she could confess a sin to me. Shirley was seeking God's forgiveness. The sin seemed understandable in light of the suffering that had led to it. Many of us would have justified it and condemned our overly sensitive consciences.

When I asked Shirley how she sustained hope and trust, she said, "I know who I am in Christ. Like a child, I'm his, and he cares for me. I know it deep down. I don't just hear it. I believe it."

But why did Shirley come to *me*? She is fifteen years older than I. She could see that I was inexperienced. I believe she came because she had heard I was a Christian missionary, a minister of Jesus Christ. She came because she trusted Christ and she trusted the words, "Confess your sins to one another and you will be healed." I will never forget Shirley's humility, her longing and expectation, her receptivity, her acceptance of grace from God in my presence. Twenty years of running from God ended that day. She quickly became a spiritual mother to me and to our team.

Many years later, when I asked Shirley how she sustained hope and trust in spite of her family's and neighbors' experiences with imprisonment, mental illness, abuse, murder, and poverty, she said, "I know who I am in Christ. Like a child, I'm his, and he cares for me. I know it deep down. I don't just hear it. I believe it." What Shirley knew deep down enabled her to address the darkness in her own life and in her family and neighbor-

hood. Such humility and trust both attracts and threatens me. Am I willing to pay the price of learning it deep down, so I can lean into this trust when I face suffering?

Burden-bearing: The call within unspeakable suffering

Shirley's trust was severely challenged when her youngest daughter went to prison for the first time. Shirley recalled, "I went into deep depression. It was so heavy. I didn't talk to anybody about it. I didn't talk to nobody at all. They could tell I was not me." Her health began to fade. Shirley relived the anguish as she told me about her despair. The words poured out:

> *My sister came, and she talked to me. And I was sitting there, saying, "I don't wanna hear anything. I don't wanna talk 'bout it. I don't care." I was bitter and hard.... Everything seemed destroyed. So she just sat there with me, and she just sat there. After a while she got on her face on the floor, and she just began to cry out to God, you know. She just prayed, and she cried out to God. I just sat there and watched her ... and she just stayed there and kept crying out to God. Finally I just began to call ... and it started to break up. And I was able to talk.... I was able to say something.*

When suffering is unspeakably painful, when words seem impotent, we need others. With her sister's help, Shirley was able to entrust her daughter to God's care. But Shirley's pain soon became almost unbearable again, when she agonized over what to do with her daughter's baby, born in prison. Shirley's body shook as she remembered holding the baby for just a few minutes before releasing it into the care of adoptive parents. Shirley's family simply could not absorb one more precious life. Shirley's sister's cries had strengthened her for this act of profound trust and relinquishment.

During our study of hope and despair, one of Shirley's sons died on the streets. Her three other sons and her daughter and their spouses gathered to break the news to her. They held Shirley in their arms and surrounded her with the faith, hope, and love they had embraced because of her example. They wept together.

Although his body had been found in a deserted alley, Shirley trusted that her son had not died alone, that Jesus held him as he died. She released her son into God's care. Is such relinquishment and hope possible when others weep with us, when others bear our burdens, when they are willing to pray on their faces until something breaks, until words became usable again?

Discernment: How to throw ropes

Shirley also taught me how to walk with others in dark distress. She drew this picture of complex suffering, when murder or past abuse or mental illness is complicated by poverty, lack of education, or joblessness: "It's like being in a deep dark hole, a hole with no doors, no windows, no light, no way in or out or around, and nothing to hold onto. Nothing to help you climb out."

I asked: "What should a missionary do when she sees this?" "Throw some ropes," Shirley suggested. I asked, "Which ones should I throw first?" Her response was brief: "Food and a place to stay." Her words return to me often:

> *If they had somebody murdered, or if they had somebody molested, you gonna have to be able to get into the heart, into the mind, into the spirit, to kind of bring them out of that.... You have to get close to that person, ... you know, like you did with me. There were times when you were just there, you know, you were just there.... You need to know a person who can relate to you, who can empathize, sympathize, and understand.... But it's hard for anybody to understand the hurt. It's hard.*

Gradually Shirley was able to envision the kind of person who could throw the ropes.

> *If you were going through something with a person like that—the missionary has to be very discerning, has to have discernment. Has to go in there with discernment and all those things that you get from reading the Word. You have to be kind of prayed up.... The Spirit of God has to tell you how to go, what to do, what to use, because in your own self you will not know how to do it.*

You need spiritual discernment to know what God wants you to do for that person. That's getting pretty close. You can't go in there trying to do it by yourself, just trying different things to see what's gonna work. I don't know. That's all I can say.

As I reflect on a ministry of throwing ropes, it strikes me that the person who grabs the ropes is doing much more difficult work than the person or team throwing the ropes. It also strikes me that if Shirley found someone in the pit, she would not throw ropes. She would gently slide the ropes down the walls of the pit so they would be easy to grasp. And she'd be tempted to jump into the pit to push from below. I still hear her repeated caution: "How you do it is much more important than what you do."

Will I ever develop the level of discernment Shirley calls for in the face of complex, multifaceted suffering? When I remember what suffering feels like, when I remember what my African American friends taught me, I tremble. Suffering and hope beckon me to new vistas of trust, burden-bearing, and discernment. I am willing to traverse these mountains because women like Shirley and Theresa are climbing with me.

Notes

[1] Three African American friends, Theresa, Pat, and Shirley, aided the research within my doctoral dissertation. See Mary Thiessen Nation, "Realizing Hope in the Midst of Despair: Narratives of an Urban Mission Community" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2004).

[2] A. Elaine Brown Crawford, *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xii–xiii; my italics. Crawford's use of these categories derives from William R. Jones, "Theodicy: The Controlling Category for Black Theology," *Journal of Religious Thought* 30 (1973):28–38. Concerning noncatastrophic suffering, both Pat and Shirley noted that historical and current oppression, intergenerational poverty and lack of education, or chronic childhood molestation and abuse are much more tenacious—transgenerational—than circumscribed tragic events are.

[3] Ibid., 34.

About the author

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