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**Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology**

# Suffering

# Editorial

Gayle Gerber Koontz

A Ken Medema song asks, "If this is not a place where tears are understood, then where can I go to cry?" Are our churches places where tears are understood? Do we open ourselves to the presence of God so deeply, so widely, so wisely, that suffering unbound and shared becomes clay in the hands of our divine potter? The writers for this issue have known tears, and they consider that clay of suffering—lumpy, shapeless, wasted, mysterious, moldable. They teach us, churches diverse in character and context, what it might mean to become more thoroughly the places on earth that Christ calls us to be—places where, when we must cry, tears are understood; places where, with time and burdens borne no longer alone, mourning turns, sometimes at least, to laughter.

**Are our churches places where tears are understood? Do we open ourselves to the presence of God so deeply, so widely, so wisely, that suffering unbound and shared becomes clay in the hands of our divine potter?**

Congregations emerge as places of sustenance and hope in some of the essays you will find in this issue. Esther Epp-Tiessen considers the intersecting relationships of family, congregation, faith, and feeling in her account of the experience of losing a young son to a devastating illness. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, facing profound physical suffering and the identity crisis it provokes, describes the slow process—in the arms of her congregation—of making peace with a God who hasn't ended her suffering. Willy Mushagalusa, once a refugee in the Congo, testifies to the critical role of worship with fellow believers in making traumatic suffering endurable. And Mary Thiessen Nation shares stories of faithful urban women of color, whose suffering—"maldistributed, enormous, and trans-generational"—has not snuffed out their ability to walk with hope and trust alongside others who suffer.

But in a pointed and wrenching way, suffering challenges trust in the goodness and power of God. Peter Dula, drawing from Christian tradition and personal experience in Rwanda and Iraq, reflects on the stubborn theological puzzle of the relation of God and suffering. Gordon Matties explores the biblical basis for speaking of God as a suffering God. And Nekeisha Alexis-Baker listens and responds to African American liberation theologians who rethink the meaning of the redemptive cross of Christ, given the past suffering of slaves and the present suffering of many who face racial and gender injustice.

Harry Loewen and James Juhnke take up another difficult issue for the church. How should we think about and practice forgiveness when believers' suffering is inflicted by other people? What does suffering do to the spirit? How should wrongs—whether directed at one's family or at martyrs of one's faith community—be remembered, righted, forgiven, as Jesus taught us to do?

The church also causes suffering, overlooks it, and turns from it. From her perspective as conference minister, Dorothy Nickel Friesen recounts ways the church hurts pastors and members, and considers ways these hurts might be prevented and redeemed. Brice Balmer explains why men's pain is often invisible and suggests how the church might better walk with men who are suffering. And to those who are discouraged because their illnesses have not been miraculously cured—and to church members who suggest that healing will occur if only enough faith is present—Samuel Lopez asserts the power of living hope as described in 1 Peter as key to believers' ability to face difficult times and death.

Pastors have a special challenge in remaining focused on that living hope while carrying close to their hearts the chronic suffering of others. How can such pastors hold up under the weight? Duane Beck's essay speaks especially to those who offer pastoral care day after day after day. He suggests the "Beatitude path" to guide pastoral care of others and care of self in the process of responding to chronic suffering.

The church in its sermons, such as the one offered by Leonard Beechy, and in its songs, such as the new texts written by Adam Tice, continues to address the reality and power of suffering in our lives and to claim faith in the greater power of God's enduring,

undying love. I hope you will find, as I did, that the pieces included in this issue both name the reality of suffering and affirm its subordination to the light of the risen Christ.

## About the editor

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# How can I keep from singing?

Esther Epp-Tiessen

When our eight-year-old son Timothy died of a brain tumour in 1994, my husband Dan and I knew immediately which words should go onto his gravestone. Tim had always loved to sing, and he would sing freely and joyfully throughout the day. We knew he was awake in the morning when we would hear "Old MacDonald had a farm" wafting from his bedroom. So this line from Robert Lowry's 1860 hymn seemed the perfect epitaph: "How can I keep from singing?"

**I resist sentimentalizing or romanticizing suffering—there is too much raw pain in it—and yet I find myself agreeing that those who suffer *do* teach us, often in profound and life-changing ways.**

But we had other reasons for choosing this song. It is a song about suffering. More importantly, it is about how God accompanies the frail human spirit through suffering and somehow consoles the sufferer and transforms that suffering. It is about God's power to shine light into darkness, and joy and comfort into the deepest sorrow. It is about the resurrection and God's assurance of a coming age when death and tears will be no more. In the days after Tim's death, our broken hearts could scarcely comprehend this message. Yet we chose these words for Tim's gravestone because our church had taught and we dared to believe the promise this old hymn held out:

> *No storm can shake my inmost calm*
> *while to that Rock I'm clinging.*
> *Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,*
> *how can I keep from singing?*[1]

Tim was born two months prematurely in the late summer of 1986. Although the doctors told us that his development would be somewhat delayed, they assured us that he would easily catch

up to his peers. But he didn't, and by his first birthday we had been told that he had cerebral palsy. We learned that his motor functioning would be seriously impaired—permanently.

Just after Tim's third birthday, he became very ill. After a long and excruciating time of uncertainty, we learned that he had a massive brain tumour. He needed surgery, radiation, and a year's worth of chemotherapy to fight the cancer invading his brain. About a year after the completion of treatment, he suffered a major stroke, which left him virtually blind, paralyzed on the right side, and unable to speak. Although Tim managed to recover some of his functioning, he was never the same. We were devastated by the successive losses.

In the late summer of 1994, Tim again became ill. He developed seizures, he lost bowel and bladder control, and his remaining vision vanished. Our deepest fears were confirmed on October 1, when the neurologist informed us that the medulloblastoma had ravaged Tim's entire brain and he had only a short while to live. Tim spent several weeks in hospital as the doctors tried to adjust medications in order to ease his seizures and pain. When his situation had stabilized, we brought him home to be with us. He died peacefully in our arms on October 31.

## Taught about living by Tim's dying

Franciscan Richard Rohr writes that those who suffer are teachers: they teach those who surround them how to die and, more importantly, how to live.[2] I resist sentimentalizing or romanticizing suffering—there is too much raw pain in it—and yet I find myself agreeing with Rohr. Those who suffer *do* teach us, often in profound and life-changing ways. Tim taught us much, through his suffering.

**A small, weak, and disabled child, Tim could not do many things for others, but he could love deeply and unconditionally. In that, he was a giant of strength.**

***Tim taught us about faith.*** He had a deep and trusting faith in Jesus, which he expressed mostly through song. In Sunday school, his voice could be heard above the chorus of others, singing "Jesus loves me." At summer camp, he mesmerized the counsellors and other campers with his campfire rendition of "Kumbayah." At school, he was known to belt out the Christmas song "Go tell it on the mountain," whatever the time of year. And at bedtime

each night, he would utter a simple but fervent prayer, "Jesus, friend of little children, be a friend to me. Take my hand and ever keep me close to thee." Tim loved Jesus dearly and truly. My own doubting spirit was often humbled by his childlike faith.

***Tim taught us to value the simplest of life's pleasures.*** Because of his physical limitations, and because he was so often unwell or in pain, Tim didn't appreciate the bigger excursions or camping trips for which Dan and I and our other sons, Mark and Chris, longed. He preferred the comforts of home. Tim's greatest joys were a juicy hotdog, a new set of keys to jingle, a walk to the fire station to "see" the fire trucks, and "wrestling" with his dad and brothers. Tim taught us to find joy and delight in the moment and in God's gifts right around us.

***Tim taught us acceptance of life and what it brings.*** Although he sometimes whined and complained, he never lamented his disabilities or special needs. Only once did I hear him say, "I wish I could walk," and only once, after his loss of sight, did he whimper, "I can't see." Tim's level of physical functioning was at its highest at about age two and a half; from then until he died at age eight, the cancer and its treatment made him increasingly disabled. He was able to accept his deteriorating functions with much more grace than his parents could.

***Tim taught us that a small, weak, and disabled child can be amazingly strong.*** The apostle Paul writes that God's strength is revealed in weakness. At Tim's funeral, a close friend of ours spoke to all the children about Tim's death. Ralph talked about the weakness and illness of Tim's body, but also about the power, strength, and good health of Tim's loving heart. Tim had an amazing capacity to love, and he showered that love lavishly on others. We, his family, experienced that love many times every day as he hugged us and told us, "I love you." After his death, we learned how many other people had been recipients of his love—his teachers, therapists, friends, even doctors and nurses. Tim could not do many things for others, but he could love deeply and unconditionally. In that, he was a giant of strength.

***Through Tim's suffering, I also learned much about God's love and presence.*** In the last weeks of his life, I had a powerful sense of God's love and nearness whenever I entered Tim's room. It was a tangible sensation that I had never experienced before.

When I mentioned it to Dan, he told me that he felt it too. And I was blessed with mystical experiences of God, which were totally new for me. In the weeks leading to Tim's death, I often held him in my arms in the evenings; during those moments I felt such a profound love for my dying child. In the year after Tim's death, I was given a vision of myself being held in exactly that way by God. I realized in those moments that God loves me even more than I loved my son.

### Connected with the suffering of the world's children

Finally, Tim's suffering connected us with the suffering of others. In the years before Tim was born, Dan and I served with Mennonite Central Committee in the Philippines. While there, we befriended Jesse and Helen Suarez. Jesse spent many months in the provincial jail, because local military authorities were threatened by the farmer cooperative that he and several others were organizing in their mountain village. Helen stayed with us when she came for her bi-weekly visit to the jail. One week she arrived to say that their one-year-old son had died. He had become sick with a fever, vomiting, and diarrhea. Because they had no money for medical care, he had quickly become dehydrated and died. We accompanied Helen to the jail to inform Jesse that his youngest child was gone. I remember vividly his piercing cry of agony and how he crumpled to the ground in a heap, sobbing. Childless at that time, I had no comprehension of what it meant to lose a child. After Timothy, I knew and I understood.

**I join my cry with the cries of millions of other mothers who have lost children. Resisting war and working for peace is a way that my bleeding mother-heart finds solace.**

Tim's suffering has been my window into the suffering of the world, and particularly the suffering of children. The last months of Tim's life coincided with the Rwandan genocide. As I sat at his bedside day after day, I was aware that in Rwanda hundreds of thousands of children and adults were being slaughtered in the most horrific ways. In the months after Tim's death, I learned about the impact of United Nations–imposed sanctions on the children of Iraq, and about the hundreds of thousands of deaths resulting from lack of food, water, medical care, and other necessities of life. In the years since, war has devastated the lives of

children in Congo, Uganda, Palestine-Israel, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq (again). I want to scream, "Why must so many children suffer and die?" My spirit weeps, "Why must sons and daughters be sent into battle to kill or be killed?"

Author Barbara Kingsolver writes that the loss caused by war is "a pure, high note of anguish like a mother singing to an empty bed."[3] My son did not die in war, yet as one grieving mother, I join my cry with the cries of millions of mothers who have lost children through the brutality and senselessness of war. Resisting war and working for peace is a way that my bleeding mother-heart finds solace. It is a way that I have found meaning in my own suffering.

**Formed by the faith community**

It is thirteen years since Tim died. In the healing comfort of family, friends, and faith community, we have learned the lessons that Tim taught us through his suffering. We have learned about faith, love, strength, joy, and acceptance, and we have learned to see our own suffering as somehow bound up with that of all God's children. I believe we were equipped to receive these lessons because the church had nurtured them within us long before Tim entered our lives. The church had formed us to see God at work in joy and in sorrow, in strength and in weakness, in life and in death, and to place our experience in the context of the anguish of all humanity. It taught us that the faith and hope we find in Christ is a well that sustains us, especially in suffering. It taught us that the song of God's love echoes in times of deepest darkness. And so, since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?

*My life flows on in endless song,*
*above earth's lamentation.*
*I catch the sweet, though far off hymn*
*that hails a new creation.*

*No storm can shake my inmost calm*
*while to that Rock I'm clinging.*
*Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,*
*how can I keep from singing?*

*Through all the tumult and the strife,*
*I hear that music ringing.*
*It finds an echo in my soul.*
*How can I keep from singing?*

*What though my joys and comforts die?*
*The Lord my Savior liveth.*
*What though the darkness gather round?*
*Songs in the night he giveth.*

*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,*
*a fountain ever springing!*
*All things are mine since I am his!*
*How can I keep from singing?*

## Notes

[1] Robert Lowry, *Bright Jewels for the Sunday School,* 1869; "My life flows on" is #580 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).
[2] Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 14.
[3] Barbara Kingsolver, "A Pure, High Note of Anguish," *Los Angeles Times,* 23 September 2001. This piece was reprinted in Kingsolver's collection of essays, *Small Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

## About the author

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# Questions, answers, stories
## Speaking of God and suffering

Peter Dula

How do we speak about God, given the presence of so much suffering in the world?

Who asks that question? In what straits? And who attempts to stammer his way beyond silence and answer it? The sufferer? When? In the midst of suffering at its most acute, or later, when the wound has scabbed over? The caregiver? When? In the face of the sufferer, or after, at home, pondering the day's encounters? Or is this a question for students in a philosophical theology seminar (a place I recommend visiting, if only for a brief time)?

**The most severe problem we face with regard to suffering is not "How can it coexist alongside a good God?" but "How can we bring ourselves to face it, to stop avoiding it, in ourselves and in others?"**

Does the question ask too much or too little? When Plato asks, "Can the just be happy?" some readers respond, "Can anyone?" When someone asks how we speak of God in a world that includes tsunamis and Baghdad, some will say that the real question is half as long: "How do we speak about God at all?" Moreover, given a certain kind of suffering, or a certain kind of sufferer, the question gets halved again and becomes, "How do we speak?" How do we overcome muteness, give words to selves, let alone a God, we can no longer find?

Perhaps we misapprehend the problems associated with speaking of God in the midst of suffering because of a failure to properly attend to the mutual entanglement of these various questions. Sometimes it is just difficult to talk at all. And it is hard to speak *well* of God all the time. What counts as proper theological speech? Christian theology is a 2000-year-old argument about just that. That argument, bound as it is to the cross, has rarely gone on in isolation from the ques-

tion of suffering. One of its earliest episodes, the quarrel with gnosticism, may help us approach the question of how to speak about God and see how that question has been tangled up with the question of suffering since the beginning.

**Answers**

For almost everyone, philosophical questions emerge from suffering. But Christians have the added challenge of holding suffering alongside their belief in a good God. To make matters worse, Christians also have to hold suffering alongside their belief in a good creation. Six times in the first chapter of Genesis we are told that it was good—as if the writer, like a Bush administration strategist, thought the only way to convince us of such an implausible idea was through sheer repetition.

Gnosticism, the first great philosophical threat to the church, can be understood as the church's opportunity to be released from this dilemma. Gnostic cosmology promised to uncouple God and world: belief in the good God would no longer entail belief in a good creation. According to gnostic belief, an evil power or malevolent demigod (sometimes identified with the God of the Old Testament) is responsible for the calamity that is creation. The world is a mistake, an accident, completely external to the purposes of God. To the question, "How does one speak of God in the midst of suffering?" therefore, the gnostics had a clear and compelling answer. God is not responsible, and creation is evil all the way down. Redemption will not be redemption *of* the world but redemption *from* the world. Salvation is the soul's escape from the prison of the body and the world.

The price of this resolution was the alienation of God from world, the alienation of soul from body, the denial of Christ's full humanity, and the severing of the unity of creation and redemption. That price was too high for what came to be called orthodoxy. But gnosticism has never stopped haunting the church. When the creeds rule out gnostic formulations, they rule out a certain way of speaking about God in the midst of suffering. But that doesn't mean that the creeds provide another answer. As Anglican theologian (now Archbishop of Canterbury) Rowan Williams has repeatedly argued over the last few decades, that is part of the point: the problem with heresies—including gnosti-

cism—is not that they are wrong answers, but that they are answers. They represent failures to keep certain questions alive. In other words, Williams thinks that the church's dogmatic formulations provide "the abiding stimulus to certain kinds of theoretical questions."[1] Certain answers get us off the hook too easily.

**For almost everyone, philosophical questions emerge from suffering. But Christians have the added challenge of holding suffering alongside their belief in a good God and a good creation.**

It is commonly supposed that Christian theology does have an answer. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov,* Ivan Karamazov articulates one such answer in the process of giving our question its most disturbing modern articulation. Ivan doesn't argue against the existence of God or of salvation. He firmly holds to the eschatological conviction that in the end "there will occur and be revealed something so precious that it will suffice for all hearts, to allay all indignation, to redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed; it will suffice not only to make forgiveness possible, but also to justify everything that has happened with men."[2]

Ivan's argument is not that this conviction is pie-in-the-sky nonsense. He believes it is true but that it isn't worth the cost. Any future resolution is not the worth the suffering of a single child. "They have put too high a price on harmony…. It is not that I don't accept God…. I just most respectfully return him the ticket."[3] That Christianity is a cozy fantasy that must be rejected in the name of clear-eyed realism is an old claim. That Christianity is a cozy reality that must be rejected in the name of decency is new. For Ivan, the traditional answer, like gnosticism, gets us off the hook too easily.

But what hook, exactly? Any decent philosophical theology, Rowan Williams writes, "should be worrying about seeing suffering always in its historical particularity: this, here, for this person, at this moment, with these memories."[4] In contrast, most theodicies—most attempts to reconcile the existence of evil or suffering in the world with the assumption of a benevolent God—are attempts to see suffering from a God's-eye view. "I suspect that it is more religiously imperative to be worried by evil than to put it into a satisfactory theoretical context, if only because such a worry keeps obstinately open the perspective of the sufferer."[5]

But of course, opening ourselves to the pain of the sufferer is exactly what we usually want to avoid. One reason, I think, why we might want quick answers to the problem of suffering is because of the burdens suffering—our own or that of others—places on us. But a faithfully Christian response to the problem of suffering will always direct us toward more intense engagement with suffering. A Christian response will keep in mind that the most severe problem we face with regard to suffering is not "How can it coexist alongside a good God?" but "How can we bring ourselves to face it, to stop avoiding it, in ourselves and in others?" It is a curious thing about humans that we are prone to deny what is most human about us, our connection with others, and to deny it most when it most needs to be recognized: in times of suffering.

**It is a curious thing about humans that we are prone to deny what is most human about us, our connection with others, and to deny it most when it most needs to be recognized: in times of suffering.**

In such straits, we may long for Augustine's God: "The mute sufferings of my mind reached your mercy as loud cries. You alone knew my pain, no one else; for how little of it could I express in words to my closest friends! Could their ears have caught all the tumult that raged in my soul, when even I had neither time enough nor eloquence to articulate it?"[6] Whether we live in Augustine's world or in Rilke's,[7] who is willing to take up the challenge to be more like Augustine's God than like Augustine's friends?

## Stories

In this light, Ivan Karamazov looks less compelling, and Job's comforters seem worth emulating. Notice how Ivan introduces his argument. "'I must make an admission,' Ivan began. 'I could never understand how it is possible to love one's neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one's neighbors that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren't so nigh…. If we're to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face—love vanishes.'"[8] For this reason, Ivan argues, beggars should solicit funds through the newspapers. The stories of suffering that compel Ivan to return his ticket are all stories of children. Children, Ivan says, because they are innocent. "I'm not talking about the suffering of grownups, they ate the apple and to

hell with them … but these little ones."[9] Yet Ivan never talks about a child he actually knows. All his stories are gathered from newspapers. I don't mean to judge Ivan harshly. Most of us feel the same way about beggars, and we find children easier to love than adults. Ivan is just honest about it.

Now notice how Job's comforters are introduced.

> *Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home…. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (Job 2:11–13)*

Job's comforters have a bad reputation, but it is hardly apparent why they do.[10] That they sit in silence with Job for seven days, and speak only after he speaks, is as important as the fact that in the end their response is found wanting.

We get a clue to just why Job's friends have a bad reputation, in a story from Elie Weisel, which—like Job, and unlike Job's comforters—flirts with blasphemy and is critical of those who defend God's ways. God was once put on trial in one of the concentration camps. Three rabbis, among the most learned of Eastern European sages, indicted God and conducted his trial among themselves. With great solemnity they brought out all the arguments against God.

> *I remember that after many, many days the verdict came and the verdict was "Guilty." But then the head of the tribunal simply said, "Now let's go pray." I would like to do a story on that one day … but there I will introduce a new character. I will introduce a character who defends God, the only one who takes God's side, the only one who says that God's ways are justified even there, even in Auschwitz, and I would say that that character is Satan.*[11]

Finally, some people *don't* ask these questions, or they ask in ways I don't recognize. On August 1, 2004, four Baghdad churches were car-bombed. The worst attack was at St. Peter and Paul. Two car bombs there killed ten worshipers as they were leaving after mass. Sister Maria was at a nearby church and hurried over to offer any aid she could. She says that all her life she has fainted at the sight of blood, but on that day she diligently picked through the ashes and car parts to match up scattered human limbs for proper burial.

We were hiking alongside a creek in the mountains of Kurdistan one afternoon when Sister Maria told me, "I don't know where I got the strength that day. And I don't know why I have survived, why I happened to be absent the night they killed Sister Cecille [in her bed in their Baghdad convent], or why I was at a neighboring church in August instead of at Saint Peter and Paul. I think there must be a reason, don't you?" I expected her to go on to say something pious, such as, "God must have preserved me for the work I am doing now." But when she continued, she said that all she could think was that her death would be still more horrible.

I speak to her on the phone every now and then. Once I called to let her know that a couple in Oregon wanted to make a gift of several hundred dollars to the convent. I needed the convent's Beirut bank account information in order to make a transfer. She was grateful, but she wasn't very interested. At least a dozen times in that ten-minute conversation, she said, "Please pray for me," "Pray for us," "Pray for Iraq." The question, "What kind of prayers can be heard above the roar of the American helicopters over Baghdad?" or, "If God cared at all about Iraq, wouldn't he have answered our prayers already?" were all conceivable responses. But they were not hers.

## Notes

[1] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 80.
[2] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1990), 236.
[3] Ibid., 245.
[4] Rowan Williams, "Reply: Redeeming Sorrows," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (London: MacMillan Press, 1996), 147.
[5] Ibid.

[6] Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), XII, 7, 11 (130).
[7] I understand the opening of Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Duino Elegies"—"Who if I cried out would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?"—to be a response to *The Confessions*.
[8] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 235–37.
[9] Ibid., 242.
[10] This point is made by Stanley Hauerwas in "Salvation and Health," in *The Hauerwas Reader,* ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 551.
[11] Wiesel went on to write a play based on this story: *The Trial of God* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

## About the author

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# Making peace with a God who doesn't end suffering

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

I know about the scripture passages that instruct us not to be surprised by suffering and even to be glad and rejoice in it.[1] I've read countless personal stories about the benefits of suffering, and I've heard many people make the case that suffering is the only way to true transformation and growth. But all that doesn't change how I feel about suffering. I'm against it. Flat out against it.

In a car accident in 1980 I badly injured my back. Years later that injury began to damage my spinal cord and impede my ability to walk. A failed attempt to stop the degeneration resulted in eleven surgeries from 2003 to 2005 and complete paralysis from the chest down. I do not rejoice and thank God for what I have endured these last several years. I never want to experience anything like it again. And I am not in any way grateful that I can no longer walk.

**With some cynicism, I said, "I know that eventually I will come around and I'll let God off the hook for not healing me. What are my choices? It's either that or get resentful and bitter. What kind of choice is that?"**

## What are my choices?

Why is this kind of suffering necessary? What kind of God would set things up so that growth only comes through pain? I wish it were different. I wish there were easier ways to grow. I wish God had left suffering out of the human experience. Barbara Taylor Brown says it well: "Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got."[2] Indeed, that is true. Our God neither prevents suffering nor ends it just because we ask. How are we to understand that reality? How do we make peace with it?

I remember working at these questions several years ago. I was angry and depressed, and I was praying desperately for healing. I wanted to walk more than I had ever wanted anything else, and I kept telling God that. A number of people told me that perhaps what God wanted was to heal me spiritually and emotionally (rather than physically). I would say, "Okay, great. But I want to walk."

Finally, in resignation, I gave up hope of walking again. I told my small group that what made me most angry was the lack of choice I felt about what would ultimately happen in my life. With some cynicism, I commented that I knew I would eventually let God off the hook for not healing me: "I'll come to some acknowledgment of non-physical healing. I will say with conviction that God has been with me through the suffering and that I have grown and gotten stronger because of it. Really," I asked rhetorically, "What are my choices? It's either that or get resentful and bitter. What kind of choice is that?"

God does promise healing if only we ask, and I did ask. I begged and I bargained, but my spinal cord was not healed. I don't know why not. Perhaps God **couldn't** heal me. Perhaps God **chose** not to. Harold Kushner says, "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die."[3] I don't know why I wasn't healed, but I do know that the desire and longing to walk will never be completely gone. Have I let God off the hook? Not completely. I do hold God accountable for not healing me physically. But I am no longer angry. I neither excuse God nor blame God; I simply let God speak for God-self. And I do celebrate healing in other areas of my life, just as I predicted I would.

But that doesn't answer the question of how I reconcile the reality of suffering—my own and the world's—with belief in a God of love. The simple answer is that I don't. And that is one of the most significant legacies of my own suffering. I have simply stopped trying to make sense of it all. My mind cannot hold together a loving God with the reality of AIDS orphans, plane crashes, rape hotels, fetal alcohol babies, tsunamis, and child abuse. So I have stopped trying. It's not that I disengage my intellect to believe in a God who loves us deeply and wants only

the best for us. It is that I have come to accept the extreme limitations of my intellect. It is foolish to believe in a loving God, given all that is around us. I know that. But I have decided that not to believe in a loving God simply because I can't make it all make sense is the height of arrogance and even greater foolishness. (I don't even begin to understand how a cell phone works!) So I do believe. I choose to believe.

**How do I reconcile the reality of suffering—my own and the world's—with belief in a God of love? The simple answer is that I don't. And that is one of the most significant legacies of my own suffering.**

### Awash in gratitude

Ironically, with increasing frequency I sense God's love very deeply. It washes over me in what I can only describe as a profound sense of gratefulness. I do not understand why I seem to have a more heightened sense of gratitude now than I did when I was fully able bodied. Maybe the experience is similar to the proverbial hitting your head against the wall because it feels so good when you quit. After several years of intense struggle and setbacks, it is so good to feel healthy, to be able to face life without the clouded lens of pain, nausea, fatigue, and despair. Or perhaps I have a new awareness of how truly light my suffering is, compared to that of many sisters and brothers around the world. Perhaps my commitment to gratefulness as a spiritual discipline is bearing fruit. Whatever the reason, I am grateful for the gratefulness, for that unexpected awareness of being bathed in blessings. In those times particularly I am aware that it no longer seems as foolish to believe in a loving God. It seems profoundly real.

My experience of these last years has also increased my awareness of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds me. So many times I have asked, "How do people survive these kinds of traumas without a supportive community?" I do not know. What I do know is that God is incarnated in the loving, caring people who have utterly enfolded me and my family. They were there when my hope was depleted and my faith a bare thread. Sometimes they were my only link to a seemingly silent God. C. S. Lewis described his estrangement from God in the journal he kept after his wife died: "To go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in

your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become."[4] Why does God turn a deaf ear when we are most in need of divine intervention? How does one hold on to faith, to the belief in goodness and love, in the midst of such utter aloneness? As with Lewis, it was my community that kept me in touch with grace. They walked with me through the valley of the shadow of death. They told me that when I was unable to hold on to faith, they would hold on for me. How can there not be a God, when the evidence of her love is so strong in her people?

### Making something holy from the shattered pieces

I have come to understand that the cause of one's suffering has little relationship with the response to one's suffering. It is quite natural to ask, "Why did this happen to me?" and "Whose fault was this?" and "Why would God let this happen?" But I don't believe it is ours to know the answers to the cause questions. I don't believe we really can know. The response to suffering, however, is ours to choose, and therein lies the transformation potential.

**I am learning that I don't need to fear becoming bitter, because it will not happen unless I choose that path. It is God who transforms the pain into good, but it is I who must make the choice for that transformation.**

My single biggest fear through these last difficult years has been the fear of becoming bitter and resentful. I have seen others become bitter, and I know how much misery it brings to the lives of family and friends, as well as to the sufferer. I am learning that I don't need to fear becoming bitter, because it will not happen unless I choose that path. It is God who transforms the pain into good, but it is I who must make the choice for that transformation. Understanding that truth has been enormously freeing. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor says it well: "What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them."[5]

There are many other things that I need and want to learn as part of this journey. Two things are especially in the forefront for

me right now. The first is how to be genuinely glad for others when they are enjoying activities that I am no longer able to do. I want to listen to their travel stories, their hiking adventures, their conquest of difficult tasks, and be able to celebrate with them. I don't want my inevitable first thought to be, "I wish I could do that," or "I'll never do that again." It's unrealistic to think that the longings for lost opportunities will ever be completely gone, but I hope to learn how to keep these reactions well in the background of my mind when I am listening to the experiences of others.

**Barbara Brown Taylor says it well: "What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them."**

A second area of needed learning is around my self-perception as a person with a disability. I know people hold stereotypes and prejudices about those in the disabled community. One frequent assumption is that we are somehow less intellectually competent than the able bodied, perhaps because people tend to lump together all disabilities, whether physical, mental, emotional, or developmental. It is difficult to talk about this dynamic. I do not, in any way, disparage those with developmental disabilities or mental illnesses; these have no more effect than physical disabilities on one's inherent value. At the same time, I don't want the fact that I am in a wheelchair to cause people to lower their expectations of my intellectual capacity or my mental acuity.

I know people sometimes expect less of me and others in this position. I also know that that awareness can have the effect of decreasing my expectations of myself. There are times when, in hindsight, I realize that what I said or did was greatly—and negatively—influenced by my self-perception that I am somehow intellectually and/or mentally diminished. I fight that perception. I have needed to claim and redeem my identity as woman, and now I also want to claim and redeem my identity as a wheelchair user, a person with a disability. It is my legs that don't function, not my mind.

Just as there is no neat, easy way to finish learning the lessons that suffering provides, there is also no neat, easy way to wrap up an essay on those learnings. I am glad to be learning. In the midst

of the worst of my suffering, I thought my life was over. I wanted it to be over, and I prayed that it would be. Now I am grateful that my life didn't end. While I would never have chosen this particular path, I am finding meaning and fulfillment as I travel on it. Thanks be to God.

## Notes

[1] See James 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:12–13; Rom. 5:3–5.
[2] Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 16.
[3] Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 123.
[4] C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 123.
[5] Taylor, *God in Pain*, 116.

## About the author

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# Reconciling suffering and joy

Willy Mushagalusa

I am convinced that suffering plays a crucial role in forming our relationship with God; the way we respond to affliction shapes our ability to understand how God works in our lives. Our experiences of suffering may lead us to abandon faith, or we may become closer to God through them.

As Christians, we believe that at creation God envisioned a good life, free of anguish, for all God's creatures, until Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptations of the serpent, and disobeyed God. Since then, through forces such as conflict, poverty, disease, human exploitation, and racism, the powers of evil exert powerful influence on our existence. My question, then, is whether we can remain hopeful as we struggle with these forces, whether we can remain joyful during our times of affliction.

**My sojourn in a refugee camp, one of the most difficult periods of my life, was at the same time a big factor in helping me develop an attitude of joy in the midst of troubles.**

At first, reconciling suffering and joy seems impracticable, because suffering depletes human beings of our natural capacity to rejoice. Suffering is unpleasant, it makes us sad, and it exposes our vulnerability. For Christians it may shake our sense of a faith firmly founded on biblical promises, a basis for a joyful attitude.

## When God does not intervene to bring relief

Like many Christians, I have experienced my share of suffering. When I faced pain, I questioned the accuracy of the scriptures that testify to the loving nature and the unsurpassed power of God. Throughout the Bible we read of a God who is concerned about the well-being of God's people, and I was and still am puzzled by the fact that God does not always intervene in my behalf, especially during difficult experiences. For example, when

I fled political instability in Congo and was in search of a secure life, my circumstances went from bad to worse, and I ended up living in a harsh and ruthless refugee camp for four years, before I finally got an opportunity to emigrate to Canada.

As I planned to settle peacefully in Canada, however, I received news that a brutal war was tearing my country of origin apart; the rest of my family was caught in a conflict that was destroying communities and sending more of my relatives to refugee camps. Then, during the same period, while I was a student at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, my wife gave birth to a premature baby, who survived a few weeks, then passed away. In an attempt to give a spiritual meaning to these unfortunate events, I encouraged myself by reciting Psalm 23 and quoting scriptural promises about how everything works for good for those who love God.

Despite the significance these passages had for me during that time, I felt confused by the contrast between God's revealed nature and an understanding of God as one who is present in the midst of my pain. During these events, I longed to understand why the scriptures declare that everything works for the good of those who love God, and why Christians' experiences of extreme suffering do not always end up as the story of Job does, with a delightful reversal of fortunes. I tried to pray, only to find that some prayers in times of affliction are not answered according to our expectations.

Because the divine resources that I was counting on did not appear to be adequate to the intensity of my struggles, I became emotionally, physically, and even spiritually disturbed. This succession of trials complicated the way I related to a God who claims to be compassionate and powerful but who permitted a suffering that left me feeling defenseless. If God is powerful, I sometimes thought, he should have been able to intervene when I underwent this difficult time, as is the pattern in many biblical stories. Or he could have prevented them from happening.

To make matters worse, I had a sense of culpability, which arose from my familiarity with biblical passages that articulate a link between disobedience and God's judgment. In these biblical stories, judgment is often made concrete in the suffering of those who have sinned. Again and again I scrutinized my actions to find

out whether somewhere I was guilty of a sin that could possibly have been the cause of my trouble. All of these trials exposed my powerlessness to move beyond circumstances that were out of my control, even as I succumbed to the impulse to see God as distant and uncaring precisely when I most needed his presence, power, care, and intervention.

### Glorifying the God who nurtures our joy

My sojourn in a refugee camp, one of the most difficult periods of my life, was at the same time a big factor in helping me develop an attitude of joy in the midst of troubles. We had a Christian group in the camp, with activities centered around worship and praise, using drums, clapping, and dancing. We lacked people adequately trained to preach and teach the Bible, so the group dedicated the largest part of our services to praise and worship. But those who led the group were able to develop a hermeneutic consistent with the realities of the refugee camp, and they understood that lively worship was necessary to sustain us amid such challenges.

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The group emphasized literal interpretation of the Bible. We found it easy to comprehend certain biblical stories. We appropriated the story of Paul and Silas singing through their night in jail, for example, because it helped us reflect on our situation. Through our reading of this story and our reflection on our experience, we came to believe that in difficult times, singing praises can play a crucial role. As we emphasized the acts of God in these stories and in most of our worship time, our faith in God increased and our problems seemed to diminish.

In most African communities, drums, songs, and dancing have always been part of life and are still important both to jubilant celebrations and in grieving. By skillfully integrating these elements in our worship, we found respite from our miseries. And we gained the insight that through worship we could experience the One who is greater than our problems. We celebrated hope in the face of hopelessness, glorifying a God who nurtured our joy. That joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that relieved our burdens and

demonstrated that God was still working among us. Such joy should not be confused with simple cheerfulness; it transcends tragic events that may afflict God's people. In praise our hearts were raised into the joyous presence and peace of God, as our worship provided a channel through which God's power could operate amid our struggles.

**In praise our hearts were raised into the joyous presence and peace of God, as our worship provided a channel through which God's power could operate amid our struggles.**

The effects of the camp experiences are still embedded in my Christian consciousness and have become a point of reference every time I face new challenges. Through these experiences I have become aware that Christians are not immune to suffering, and even that Christ prepared his followers for suffering by frequently mentioning it in his teachings. In fact, when his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he was careful to remind them that they should always ask God to deliver them from evil, a prayer that is still a cornerstone of Christian worship. Through a worshiping attitude that has sprung from suffering, every difficult experience I face is now endowed with new meaning and with hope that God is present all through our afflictions.

Reflecting on the role of God in his son's illness, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes that

> *Christianity introduced the world to the idea of a God who suffers, alongside the image of a God who creates and commands.... I don't know what it means for God to suffer. I don't believe that God is a person like me with real eyes and real tear ducts to cry, and real nerve endings to feel pain. But I would like to think that the anguish I feel when I read of the suffering of innocent people reflects God's anguish and God's compassion, even if his way of feeling pain is different from ours."*[1]

Apart from Christ's experience on the cross, I don't know what it means for God to suffer, but I know for sure that joy is one of God's characteristics. Because he wants us to be partakers of his nature, his joy can be passed on to us through the Holy Spirit, who is present among us in prayer and praise and worship, even—

or perhaps especially—when difficulties assail us from every direction.

## Note

[1] Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 85.

## About the author

Willy Mushagalusa is married to Ephemie and a father of two, a boy named Ahadi and a girl named Ashuza. He studied international development at Canadian Mennonite University, and he and his family attend the Fort Garry Mennonite Brethren Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, while also reaching out to the African community in the area.

# God's suffering?
## A challenge for biblicists

Gordon Matties

From his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in 1944, "Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world…. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help." Bonhoeffer suggests that by doing away with "a false conception of God," we become open to "seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness."[1]

**The Old Testament witnesses to a God whose suffering love transcends the very strictures of language, especially language that demands consistency and noncontradiction.**

Similarly Abraham Heschel, in his influential work on the prophets, argues that God is "moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath…. Quite obviously in the biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or … gladden and please him…. God can be intimately affected," because "God does not stand outside the range of human suffering and sorrow."[2]

### Theological debate

For Bonhoeffer and Heschel, two world wars and the Holocaust had awakened the question of whether God suffers. Although the question had been taken up by others since then, in 1975 Dorothee Sölle suggested that "the theological question of whether God could suffer has not been settled to this day."[3] Nine years later, Terence Fretheim affirmed "a divine vulnerability" in which "God takes on all the risks that authentic relatedness entails. Because of what happens to that relationship with those whom God loves, God suffers."[4]

By 1986, Ronald Goetz remarked that the notion of a suffering God had become a "new orthodoxy."[5] Even so, as Marcel Sarot suggests, "The debate between those who affirm and those who deny that God suffers is not a debate between people who believe in different sorts of gods. It is, rather, a debate between people who take for granted different philosophical axioms and employ different philosophical tools in their articulation of belief in one and the same God."[6] Or, as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon put it, the real issue of our time isn't whether God exists, but what kind of God exists.[7] Does God suffer in the fullness of the Trinity, or does God suffer only in the human Jesus Christ?[8]

Among some evangelical theologians the subject has become a flash point. The so-called "openness of God" theology, challenging traditional theology's "pagan borrowing" and overemphasis on God's "magnificent otherness,"[9] takes up the affirmation that God suffers. As Clark Pinnock suggests, "Impassibility is undoubtedly the Achilles heel of conventional thinking. It was as self-evident to our ancestors as it is out of the question to us, but as soon as one tinkers with it the edifice trembles. To our ancestors … God was perfect or changeable; to us he is both perfect and changeable."[10]

## Biblical witness

Such conclusions resonate with the increasing attention being paid to the actual biblical language for, by, and about God.[11] We do well, of course, to heed Sarot's observation that the concern about whether God suffers "is hardly ever addressed in the Bible." Sarot cautiously summarizes, "The biblical testimony cannot be used to exclude the possibility of God's suffering."[12] Although the Old Testament does not directly address the question, it presents a character who lives in and through a story with all of creation, yet who is not overcome by the freedom God grants to the creation.

The Bible presents that character via texts whose God-talk cannot be neatly systematized or reduced to a handful of propositions. Rather, the Old Testament bears witness to a lively conversation in which one perspective sheds light on another, a conversation that represents a striving toward the mind of God.[13] God's suffering love transcends the very strictures of language,

especially language that demands consistency and noncontradiction. Three examples illustrate the point.

Isaiah affirms that God dwells "in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit" (Isa. 57:15),[14] and that "in all their distress he too was distressed" (Isa. 63:9, NIV).[15] It should not bother us that Isaiah 46:5 refuses the option of reducing God to human dimensions. After all, God "does not faint or grow weary…. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (40:28–29). In God's incomparability God imagines a way that runs counter to conventional theopolitics. Such imagination is rooted in God's own ability to "have compassion on his suffering ones" (Isa. 49:13). God has birthed Israel and knows the pain and compassion of mothering (Isa. 42:14; 49:15). God's otherness does not preclude God's intimate and empowering compassion. According to Fretheim, "there is no suffering of the servant without the suffering of God."[16] By protecting God's freedom from domestication, Isaiah presents a God whose presence and imagination transcend the limits of power and politics, both human and divine. Isaiah's theopolitical agenda strives toward the New Testament's appropriation of the servant who takes up suffering in order to transform it.

**Although the Old Testament does not directly address the question of God's suffering, it presents a character who lives in and through a story with all of creation, yet who is not overcome by the freedom God grants to the creation.**

The book of Jeremiah offers us a prophet who embodies the pain of God's embracing compassion for and rejection by Israel. We read what sounds like the suffering of Jeremiah: "My eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears" (Jer. 13:17; cf. 9:10; 15:18; 23:9). Yet we find what seems like a rending of the very heart of God: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick…. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me" (Jer. 8:18, 21). And at times the words of Jeremiah and the words of God merge seamlessly, as though both prophet and God grieve in anguish and writhe in pain at the reality and consequences of evil (Jer. 4:19–22; 23:9–11). Even the earth mourns (Jer. 4:28; 12:4; 23:10). Jeremiah is a book of the pain of the divine Word.

This pain reveals that God's constancy is not compromised by the rupture of the relationship with Israel. The irony of the book is that the God who withdraws God's "steadfast love and mercy" (Jer. 16:5) is the God who is faithful to the relationship founded on "steadfast love, justice, and righteousness" (Jer. 9:24; 31:3). God has given birth to Ephraim and continues to participate in the pain inherent in parental compassion (Jer. 31:20; cf. 31:9, 15, 20). And because Israel's "hurt is incurable" and their "wound is grievous," God is committed to restoring health and healing (Jer. 30:12, 17). God's having chosen to be bound to Israel gives birth to the experience of divine suffering (Jer. 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; cf. 31:35–37).

**The challenge for those who seek a biblical response to a theological question is to allow the language of scripture to stand on its own terms and not to take offence at its earthiness.**

This unequivocal binding makes it possible for the prophet to utter the unimaginable: "See, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:26). Here we witness the travail and paradox of the divine Word that both judges and redeems, because God cannot be implicated in the constraints of a piety that demands God's presence in conventional terms (Jer. 7:4–7). God may well be both near and far (Jer. 23:23). It is precisely because God is able to "fill heaven and earth" (Jer. 23:24) that God is able both to pluck up and to plant, to destroy and to build, to wound and to heal (Jer. 1:10; 18:5–9; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10). Yet in no way does Jeremiah ascribe capriciousness to God. God suffers because of Israel's actions but will not allow those actions to thwart God's intentions for the relationship (Jer. 24:7–8; cf. 33:19–22). Jeremiah presents a God whose power and might (Jer. 16:21) cannot be compared to the "no gods" (Jer. 16:20). Israel's God will not be domesticated by abstract notions of consistency. Israel's God suffers and heals.

Hosea, too, presents us with a compassionate God who will save God's people, but not in ways traditionally associated with power (Hos. 1:7; NASB). Hosea presents a God who experiences suffering love as a jilted lover (Hos. 3:1) and a rejected parent (Hos. 11:1–9). The betrayed husband acts to restore the marriage in the transformation of all creation (Hos. 2:18–20). The grieving parent lets the wayward child go yet purposes to exercise compas-

sion in ways that seem inconsistent with the demands of retributive justice. After all, "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" (Hos. 11:8–9). The one who is profoundly affected by injustice and disloyalty also stands outside the limitations of human language, in that God's affections both participate in the wounding and precipitate a healing transformation that extends beyond Israel to a mending of all creation (Hos. 2:18). This is Hosea's paradox. The divine Other participates fully in relationship and willingly suffers the consequences of God's own commitments.

### Seeking a biblical response to a theological question

The challenge for those who seek a biblical response to a theological question is to allow the language of scripture to stand on its own terms and not to take offence at its earthiness. Fretheim's argument in *The Suffering of God* is a good example of this posture. God suffers *because* of evil in the world and among God's people in particular. God suffers *with* Israel in the consequences of that evil, and absorbs yet is not overwhelmed by it. And God suffers *for* Israel in that God takes on suffering in order that God's will might be done on earth.[17] In all this, God embodies a condescension, a *kenosis*, a self-emptying, yet without contradicting the otherness of God that cannot be comprehended within the limits of human reason (cf. Isa. 40:28; Jer. 23:23; Hos. 11:9). As Pinnock puts it, Christ humbled himself (Phil. 2:6–11), "but this self-emptying was what he had seen his kenotic Father do."[18]

**Scripture presents a God who, though identifying with the bruised servant, the injured parent, and the jilted spouse, always at the same time lives out of a faithfulness that will not abandon the people, the child, the spouse.**

Because humankind, made in the image of God, lives in a relationship with the Creator that is inhabited by love, and because the essence of love is a freedom inherent in the gift of loving, all of creation, including humankind, shares suffering with a God who is affected by the creation. By experiencing the suffering of relationship gone awry, God bears the suffering yet is not overcome by it. God takes it up into a larger redemptive purpose, enduring the suffering and shaping it toward the goodness God desires for all things.

Scripture presents a suffering and transforming God who, though identifying with the bruised servant, the injured parent, and the jilted spouse, always at the same time lives out of a faithfulness that will not abandon the people, the child, the spouse. God's love is deep enough to absorb the suffering and strong enough to stay in it to the end, when all is redeemed. God, surprisingly, works through the transforming power of weakness, "identifies with our suffering and works faithfully, everlastingly, and infallibly to transform our suffering into the highest possible good or into life lived within the realm of God's resurrection."[19]

## Notes

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 361.
[2] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 4.
[3] Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 43. For a mapping of the terrain since then, see, e.g., Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984): 6–12; Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[4] Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 78.
[5] Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* 103, no. 13 (16 April 1986), 385–89.
[6] Marcel Sarot, "Does God Suffer? A Critical Discussion of Thomas G. Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*" *Ars Disputandi* [http://www.ArsDisputandi.org] 1(2001), section 1. Weinandy argues for the impassibility of God in *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) and in his summary article, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35–41 [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=2262].
[7] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 95.
[8] This question has been at the heart of debate since the early church fathers. See Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, for a thorough exploration.
[9] Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 7, 75.
[10] Ibid., 76. For a more nuanced perspective on the early church fathers, see Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*.
[11] The challenge for Old Testament theology is to account for the rough and the emotive language for God (see, for example, John Goldingay, *Israel's Faith: Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], sections 2.6, "Yahweh's Love," and 2.7, "Yahweh's Hostility"). For New Testament theology, the challenge is to bring the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ into conversation

with scriptural tradition (see, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

[12] Sarot, "Does God Suffer?" sect. 3.

[13] Pinnock suggests that the "struggle for truth" within the Bible itself recommends openness to the Bible's "overall drift." We do well to "listen to the Bible as we would listen to a conversation" (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 21). See Ellen F. Davis, "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic," *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (2000): 733–51.

[14] Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

[15] This is the sense in the KJV, NIV, NASB, NLT, and NJPS. The context suggests a divine "carrying" of Israel (Isa. 63:9), yet a tragic rebelling, with the result that Israel "grieved his holy spirit" (v. 10). Of course, the prophet affirms the otherness of God in God's speech: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (55:8–9). These "ways," however, include the way of the servant, which represents the heart of divine condescension, including suffering, as that is interpreted by New Testament writers. See Bauckham, *God Crucified*, on the New Testament appropriation of the Servant Songs.

[16] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 148.

[17] Fretheim makes the threefold argument in chapters 7, 8, and 9.

[18] Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 58: "If change and suffering can be ascribed to God, the mystery of the incarnation is much more comprehensible. Divine perfection is perfection in change. This is a God who changes and suffers while remaining perfect."

[19] Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 188.

## About the author

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# 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 *non-catastrophic* (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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# Renewing the Passion
## Freeing the cross for redemption

Nekeisha Alexis-Baker

Although debates swirled around the film's accuracy and its portrayal of Jews, religious and secular critics agreed on one basic point: Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is remarkably violent. From beginning to end, *The Passion* is packed with images of torture and abuse, until soldiers nail Jesus' bloodied body to the cross and leave him to die.

In the eyes of many Christians, these images of Jesus' suffering reaffirmed their faith in and understanding of Jesus' saving work. For some people, Gibson vividly depicted all that Jesus had to endure to overcome evil and set believers free. For others, the film demonstrated God's love for the world and the lengths Jesus' followers must go to love God, neighbors, and enemies. For still others, it showed the punishment we all deserve as sinners—punishment that Jesus endured in our place. All these responses to Jesus' suffering were undoubtedly reinforced by the verse from Isaiah 53 that started the film: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed."

**One cannot grasp how black Christians understand the redemptive significance of Jesus' suffering without considering the community's past and present experiences in white American society.**

These interpretations of Jesus' crucifixion derive from atonement theories that explain how Jesus' shed blood saves the world. Yet, as black liberation theologians and womanists[1] remind us, our histories, social locations, and experiences shape how we understand Jesus' work on the cross; the influence of these realities is at least as great as that of our faith in the biblical story and the Christian traditions to which we adhere. Thus, one cannot grasp how black Christians understand the redemptive significance of Jesus' suffering without considering the community's past and present experiences in white American

society. Slavery, oppression, racism, class discrimination, and sexism have all shaped how black men and women interpret Jesus' crucifixion and incorporate it into their lives.

### The cross in black history

Before slavery was abolished in the U.S., white missionaries and slaveholders collaborated to evangelize slaves in ways that encouraged passivity. Using biblical proof-texts, specially designed catechetical programs, and carefully crafted sermons, white Christians spread a gospel that condoned slavery. They preached freedom from sin rather than from earthly bondage, downplayed Jesus' liberating ministry, proclaimed a salvation that only emphasized right belief, and professed what Kelly Douglas calls a "White Christ" in order to form a docile class of Christian slaves.

**White Christians preached freedom from sin rather than from earthly bondage, downplayed Jesus' liberating ministry, proclaimed a salvation that only emphasized right belief, and professed a "White Christ."**

One important tool in this oppressive venture was Jesus' cross.[2] In *Power in the Blood*, JoAnne Marie Terrell describes how white Christians developed a "hermeneutics of sacrifice" which valorized personal sacrifice as the ultimate sign of Christian faithfulness. Using this approach to Jesus' suffering, masters and missionaries alike encouraged black people to revere slave-owners as God's appointed agents and to see their own subjugation as service to God.[3] While some slaves resisted these messages, others saw their bondage as God's punishment against them for being "heathens" and as a necessary path to conversion.

In addition to the hermeneutics of sacrifice, the notion that Jesus died as an innocent substitute for sinful humanity was detrimental to the black community and especially to black women. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores Williams describes black women's history of coerced and voluntary surrogacy, and the ways in which this theology has reinforced their oppression. During the antebellum period, black women were forced into positions that whites and black men would otherwise fill. As mammies, black women nursed and nurtured white children in place of their mothers. As "lovers," black women were violated to fulfill white and black men's sexual appetites. As "breeders," black

women were forced to produce children to whom they had no claim. As house slaves, black women were occasionally forced to manage the plantation in their slave-owners' absences. Even after gaining their freedom, black women were still pressured into surrogate roles, working as domestic servants and in jobs usually assigned to men.[4]

Today social conditions continue to compel black women to accept surrogacy roles. African American, African, and Caribbean women continue to labor as domestic workers and are often subjected to modern-day indentured servitude by white employers. With black men in the U.S. incarcerated at a rate 9.6 times that of white men, black women increasingly serve as mothers *and* fathers to their children. The cross is still used as a weapon against black women, as pastors advise them to pray for their violent spouses and faithfully bear their crosses. Convinced by the church's teaching that suffering is a virtue, black women remain trapped in sexually, mentally, and physically abusive situations.[5] Given these and other injustices, Williams asks whether a surrogate God figure is liberating, or whether it simply reinforces black women's oppression.

**Redefining the cross of Christ**

In spite of its problems, Jesus' cross has undeniably shaped the black community. Because of its importance to the Christian faith and to those black people who have depended on it for survival, one cannot discard the cross. Therefore, black liberation theologians have sought to redefine the cross's redeeming power through the lens of black experience.

Responding to her own question, Delores Williams redefines the cross by focusing on its immorality. Jesus' crucifixion, she argues, is not redemptive. Rather, it represents sin, desecration, and gross injustice, and should be condemned as evil rather than celebrated as sacred. Unlike Mel Gibson, whose film focuses on Jesus' last hours, Williams proposes that Christians—particularly black women—emphasize the saving power of his lifelong healing, teaching, preaching, and liberating ministry, and his victory over sin and death in the resurrection.

Although she rejects the belief that Jesus' suffering and death are inherently redemptive, Williams does not entirely exclude the

cross from her theology. For her, the cross reminds us of what can happen to those who practice Jesus' ministerial vision in a sin-filled world. As a result, she finds redemption in Jesus' relentless struggle to reconcile humanity to themselves, to one another, and to God, rather than in the violence he endured.

Taking a different approach, Jacquelyn Grant revises the cross's meaning by identifying Jesus as the "divine co-sufferer" who experiences black people's pain and empowers them in the midst of oppression.[6] During slavery, black men and women conflated their persecution with Jesus' crucifixion and believed that he identified with their suffering. For the slaves, this meant that Jesus heard their cries. It also meant that when they denounced Jesus' murderers in worship, they were also denouncing their oppressors.[7] Because black people believed that Jesus' suffering was the suffering of God incarnate, and that Jesus' persecutors were not God's agents, it followed that the slaves' masters were not divinely appointed. This belief empowered them to resist white rule and its abuses in whatever ways were possible. For black men and women, seeing Jesus as divine co-sufferer has meant that Jesus is on their side, inspiring them to struggle for liberated, resurrected lives and continuously affirming their humanity.

Demetrius K. Williams finds even more redemptive meaning in Jesus' crucifixion. Looking at Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians, he shows how the cross sparked the formation of a distinct political and religious community with an allegiance to Christ. This fellowship breaks down race, gender, and class distinctions that separate people in the larger society, and it unifies all who proclaim Christ crucified.

During slavery, this community of equals created by Jesus' death and resurrection provided black people with arguments for freedom. Because Jesus died for *all* people, white people are called to treat black people justly and to respect their dignity. This reasoning also enabled black women to petition for equality in the church. Since Jesus died for men *and* women, women argued for the privilege to preach, teach, and minister alongside their male counterparts. Today, both the early church's example of resistance to empire and its allegiance to Jesus still support black people's struggle for wholeness and liberation, as does the cross's equalizing power. Therein lies the cross's saving power.

Although these reinterpretations offer new perspectives on the cross, they are most faithful and life giving when held together. While the image of Jesus as divine co-sufferer and advocate sustains many black people, theologians argue that likening one's suffering to a glorified cross may lead others to sanctify personal pain. Yet Delores Williams's insistence that the cross was evil reminds us that we should not seek to emulate Jesus' suffering but instead should imitate his liberating mission. While Delores Williams's focus on Jesus' ministry may tempt us to abandon the cross, Grant and Demetrius Williams's fresh approaches to the cross reveal its redemptive value.

**Crucifix-like lynched bodies hanging in trees and KKK burning crosses have made the cross a source of terror in black history. Nevertheless, the cross can be reinterpreted to offer this community faith, hope, and survival power.**

Finally, though Demetrius Williams's emphasis on the extraordinary political community formed by Jesus' cross provides a biblical argument for freedom and equality, Grant's vision of Jesus as the *divine* co-sufferer brings the cross's *spiritual* character to the fore. Furthermore, by detailing the reconciling aspects of Jesus' ministry, Delores Williams identifies the preaching, teaching, and healing work his followers must also perform. In other words, these and other reinterpretations of the cross can work together to provide black men and women with a liberating theology of Jesus' redemptive work.

## Conclusion

From the harrowing similarity between lynched bodies in trees and Jesus' broken body on the cross, to burning KKK crosses on black people's lawns, the cross has been a source of terror in black history. Nevertheless, the cross can be reinterpreted to offer this community faith, hope, and survival power. By reappropriating the cross with black people's histories in mind and a deep faith in Jesus and the biblical witness in their hearts, black liberation theologians and womanists free the cross for redemption. In so doing, they renew its liberating power for other abused persons living as the least of these in our society today.

## Notes

[1] Derived from the black expression *acting womanish,* the term *womanist* is commonly used for and by black women who resist gender, racial, sexual, and class oppression.
[2] James A. Noel, "Were You There?" in *The Passion of the Lord: African American Reflections,* ed. James A. Noel and Matthew V. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 43–44. See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 14–17.
[3] JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in African American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 1998), 47.
[4] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 60–74.
[5] Frances E. Wood, "Take My Yoke upon You," in *A Troubling in My Mind,* ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 37, 40.
[6] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 212.
[7] Demetrius K. Williams, "Identifying with the Cross of Christ," in *The Passion of the Lord,* ed. Noel and Johnson, 82.

## About the author

An immigrant from Trinidad & Tobago, Nekeisha Alexis-Baker spent most of her life in New York City before moving to Elkhart, Indiana, where she is working on her masters degree in theology and ethics at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Her passions include peace and justice, animal ethics, anarchism, and Andy (her partner in marriage).

# Of suffering, forgiveness, and closure
## Reflections on Russian Mennonite experience

Harry Loewen

Writing about suffering is especially difficult when our past experiences of suffering remain unresolved. The problem is compounded when we consider suffering from a Christian perspective. Traditionally, Christians are expected not to bear resentment and to forgive those who have caused us injury or pain. Yet for victims to forgive is difficult when they feel that justice has not been done, when the perpetrators have not admitted their guilt or asked for forgiveness.

The case of Mennonites in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 1940s is especially complex. Their suffering was excruciating, the perpetrators never admitted their guilt, and the victims lived with the memory of affliction for many years, often without really coming to terms with it. There are Mennonites who say, "We don't hate the Russian people, but we hate the Soviets who took away our homes and sent our loved ones to suffer and die in Siberia." That statement in itself reveals that the past still has a certain hold on these victims.

In the following pages I will briefly tell the story of my own experience as a young child in the Ukraine and then reflect on that experience, suggesting what pastors and counsellors might do to help former Russian Mennonite refugees bring about redemptive closure.

### "Now they have come to get you"

I was among those Russian Mennonites who lost their fathers during the Stalinist terror in the mid-1930s. My story is not unusual; thousands of people, Mennonites and others, suffered at the hands of the Soviet NKVD, the state secret police at the time.

One night in September of 1937, we heard a loud knock on our window and then the voice of a man demanding that the door be opened. I heard my mother whisper to my father: "Now they

have come to get you." Father got up, lit a kerosene lamp, and went to open the door. A couple of NKVD policemen entered the house. They began to open drawers and closets, removed documents and letters, and told Father to get ready to go with them. When they completed their search and took what they wanted, they grasped Father by his arms and led him toward the door. From my bed I saw Mother crying uncontrollably and pleading with the men not to take her husband and the father of her three young children. The men told her to calm down, assuring her that her husband would return soon. Through tears, sobs, and anger, Mother almost screamed at them: "I know how he will return. He'll never come back!"

Almost all the men in our village were arrested and disappeared that year. The trumped-up charges against them included engaging in espionage; communicating with a foreign country; destroying crops and livestock; and speaking critically of Stalin, particular communist party members, or the Soviet Union in general. In nearby prisons, the men (and also some women) were tortured to induce them to sign the charges against them. My grandfather, who had been arrested a few months before my father, had to stand for hours under a bright light with water dripping on his balding head. My father's toes were mutilated and crushed before he signed the accusations against him. Others' fingers were smashed between doors and door frames, and some had hungry dogs let loose on them in the prison courtyard.

**Almost all the men in our village were arrested and disappeared that year. Most lived and worked in harsh conditions until they died of hunger, cold, disease, and physical and mental abuse.**

Most of those arrested were eventually transported to the northern and eastern regions of the vast Soviet Union, where they lived and worked in harsh conditions until most of them died of hunger, cold, disease, and physical and mental abuse. Of those arrested in the mid-1930s, few survived or came back. I never saw my father again. My twenty-seven-year-old mother was left to feed and take care of her children on a meagre income from the collective farm (*kolkhoz*). My sickly grandmother helped Mother as much as she could with household chores and childcare.

When the German army invaded and briefly occupied Ukraine in 1941, the German-speaking Mennonites hoped for a respite and a better life. But two years later, in 1943, in order to avoid falling into the hands of the Red Army, some 35,000 Mennonites—including our family—fled west as far as Poland and Germany. Twenty-three thousand Mennonite refugees were captured and repatriated to the Soviet Union. The members of my family were among the fortunate 12,000 to escape the clutches of the Soviets; we eventually emigrated to Canada. Here we enjoyed a better life in a land of freedom, but the difficult past was still very much with us. Because my mother did not know what had happened to my father and what his end was, she was unable to fully grieve her loss.

**We eventually emigrated to Canada, but the difficult past was still very much with us. Because my mother did not know what had happened to my father, she was unable to fully grieve her loss.**

### "Stalin, you have killed my papa!"

It was not until 2000 that we learned that my father and grandfather had not been sent to the gulag with so many others. My sister Helen and husband, Art Dick, travelled in that year to Ukraine, where they had access to recently opened archival files of the former Soviet Union. They discovered that our father and grandfather had been shot just a few months after their arrests in 1937.

According to Father's file, which my sister was allowed to open, he—a veterinarian in our village—was charged with poisoning more than a hundred cattle and with other treasonous acts. Helen and Art were told that Grandfather, an orchardist, had been found guilty of destroying the state's fruit trees and of other crimes. After "confessing" to these crimes, Father and Grandfather were summarily executed. When Helen and Art held Father's file in their hands, they wept for a long time. The Russian translator and other staff members at the archives felt sorry for them. When my sister e-mailed me from Ukraine to tell me what they had found, I too broke down and cried—for the first time—over the death of my father and grandfather, nearly sixty years after they were arrested.

Not long after that, I had a strange dream. I dreamed that Stalin cried! In my dream I saw him standing in an open field,

sobbing. A step or two from Stalin stood my mother, covering her face with her hands and weeping quietly. I walked up to Stalin, bent down to him (physically he was a small man), embraced him, and whispered in his ear: "Stalin, you have killed my papa!" Stalin did not say a word but continued to shed tears while I held him in my arms. I did not tell him that I forgave him for what he had done to our family, nor did my mother say anything; she just stood there, looking at the ground.

I recounted my dream to several close friends, and one of them wrote, "Harry, the dream tells more about you than Stalin. It indicates that you are a forgiving person, but that ogre Stalin would never feel sorry for what he did." Soon afterward, my wife and I travelled to Nelson, a beautiful historic town in southeastern British Columbia. In the market square I met an aging hippy, sitting behind a table, selling old books. Among the rows of books I spotted Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which prompted me to tell the man my recent dream and some of my experiences in the Soviet Union. When I completed my story, he said in all seriousness: "According to your dream, you have not quite come to terms with your tragic past, even after these many years. But you are on your way to recovery and healing, and in time you will be free of the psychological damage that you experienced as a child."

**It was not until 2000 that we learned that my father and grandfather had been shot just a few months after their arrests in 1937. When I learned of it, I cried—for the first time—over their deaths.**

C. Henry Smith has written, in his *Story of the Mennonites*, that "never since the days of the [Anabaptist] martyrs have the Mennonites suffered as much as during the twentieth century in Russia."[1] Not all Russian Mennonites who suffered or were killed can be called martyrs in the sense that they suffered on account of their Christian faith, but the majority of them were targeted by the Soviets because they clung to their religious faith and values in opposition to the atheistic ideology of the state. Soviet attempts to reeducate Mennonites to think and act in line with communistic values met with little success. One might have thought that when the Soviet regime collapsed, the new rulers would apologize to the millions of their citizens who had suffered under Stalin, but to date no such apology has been forthcoming.

**"You have brought us out to a spacious place"**

How do I and many other victims of Stalin's crimes come to terms with the cruel wrong done to the Russian-Mennonite people?

There are those who say that Christians ought to forgive those who cause our suffering, regardless of whether these oppressors have asked for forgiveness; we should turn away from our painful past and from our memories of suffering, and go on with life. This advice is more easily given than followed, of course—and it may not be all that biblical, either. Biblical reconciliation requires an admission of guilt on the part of the perpetrator, a promise not to repeat the offence, and a request for forgiveness (Luke 17:3–4). Obviously, these conditions have not been met by the Soviets or by those who have replaced them. How then do I forgive those who have not asked to be forgiven? Apparently only God can forgive the unrepentant sinner (Luke 23:34).[2]

Personally I have found at least a partial answer to the question of how to respond to what happened to my family and more generally to the Mennonite people in the Soviet Union. In the book of Daniel, chapter 9, the prophet reflects on the Babylonian captivity of his people. They have undergone intense suffering, including loss of their homeland, desecration of their holy places, humiliation, and death.

**Daniel's prayer reviews Israel's history and confesses sins that led to suffering. In the end, Daniel gains insight into and understanding of the *historical* relationship between his people and their enemies.**

Instead of accusing the Babylonians of causing Israel's suffering, Daniel's prayer reviews Israel's history and confesses his and his people's sins that led to their suffering. In the end, Daniel gains "insight and understanding" (9:22), insight into and understanding of the *historical* relationship between his people and their enemies. God then answers Daniel's prayer and confession by showing him a vision of what is to come and how in the end it is God who will intervene in behalf of Daniel's people, bringing victory (Daniel 10–12). So Daniel begins to view his people's history and suffering from the end that God reveals.

In viewing our people's sojourn in Russia, including their great suffering during the Soviet period, we need no longer be angry at the communists for the evil they did. From my study of Russian

Mennonite history, I know that many of our people were far from blameless in their relationships with their Slavic neighbours. They sometimes took advantage of these neighbours and often treated them with contempt. During the lawless period and civil war after the Revolution of 1917, these attitudes and actions came back to haunt the Mennonites. Also, Mennonites' religious faith and values, especially their peace witness, had declined and in some instances disappeared altogether. In the midst of Mennonite suffering in the 1920s, B. B. Janz, one of the Russian Mennonite leaders, asked, "What were the reasons for this [tragedy]?" His answer was, "We have sinned!" He meant that God was punishing them for their sins.[3]

**I want to believe that by allowing the Soviets to inflict suffering on my family, God had redemptive purposes for us: to draw us closer to God, to help us recapture our faith heritage, and to make us more conscious of the needs of others.**

I don't think we can know whether the suffering of Mennonites was God's punishment for their sins, but I want to believe that by allowing the Soviets to inflict suffering on my family, God had redemptive purposes for us: to draw us closer to God, to help us recapture our Anabaptist faith heritage (in Russia I didn't even know that I was of Mennonite background), and to make us more conscious of the material and spiritual needs of people around us. Some of the refugees from Russia have even thanked God for the suffering they went through, for they have become better people as a result of what they have endured. Since the Soviet Union came to an end, many Mennonites have gone back to the former land of terror to help the Russian people materially and spiritually.

Had it not been for the difficult 1930s and our flight from the Soviet Union to a devastated Poland and Germany in the 1940s, I would never have come to Canada, where my life developed altogether differently from what it would have been in the Soviet Union. As my grandmother later said of me and my brother and sister, "Had we remained there, they perhaps would have had to end their lives as communists." No doubt.

Other Mennonites were not as fortunate. Many refugees were repatriated to the Soviet Union, where they continued to suffer for many more decades. Why I was led to freedom and safety

while others were not, I don't know. All I know is that in the case of me and my family, suffering was turned to a life of abundance; as the psalmist says, "We went through fire and through water, yet you have brought us out to a spacious place" (Ps. 66:12). My painful past, thank God, does not hold me in its grip and cripple me. I harbour no resentment against the perpetrators of my family's suffering. I have let go, which is no doubt a form of forgiveness.

## Notes

[1] C. Henry Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*, 5th ed., revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn (Newton: Faith & Life Press, 1981), 340.

[2] There is also the question of whether the children of parents who suffered in the 1930s have an obligation or moral right to forgive those who caused their parents' suffering. For my reflections on this subject, see Harry Loewen, "A Mennonite-Christian View of Suffering: The Case of Russian Mennonites in the 1930s and 1940s," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (January 2003): 47–68; and Harry Loewen, "'Can the Son Answer for the Father?' Reflections on the Stalinist Terror (on the 60th Anniversary of My Father's Arrest, 1937–1997)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 76–90.

[3] John B. Toews, "'No songs were sung at the gravesite': The Blumenort (Russia) Massacre, November 10–12, 1919," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 62. Other reflections on the Russian Mennonite experience during these years can be found in these sources, among others: Waldemar Janzen, "Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering during the Stalin Era and World War II," *Conrad Grebel Review* 18 (Spring 2000): 6–18; Harry Loewen, ed., *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000); and Walter Sawatsky, "Historical Roots of a Post-Gulag Theology for Russian Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 (April 2002): 149–80.

## About the author

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# Rightly remembering a martyr heritage

James C. Juhnke

For North American Mennonites today, memories of the Anabaptist martyr tradition are a significant source of group identity. The martyrs tell us we own a faith worth dying for. They prepare us for the possibility of persecution and marginalization in our own time—especially when our pacifist convictions become unpopular in wartime. But martyr memories are not without problems. Is it appropriate for affluent Christians who live in tolerant democratic societies to focus on the theme of Anabaptist martyrdom? How relevant to modern life are the more recent stories, remembered vividly in families of Canadian Mennonites, of suffering under communism and worldwide warfare?

**If Mennonite remembering is to be both fully honest and convincingly hopeful, we will not forget the martyrs. But neither will we allow them an exclusive role in our historical imagination.**

The original *Martyrs Mirror* of 1660 by Thieleman van Braght breathed an extremely hostile anti-Catholic spirit that reflected Dutch Protestant resistance to Spanish Catholic colonial rule.[1] Three and a half centuries later, these stories can affect our relationships with Catholics. In the spring of 2007, Lois Harder, co-pastor of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kansas, taught a catechism class that included a young woman raised as a Catholic. Harder confessed that she found it difficult to tell the Anabaptist martyr stories in ways that would not embarrass or offend the Catholic class member.

Melvin Goering, a former Mennonite mental hospital administrator, has argued that the martyr stories are dysfunctional for modern Mennonites.[2] Martyr stories, Goering wrote, foster arrogance, superiority, and moral smugness. These stories, according to Goering, cannot "provide guidance for a people immersed in culture," "for a people in need of a positive vision of authority and institutional ethics."

**Right remembering: Confront the evil in the other and forgive**

How can we rightly remember the martyrs? One option is silence—a time-honored Mennonite strategy for dealing with conflict. By setting aside the martyr stories, we can avoid complicating relationships with spiritual descendants of our sixteenth-century persecutors. But the price of silence can be great. We need to confront the evil in our past—the evil of our persecutors and our own evil. Forgiveness, wrote Desmond Tutu, "involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them."[3]

The popular Mennonite history book by Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Through Fire and Water,* paints an initially favorable portrait of Martin Luther. But this good person eventually did bad things to Anabaptists.[4] Loewen and Nolt say that Luther believed there was a connection between the Peasants Revolt and Anabaptism and became convinced "that even the peaceful Anabaptists were devils in disguise." Luther indiscriminately condemned the Anabaptists, in part because he feared that people would blame *him* for the Peasants Revolt. We need to understand the complexity of Luther's situation, including his motives, both benevolent and selfish.

**The forgiveness of honest confrontation and embrace is more profound than the forgiveness of silence and forgetting.**

Right remembering of a martyr heritage is no easy task. If the stories are to be honest about what happened in the past, and if they are to result in forgiveness and reconciliation, we must tell accurately the extent of the persecution and suffering. And we must do all we can to understand and embrace the situation and character of those who perpetrated the persecution. The forgiveness of honest confrontation and embrace is more profound than the forgiveness of silence and forgetting.

**Right remembering: Confront the evil in ourselves and repent**

A great hazard of martyr memories is self-righteousness. We who would rightly remember our martyr ancestors must learn how to see them not only as victims but also as flawed people who were part of a flawed movement. Remembering our flaws has not been easy for Mennonites, in part because for the better part of the

twentieth century our historical agenda was to revise the centuries-long establishment-orthodox view of Anabaptists as antinomian radicals whose true character was revealed in the violent apocalyptic kingdom at Muenster of 1534–35. The Goshen (Indiana) school of Anabaptist historiography, led by Harold Bender, John Horsch, and scholarly publications in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review,* undertook a rehabilitation of the reputation of Anabaptism. Bender used a theological typology to classify Reformation groups and to argue that mainstream Anabaptism, or "Anabaptism proper," was a peaceable movement different and separate from the violent Muensterites; thus the Mennonites were not culpable for the Muenster debacle.

The Goshen school's revisionist views were influential, but the impulse to see the Kingdom of Muenster as definitive of the Anabaptist movement remains very much alive. Anthony Arthur's book, *The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster,* was prompted by the author's quest for a historical parallel to David Koresh and the Branch Davidians who were destroyed at Waco, Texas, in April 1993.[5] Arthur seemed to be aware that most Anabaptists were peaceable people with a peaceable theology. Like most religious folk of their time, Anabaptists expected the imminent return of Christ. A great majority of Anabaptists did not set an exact time and place for Christ's return, nor did most of those who did so expect to engage personally in a violent end-time fulfillment. Nevertheless, Arthur's book—and his repeated naming of the "Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster"—conveys the impression that the Muenster episode was *the* definitive Anabaptist event. This characterization may be analogous to holding the terror at Waco in 1993 as definitive of Seventh Day Adventism because David Koresh's group was an offshoot of the Adventists. It falls short of right remembering.

**We who would rightly remember our martyr ancestors must learn how to see them not only as victims but also as flawed people who were part of a flawed movement.**

Historians of Anabaptism in recent years have revised the Bender school's normative Anabaptist vision. The new revisionists have shifted somewhat from theological history to social history, and have narrowed the conceptual difference between the

Muensterite radicals and the wider Anabaptist movement. They have insisted on an acknowledgment of the facts of historical genesis: Muenster did arise in part out of Anabaptism. Mennonites should acknowledge the connections between the Anabaptist movement and its violent fringe. Not least of the reasons for doing so is to confess that our attitudes toward our enemies, or those who are most unlike us, are in continual need of repair. Even as we Mennonites rightly distinguish ourselves from the violent Kingdom of Muenster, we do well to see something of ourselves in the radical fringe as we confess our own potential for anger, hatred, and revenge.

### Right remembering and right living

From an Anabaptist perspective, right remembering is a part of Christian discipleship and mission. Our ways of remembering should be conducive to our walk as disciples of Christ. Our remembering should influence our behavior. Even if we find ways to honor our ancestors while acknowledging their failings, and if we find ways to more fully engage and understand those who persecuted our ancestors, we will gain little if we do not repent of our own sins in our own time, and learn to love and forgive our neighbors. Nor should we forget that our worldwide community of faith includes believers who still suffer persecution.

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Part of right remembering and right living has to do with our relationships to dispossessed and disadvantaged people in our own society and overseas. The stories of the martyrs find immediate resonance among Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who have vivid memories and current fears about the oppression of "cultural revolutions" or incidents of terror directed against believers. Historian Robert Kreider has suggested that extensive Mennonite Central Committee and mission involvements overseas have helped Mennonites identify with the plight of the hurting. Those people are remarkably eager to have the Anabaptist martyr stories translated into their own languages.

Right remembering should also help us envision a future of greater wholeness and fulfillment. Martha Minow, in her book on memories of recent mass violence, warns against the wrong remembering that happens "when the truth attends to a past without affording a bridge to the future."[6] If Mennonite remembering is to be both fully honest and convincingly hopeful, we will not forget the martyrs. But neither will we allow them an exclusive role in our historical imagination. For our relationships with others, and for energy in kingdom work in societies democratic or dictatorial, we must nurture a balanced and positive understanding of our past as a people of God.

**For our relationships with others, and for energy in kingdom work in societies democratic or dictatorial, we must nurture a balanced and positive understanding of our past.**

## Notes

[1] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians,* 5th English ed., ed. and trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).
[2] Melvin Goering, "Dying to Be Pure: The Martyr Story," *Mennonite Life* 47 (December 1992): 9–15. Goering, "A One-Sided Diet: Martyrdom and Warriors," www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2006Dec/goering.php.
[3] Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 271.
[4] Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 63.
[5] Anthony Arthur, *The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 198–99.
[6] Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 62.

## About the author

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# Communities of grace, joy, and peace?
## When the church causes suffering

Dorothy Nickel Friesen

The telephone rang at our home. A fellow staff member asked, "Did you get your paycheck today?" Of course I had. "Well, I didn't," she replied. "Is there a mix-up of some kind?" As head of a multi-staff congregation, I called other members of the team and discovered that some had been paid their monthly salary, but others had not. Then I phoned the church treasurer and reported this odd occurrence. Were some of the paychecks misplaced? Put in another location for safekeeping? "No," came the treasurer's answer. "The bank account was too low to cover all the staff salaries this month, so I decided who should be paid and who would not be paid this month. I will issue the other checks when the cash flow is better." I was furious, dumbfounded, distressed, and insulted. He had rated us more and less worthy, with characterizations such as "female supported by a husband" and "single with another job." And he seemed oblivious to the friction and hurt his approach had caused. "What are you complaining about?" he asked me. "You got paid!" I phoned the chair of the staff relations committee and urged that amends be made without delay.

Things were not going well in a churchwide institution. Contributions were shrinking as potential donors working in an agriculture-based economy were struggling to make ends meet. Having completed the required years of service, the organization's pastor still received a sabbatical, because an ecumenical agency had awarded him a hefty grant. The sabbatical proved to be a rich time of rest, retreat, and renewed vigor for the pastor. Meanwhile, the leadership of the institution determined that finances were so compromised that major change was in order. So the pastor returned from sabbatical to discover that his full-time position had been reduced to half-time; he had received no warning and had not been consulted. The pastor was told that even the half-

time position was tenuous. With his livelihood on the line, he resigned, deeply hurt.

It was review time for a pastor who had served conscientiously and capably for six years. The congregation conducted a pastoral review, complete with questionnaires and interviews, which revealed, in general, a fine ministry. About 50 percent of the congregation's adult regular attenders participated in the written review. But some people returned unsigned questionnaires that included vicious personal attacks, replete with criticism of all the congregation's leaders and accusations of abuse of power. The deacons were stunned but could not track the anonymous accusations and decided to ignore the unsigned questionnaires. They reported the findings of the other questionnaires at the congregational meeting. When the congregation voted on reappointment, the affirmative vote was an abysmal 69 percent, a far smaller margin than the pastor had ever received before. He resigned. His wife wrote a hostile letter and placed it in all the church mailboxes the next Sunday. She never set foot in the building again.

The pastor of a new urban congregation happened to walk by the front door of the church as a young couple entered. She greeted them warmly, offered a Sunday morning bulletin, and directed them to the sanctuary. The service began, according to the printed order of service. When the pastor stood to preach, the couple glanced at each other and put their heads down. After the service, they confronted the pastor at the door: "We are opposed to women in ministry. Had we known that you were the preacher and not just the greeter, we would never have set foot in your church."

These stories recount events from my life in pastoral ministry in the Mennonite church. They are examples of the types of suffering that happen in our system and in other denominations. In what follows I identify four kinds of suffering caused by the church.

## The suffering of opposition

Most pastors and church leaders must deal with opposition at some point in their ministry. Sometimes that opposition comes from theological differences, sometimes from outright mistakes, and other times from divergent understandings of the role and

authority of the pastor. The opposition may take the form of gentle criticism and critique that makes understanding and change possible. Other times, the opposition may take the form of gossip, underhanded maneuvering by church leaders, and even anonymous accusations that provide ample fuel for destructive conflict.

**Healthy dialogue, even conflict, can yield tremendous growth, insight, and strength. However, an opposition that abuses power by intending to wound is always wrong.**

All leaders should be prepared for opposition. In fact, healthy dialogue, even conflict, can yield tremendous growth, insight, and strength. However, an opposition that abuses power by intending to wound is always wrong. Learning to read the opposition, learning to understand the culture of critique, is a pastoral skill.

### The suffering of correction

I once made the mistake of sharing from the pulpit news of a parishioner's health crisis that was widely known in the community but which I had not heard directly from the person who was ill. An angry e-mail sent me to the person's home without delay, with a heartfelt apology and evident embarrassment. I had overstepped my bounds and I needed to suffer remorse—but I was also forgiven for my error in judgment. My impulse was to provide support, but the person I hoped to help experienced my action as a violation. My time-out experience made me sad but also bolstered my resolve to watch the boundaries of my power more carefully.

By extension, conference ministers must sometimes "correct" the pastors for whom they provide oversight. When pastors make mistakes, whether these are errors in judgment (for example, insisting on one's own agenda even when other congregational leaders are reluctant to proceed) or errors in the use of pastoral privilege (for example, inappropriate jokes or secret meetings with "needy" parishioners), they must be corrected. Confronting people in power is not easy, and it entails risk. However, good training and careful spiritual preparation are pathways to constructive correction and redirection.

### The suffering of omission

Being ignored, not taken seriously, or overlooked can happen in overt or subtle ways. Statistics revealing the lack of women in leadership in many Mennonite institutions are astounding. The lack of employees representing other racial/ethnic groups in most Mennonite institutions, conferences, agencies, and congregations is sinful. We have omitted from our circles of power those who in various ways are seen to be "not like us."

The voice of the young is often missing in conversations about leadership of the church. Appointing high school youth to a search committee is one of the best mentoring experiences we can offer thoughtful teenagers. Benign neglect is often expressed as "We've never done it that way before"; when we hear those words, we are probably practicing the sin of omission. Courage to include is the prophetic call of the church.

**Benign neglect is often expressed as "We've never done it that way before"; when we hear those words, we are probably practicing the sin of omission. Courage to include is the prophetic call of the church.**

### The suffering of oppression

While we can certainly correct some oversights with simple affirmative actions of advocating for inclusion of qualified and gifted leaders of color in all levels of our church structures, we must not let the omissions create a pattern of normalcy—allowing us to maintain a system that is unjust. By their very absence in our churchly experience, "others" become objects and strangers rather than friends and companions on this faith journey. Oppression yields greater suffering. Systemic oppression continues unnoticed and unopposed, stealing life from every institution and structure that allows it a safe haven. Oppression uses power in an evil way.

The church, as an institution, causes suffering through oppression in a variety of ways: by rigid constitutions instituted long ago; through customs and traditions that have little to do with theological or biblical integrity and instead reflect cultural expectations; in structures that insist on privileging one person or group over another; through unchecked personal power; and from lack of understanding of institutional and systemic power.

In *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, James Newton Poling writes about human resistance to oppressive power:

*Power in its ideal form is the energy of life itself as it is organized into the relational web that includes us all. This primal relational power is distorted through human sin by individuals and societies into abuse of power and is the cause of much human suffering. Through resistance to the abuse of power and the work of God's love in Jesus Christ, the human spirit is made resilient. We search for the resilient hope of the human spirit, which can resist abuse and create new communities for the restoration of communion and freedom of self, others and God.*[1]

## Signs of hope

How can we heal and prevent the suffering the church causes?

In our worship, we can regularly include prayers for healing, anointing, and other visible practices that help us foster patterns of kindness, compassion, and reconciliation. We can develop and lead rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation. We can sing songs and hymns of hope, healing, forgiveness, love, mercy. We can create and present poetry and stories that give voice to suffering but also to the power of imagination and hope. We can preach about the suffering of God and the theology of suffering.[2]

In our training for pastors and other church leaders, we can teach about suffering—its roots and its expressions. We can educate leaders about structures and systems that may cause suffering and about ways the faithful community can address suffering. We can produce literature, offer seminars, and invite all church leaders to grow in their capacity to identify power and use it redemptively.

In our structures, policies, and procedures, we can provide for education about and prevention of employee and pastoral abuse. We can develop healthy pastoral review processes and create congregational systems of oversight that lead to pastoral growth and congregational vitality. We can connect congregational to regional denominational structures to assist in thoughtful pastoral search processes, written covenants of understanding, and clear and appropriate job expectations and financial and benefit packages. We can insist on Sabbath practices to regularize rest, retreat, and renewal as part of pastoral ministry.

In our pastoral care, we can organize support groups for those who are disenfranchised, hurting, and needing safe places to deal with their suffering.

In these and other areas of church life, we can acknowledge the suffering caused by past practice and model approaches that can help us avoid inflicting pain on each other. We will never outgrow our need for the repentance and forgiveness that can restore fellowship among believers when we have hurt one another. But in the power of the Spirit, we can continue to "grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world."[3]

## Notes

[1] James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 33.

[2] In addition to Poling, *The Abuse of Power,* see Barbara Brown Taylor's *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), for example.

[3] From "Vision: Healing and Hope," the vision statement for Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada; see http://www.gameo.org/index.asp?content=http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/V586.html.

## About the author

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# Walking with men to heal their buried pain

Brice Balmer

A recent Statistics Canada survey (National Population Health Survey 2007) reported that, compared to women, men generally have fewer internal emotional resources to handle pain and suffering. The men surveyed were less able to discuss or acknowledge their feelings, and they were twice as likely as women to suffer a depression after a divorce. Initially they may seem to cope with divorce better than women, because they draw on their intellect and try to think their way through the difficulty. They are less likely to go through mood swings and may regard their daughters, sisters, and wives as exaggerating and carrying on when these women struggle emotionally. While the men may express anger and rage, they may not have practiced or worked with other emotions necessary in the grief process, such as sadness, loneliness, hurt, abandonment, and betrayal.

**Men often put their pain in a sealed box inside themselves. They rarely choose to experience it directly. But ignoring pain and suffering does not make these realities disappear.**

When confronted with grief, divorce, physical illness, or mental health issues, men often put their pain in a sealed box inside themselves. They rarely choose to experience it directly. But ignoring pain and suffering does not make these realities disappear; uncontrollable emotions and pain may well emerge after a few weeks or months. The suppressed pain may manifest itself physically in illness, extreme tiredness, or depression, even to the point that a man may become immobilized. Though these men have tried hard to avoid any signs of weakness, they may become vulnerable.

## Grief delayed, grief avoided

Of course, some men have learned how to cope emotionally with pain and suffering, but pastors must be prepared to work with men

who find vulnerability and emotional work difficult. At one extreme, one may observe an emotionally stifled man, and at the other, a man who cannot stop crying and is on an emotional rollercoaster. Yet both extremes may be manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon: a lack of emotional training and work. The man on an emotional rollercoaster may be grieving many past experiences, not just the presenting loss.

In my work as a pastor in a congregation and as a leader of spiritual and masculinity groups in an alcohol recovery home, I have been amazed to observe many men still in the initial stages of grief several years after a divorce or the death of a spouse. Some have avoided the pain and suffering by becoming absorbed in work; others have drowned their sorrows in alcohol and drugs.

One widower entered the recovery home four years after his beloved wife died. He was still numb and in shock. He had been drinking to avoid the pain. His recovery meant moving through the grief process for his wife and for the alcohol.

A widower in the congregation resisted burying his wife's ashes. His family and his wife's siblings asked him over and over if they could bury her remains so they could move on with their grief. He gave all sorts of reasons for putting off the burial. Six months after her death, we were finally able to bury her ashes.

A son died many years ago; his father still cannot talk about him. He buried his feelings and hoped that he could tough it out. He did not want to be emotional. He had to be strong for his family and keep the business and home running. It is difficult to assess whether his developing physical problems are the result of stifling his emotions. Of course, the loss of their son was also his wife's loss. She responded by talking about the loss, praying, asking for support, receiving counselling and pastoral care, remembering her son, sharing stories of their experiences, and crying often. Her loss will always be with her. She can't do her husband's emotional work for this deep pain in their lives. She wishes he could face his grief and become less rigid and resentful.

**Of course, some men have learned how to cope emotionally with pain and suffering, but pastors must be prepared to work with men who find vulnerability and emotional work difficult.**

## Unacknowledged feelings

At the risk of oversimplifying and stereotyping, we can trace some general tendencies. While girls explore emotions by playing with dolls, experiencing the intricacies of friendship, and learning emotional skills from their mothers and other women, boys compete in sports, explore their environment, build things, and mend relationships quickly so games and adventures can continue. Boys don't have time for or interest in exploring all the emotions that arise as friendships break down and conflicts erupt. Boys are supposed to be brave, learn to win, and move ahead with tasks and games. They prefer to solve problems with quick fixes rather than by taking time to delve deeply into feelings. Guy friends are good buddies. A boy wants to know how he can keep his buddy; he is not interested in processing emotions and tensions.

**Women sometimes need help to think through their experiences, to move from heart to intellect. Men may automatically go into thinking and need help to feel their way into their experiences.**

If they have had this kind of formation, men who experience suffering and pain as adults will be inclined to tough things out and stick to the game plan. They do not want to be the cog that breaks down and requires others to shoulder more work. Their assets are loyalty, courage, stamina, strength of character and body, and longsuffering. Women may also have these assets but are less likely to stifle their emotions in order to move forward.

With minor problems, this male strategy often works. Unfortunately, a tipping point may come, when men need to work through suffering and painful feelings in order to move on in life. At the Alcohol Recovery Home, we had a chart that displayed forty or so faces expressing a wide variety of human emotions. We used this chart often to help men identify the feelings they were experiencing but had difficulty naming. I have also used the chart with men in the congregation and in counselling.

Several times over the past six years, I worked at both recovery homes, men's and women's. At the women's recovery home, significant emotion and intuition were in evidence. My role was to help the women think through their experiences, to assist them in moving from heart to intellect. At the men's recovery home,

many men automatically focused on their thoughts rather than their feelings. I warned one seminary intern, "I'm not being mean, but I must help the men feel their way through these experiences. They can't just go into their heads." The differences in gender were obvious, and the strategies for healing were different.

### Pastoral care for men in pain

Adult men will inevitably experience pain and suffering: family and marriage problems, issues in the working environment, death of friends and family members, physical illness, disability, or mental health issues. It is vital that pastors and others in the church walk with men during these difficult times.

**Pastors need to accept a man who is suffering just as he is and as he has been trained. We may feel some frustration and anger, but we need to build deep trust and create a safe place where he can be vulnerable without losing his dignity or our love and companionship.**

The first and most important step in walking with them is to recognize that men in our culture generally have an emotional and developmental process quite different from that of many women. Our culture has trained us to be self denying, concerned about others, and attentive to keeping our family and environment stable. As pastors and other caregivers, we need to accept a man who is suffering just as he is and as he has been trained. We may feel some frustration and anger, but we need to build deep trust and create a safe place where he can be vulnerable without losing his dignity or our love and companionship.

As deep trust develops, pastors and elders need to watch for clues that the man wishes to share his experiences. We need to be ready to listen and invite him to disclose not only his understanding but also his feelings. We will allow him to work at his own pace, though sometimes we may nudge him.

Men benefit from talking with other men who have experienced a similar trauma. The church and elders may decide to create a men's self-help group with or without a male facilitator. The congregation may wish to form a support group to surround a man as he walks through pain and into healing. He should have significant input into the composition of the group, but he should not invite participants.

I recommend all-male support and self-help groups for several reasons. First, many men look to women to do their emotional work for them. They see women as the emotional experts and in the presence of women may continue to avoid facing the pain directly. Second, men can confront each other, share experiences, and demonstrate male emotions and appropriate processes for dealing with pain and suffering. Third, there is a positive male bond—between buddies—which can allow men to pursue healing. They may find healing through sports activities, meals together, camping, or meeting for coffee. They may not directly discuss their pain and suffering, but the men can feel supported and cared for among friends. Finally, many activities where men gather and support one another have disappeared from North American society. These groups were often patriarchal—old boys clubs of one sort or another. Now men need new male groupings to support, confide in, and care for one another.

Men's suffering and pain may be buried deep inside. Can pastors, elders, and the church walk alongside, so that men not only relieve their emotional anguish but also develop a fuller emotional life? Can these men then help others who experience trauma and need to find new emotional resources in order to heal?

## About the author

Brice Balmer is chaplaincy director at House of Friendship, Kitchener, Ontario, where he has led spiritual discovery and masculinity groups with men recovering from addiction. He was copastor of First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, for seventeen years and led some men's groups at the church. In his doctor of ministry studies, he explored masculinity and spirituality for men in the midst of recovery from addiction and abuse.

# The Beatitude pastor

Duane Beck

The old Paul Simon song of the 1960s, "Bridge over Troubled Water," still stirs my pastoral soul.

*When you're down and out,*
*When you're on the street,*
*When evening falls so hard*
*I will comfort you.*
*I'll take your part.*
*When darkness comes*
*And pain is all around,*
*Like a bridge over troubled water*
*I will lay me down.*

Chronic suffering is a continuous stream of troubled water. Many congregations include people who have experienced the undertow of unending suffering from chronic diseases, disabilities, disorders, abuse, and addictions. One of the joys of being a pastor is walking with people of every life stage as they maneuver through the expected changes and the vicissitudes of life. We are witnesses to the generous grace of Jesus. But in helpless situations, how do pastors help? And where is wisdom for the unanswerable questions? Pastors who bridge the troubled waters of long-term, no-answer chronic suffering sometimes wonder if they will hold up under the weight. County road crews sometimes erect signs: Warning: Load limit 3 tons. Perhaps pastors should erect such signs at church entrances! From where comes our help—help to strengthen our pastoral infrastructure to handle heavy loads?

**In helpless situations, how do pastors help? And where is wisdom for the unanswerable questions? Pastors who bridge the troubled waters of chronic suffering sometimes wonder if they will hold up.**

Temptations abound for those who pastor the long-suffering: to become the fixer, or the one needing to be needed, or the hero swooping in (in all humility, of course) to save. We are tempted to over-function and end up doing for others what they can do for themselves, thus reducing their dignity. Chronic suffering sucks dry the wells of compassion; we don't have the energy to face another person with persistent needs. Pastors who have prayed fervently and seen no change know their silent disillusionment with God. They may doubt the depth of their faith and even question their pastoral call. We have felt our anger, judgment, and rejection surface when the sufferer doesn't follow our wise counsel.

Similar temptations abound on a corporate level for congregations feeling the impact of chronic suffering: trying to fix, trying harder, feeling anger and fatigue and disillusionment, avoiding.

**Temptations abound for those who pastor the long-suffering: to become the fixer, or the one needing to be needed, or the hero swooping in (in all humility, of course) to save.**

How, in addition to carrying the load of individual pastoral care, do pastors lead the church to be the body of Christ to one another? Where can pastors turn for help in situations of chronic suffering?

The answer, as Moses said, is "very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."[1] It is in our spiritual center, where our self-identity meets Christ. Our self-identity is crucial to how we relate to those with chronic suffering. Who we are—our own suffering (or lack thereof), our family system's response to suffering, our sense of pastoral call—shapes our pastoral responses. Central to our personal and pastoral identity is our conversion to Christ and our ongoing transformation into Christ-likeness. Or as Paul puts it, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19b–20).

Eugene Peterson writes that pastoral identity is shaped around the sixth ordination vow (in his Presbyterian tradition): "Will you, in your own life, seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?"[2] While the other ordination vows refer to tasks unique to the pastoral office, this vow, really the baptismal vow of all Christians, seems especially crucial for pastors. Our pastoral person and work are authentic and fruitful as long as *in our own life* we keep building

on this one foundation of Jesus Christ. We know this truth, and yet perfectionism, the tyranny of the urgent, and compassion fatigue all militate against living this basic baptismal vow.

Much has been written about pastoral self-care, setting boundaries, building a system of referrals and helpful resources. It's sometimes easier to read books and attend seminars, but it is out of our spiritual center that we minister to those in the long season of endless suffering. How can spiritual formation strengthen the central pillar of our personal and pastoral lives? What helps us hold chronic suffering in our heart without being consumed by it?

**Much has been written about pastoral self-care, setting boundaries, building a system of referrals and helpful resources. But it is out of our spiritual center that we minister to those who suffer.**

The Beatitudes have been a wonderful resource for renewing my overloaded inner spiritual-psychic infrastructure. They have become a spiritual gyroscope to maintain pastoral balance in the dizzy cycles of suffering. And they provide practical pastoral wisdom for caring for those who suffer long.

### The Beatitude path

One teacher of the Beatitudes has noted the simple God-with-us theme at the beginning and end of Matthew's story of Jesus: at his conception, "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us,'" and in Jesus' last words to his followers, "And remember, I am with you always."[3] God-with-us permeates the story of Jesus and the whole of scripture from Genesis to Revelation. It needs to permeate our personal story as well. The Beatitudes open our spiritual lungs to inhale deeply "God with us" and exhale gently "God with us" in our pastoral care. Edwin Hatch's 1878 hymn text is a wonderful God-with-us prayer song:

> *Breathe on me, breath of God,*
> *fill me with life anew,*
> *that I may love what thou dost love,*
> *and do what thou wouldst do.*

Loving as God loves and doing what God does is finally what pastoring is about.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, God-with-us becomes concrete as Jesus touches a leper, an untouchable outcast, a chronic sufferer (Matt. 8:1–4). As we invite Jesus to touch our unhealed and untouchable parts, we are able to embody the reign of God and touch others.

Several Beatitudes are particularly helpful to guide pastoral care of others and our care of self.

**Blessed are the poor in spirit,**
**for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

People who suffer long term do not have the spiritual resources to change their situation. But these poor-in-spirit ones are often unaware that they hold the gift of the kingdom. It is a pastoral act to notice and name signs of the kingdom of God in their lives. I quietly told Jane, who suffers from depression complicated by mental challenges, that I had just seen Jesus. Jane had spontaneously given her locket and soothed a belligerent, fearful thirteen-year-old whose mother had just been hospitalized as a precaution against suicide.

Poor-in-spirit pastors do not spend much time trying to fix long-term suffering; we don't have the spiritual resources. Instead we look to the Spirit of God to fill our emptiness and our powerlessness. A simple Beatitude prayer, "I trust you, God," begins to clear our anxiety and our impulse to fix and opens the window to receiving the Spirit's presence. Poor-in-spirit pastors can say, "I don't have a clue; let's sit quietly and listen. Perhaps God will say something." One day in poor-in-spirit silence, God spoke, and the sufferer heard Elvis sing, "You'll never walk alone." The biblical promise of God's presence was echoed by Elvis!

**Blessed are they who mourn,**
**for they will be comforted.**

Chronic sufferers grieve many losses. Thank God for Psalm 13 ("How long, O Lord?"), Psalm 22 ("Why have you forsaken me?"), Psalm 77 ("I cry aloud to God"), and other scriptural laments that provide words for numbed minds and turn grieving toward God. The fruit of lament is hope, as witnessed in Lamentations 3:21–26:

*But this I call to mind,*
*and therefore I have hope:*
*the steadfast love of the* LORD *never ceases,*
*his mercies never come to an end;*
*they are new every morning;*
*great is your faithfulness.*

Thank God for the gift of a community that can mourn. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that we console one another in the way that God has consoled us: "Blessed be … the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Widows comfort widows; parents comfort parents; the addicted comfort the addicted; the childless comfort the childless. Thus the church embodies God's gift of comfort.

In listening and loving these chronic sufferers, pastors accumulate heavy loads. We need to grieve and release these loads. Mourning pastors learn to turn their grief toward God, listen for hope, and find rest from the heavy burdens.

**Blessed are the meek,**
**for they will inherit the earth.**

Pain has a way of absorbing energy and focusing the mind. Tales of woe can consume the conversation, driving people away. But people really do want an identity beyond their suffering. Meekness provides such an identity. Meekness is not acquiescence; rather it is a strong action, for the meek seek to do God's will. The third step in the twelve-step Alcoholics Anonymous program shows the path to an identity beyond suffering: "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him."

This Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," provides pastoral wisdom and renewal of energy as well. To guide a person toward living in God's will during the time of suffering provides a fresh alternative to the theological riddle of whether this suffering is God's will. The ones who suffer can begin to focus their attention on ways they might touch others as they have been touched by Jesus' love. Are there people in the congre-

gation or neighborhood who have similar sufferings, to whom they might offer consolation? Can support groups be initiated around common chronic issues? Those suffering join the pastor in caring for a wider circle of people.

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

People search far and wide for answers. As the Gospel writer reports of the woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years, "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse." She reached out in hopeful desperation and touched Jesus' robe (Mark 5:25–34).

Chronic sufferers are often powerless and are drained of the energy needed to fight their battles. Pastors who thirst for righteousness do not carry the burdens alone. They are alert to systems of support in the church community and in the community at large. They ask which systems of care are helpful and which ones only add to the pain. Pastors use the power of their office to find a way into impersonal, overloaded systems; they become interpreters making coherence out of confusion and help agencies communicate with one another for the benefit of those who are suffering.

**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**

Ezekiel comes to the refugees suffering by the river Chebar: "And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days. At the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me" (Ezek. 3:15–16). Sitting with those who suffer gives pastors a place to hear the voice of God. Sometimes it is a word for the suffering one, and sometimes it is a word for the pastor. Once, in worship, after prayers for healing, one of the sufferers for whom we had prayed spoke up, "The preacher looks tired; I think we ought to pray for him." The suffering worshipers sensitive to my need prayed; I experienced rest and renewed strength. I received God's mercy.

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

An answer that a pastor is never to give, but one that may be

found by those who suffer, is that suffering is redemptive. Contemplation of the suffering Christ is as important as contemplation of the healing Christ. Conversation, prayer, scripture, and the worshiping community help draw attention to suffering as one of God's gifts of redemption. This last Beatitude promises that the gift given the persecuted is nothing less than the kingdom of heaven, which is the same gift received by the poor in spirit, according to the first Beatitude. The Beatitude paths we walk with those who suffer bring us full circle, back to the reign of God and the spiritual resources given by Jesus.

## The heart of the matter

The heart of pastoral response to chronic suffering lies in the heart of the pastor. Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive" (John 7:37–39). Rivers of living water provide sustenance in the midst of the troubled waters of chronic suffering.

## Notes

[1] Deuteronomy 30:11–20 is the exhortation to choose life by loving God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments.
[2] Marva J. Dawn, Eugene H. Peterson, and Peter Santucci, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 13.
[3] Michael Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge for First World Christians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 153.

## About the author

Duane Beck has been pastor of Raleigh (North Carolina) Mennonite Church since 2005. He has served two other congregations, Belmont Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Indiana (1984–2005), and Bethel Mennonite Church, West Liberty, Ohio (1971–1984). Duane and Lois have two adult sons and two granddaughters.

# The fox and the hen
## A sermon on Luke 13:31–35

Leonard Beechy

> *At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Luke 13:31–35)*

When I was a little boy growing up on the farm, one of my favorite places to play was on the roof of what we called the chicken house. The roof was low and round, so in my play it served sometimes as the back of an elephant when I was playing Tarzan and sometimes as a hill that had to be defended from marauding neighbor boys. It struck me one day while I was playing there that we always called it the chicken house, but there were never any chickens in it. I asked my mother about this, and she told me the story. It seems that when my family moved to this farm just before I was born, one of the first things my father did was to buy a bunch of chicks and put them in the chicken house. The next morning, all the chicks were dead. They had been killed by some predator or other. Some suspected rats. I know that I once surprised a fox in the

woods near our house. Whatever the culprit, our chicken house never housed another chicken. In my mind it became a monument to the essential vulnerability of chicken life, of all life, to the nameless forces of death that work in the night. As for my father, he was through with chickens. In the eternal struggle between chicken and fox, his money was forever after on the fox.

Our text from Luke is, of course, the story of a fox and a hen. "That fox" is the very disrespectful way by which Jesus refers to the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas. The Pharisees, of all people, had come to Jesus to warn him to flee because Herod wanted to kill him. With startling sarcasm, Jesus replies, in effect, "Go tell Herod to get in line. There is machinery in motion that's bigger than any third-rate political hack. I've got a few days' work to do," Jesus says, "and I may as well do it on the way to Jerusalem, because that's the only place for a prophet to die." But even as he utters the word "Jerusalem," you can hear Jesus' voice choking with emotion, all the sarcasm draining away. With open grief he cries out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem"—You can almost hear David's heartbroken "Absalom, Absalom"—"the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you." Jesus sees an empty chicken house ahead. The passage carried even greater pathos for Luke's first readers, for by that time Rome's legions had reduced the city to rubble. Oh, Jerusalem.

**To love means to expose oneself to heartbreak. The dark forces of violence, diseases of body and spirit, all lurk like foxes in the night. We love and cannot protect.**

One of the best preachers at work today is Barbara Brown Taylor. I want to quote one comment from her on this passage: "If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament." Is there anyone here who is not included in that "if"? To love means to expose oneself to heartbreak. We wait in emergency rooms, in restless beds for the sound of the car in the driveway; we hang on the words of one professional or another; we partake of a hundred anxious vigils, any one of which could end in the most heart-rending grief. The dark forces of violence, diseases of body and spirit, all lurk like

foxes in the night. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How I have desired to gather your children! We love and cannot protect.

What will we do? From the beginning of the service this morning we have been invited to come home to the shelter of God's wings. It's a rich image, with roots in the Psalms as well as in our story in Luke. But it raises a question that I would like to face directly and honestly this morning. The question is, how safe is it here under God's wings? What kind of shelter are we offered here?

This question was posed to me most hauntingly when, just after high school, I read a short story by Mark Twain called "The Mysterious Stranger." The story was written very late in Twain's life, after he had been ravaged by grief after grief as his daughters, his wife, and his closest friends all died within a horrible few years. Twain was furious at life and at God, and in his story, a stranger, a stand-in for Satan, comes to town and instructs a group of children on the utter meaninglessness of life and of individual lives. "But the Bible says," one girl protests, "that God sees the sparrow fall from the nest." The stranger replies, "But it falls just the same, doesn't it?"

The stranger's question bothered me so much that, even though I hadn't read it in thirty years, when I looked for the passage this week I knew right where to find it. Reading again, though, I was relieved to find that the passage had lost most of its power. Thirty years of living had convinced me of the reality of the shelter of God. In fact, life in the shelter of God's wings is the thing that in all the world is most real to me. What we find there is not exactly safety, for love is never safe. What do we find in the shelter of God's wings?

**We have been invited to come home to the shelter of God's wings. It's a rich image, with roots in the Psalms as well as in our story in Luke. But the question is, how safe is it here under God's wings?**

In the first place, we find that we are not alone. My principal said at a faculty meeting once that everyone has a private hell. The thing is that when a private hell is shared, it is no longer private, and it is no longer hell. For hell is by definition eternal and without hope, and suffering that is shared is neither of these.

Second, in the shelter of God's wings, we find possibilities that are not available anywhere else. There is the possibility of the

miraculous. I am not one who believes that the miraculous is something we can expect or demand or claim, but neither should we cease to pray for it nor cease to watch for it. History, ancient and modern, is too full of testimony that this world is not a closed system, that into the patterns of cause and effect sometimes come wonders that are inexplicable outside the realm of God's shelter. Besides the possibility of the miraculous, there is also the possibility of meaning. Now, I am not among those who believe that all suffering is redemptive, or that it is all designed for our good. One of my central theological tenets is a paraphrase of the bumper sticker: "Stuff happens." But one of the rules of the shelter is that suffering does sometimes redeem us, teach us, refine us.

**Our teacher and protector assumes the most vulnerable posture in the world: her wings spread over us, her breast exposed. The fox will have to kill her to get to us. And, of course, he does.**

We had a good conversation with our daughter Mary one time this week, reflecting on the two-year ordeal with her health. I told her that the theme of our services during Lent this year, "Coming Home," would have been very tough for me last year when she was in exile in Ohio because of her allergies. She surprised us, though, by saying that, if she had the power to go back and change the last two years and delete the medical problems, she's not at all certain that she would. What she gained in relationship with her parents, what she learned about herself, what she learned not to fear—these are not things that she would want to do without. Within the shelter of God's wings, we sometimes find that our suffering offers us wisdom.

Finally, we find that when we enter the shelter of God's wings, we enroll in a school of love. It is a risky and painful kind of love, for our teacher and protector assumes the most vulnerable posture in the world: her wings spread over us, her breast exposed. The fox will have to kill her to get to us. And, of course, he does. The fox strikes, the hen is killed, the chicks scatter. Some of the chicks decide they'd prefer to be under the protection of a fox than of a hen, and who can blame them?

But the story takes a surprising turn. It turns out that this hen-love, the kind that puts its body between the fox and the chicks, is the very force in all the universe capable of defeating death, of exposing it as the temporary, third-rate power that it is. On the

other side of death, the wings spread for the entire world. The voice of Jesus calls to us, urging us into the shelter of God's wings. We can go there now; we can stay there the rest of our lives. It isn't exactly a safe place. We too will be asked to spread our wings in love. In doing so, we will expose our own vitals. But we will also know the kind of love that is eternal, that defeats those unnamed powers of death that work at night. And Jesus, whose voice calls to us, will never, ever relinquish the risk of loving us. He'd rather die.

## About the author

Leonard Beechy is a member of Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, where he gave this sermon on March 11, 2001. He is a teacher of high school English, a writer of adult Bible study materials for Faith and Life Resources, a member of a trio of tenors known as the Schmaltzentrubers, and the reigning over-50 tennis champion of Goshen. He and Sharon (Schrock) are the parents of two adult daughters.

# Book review

Melissa Miller

***Grief and Sexuality: Life after Losing a Spouse***, by Rachel Nafziger Hartzler. Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006.

In *Grief and Sexuality: Life after Losing a Spouse*, Rachel Nafziger Hartzler has brought a treasure to the church, mined from her own experience as a widow, and polished with astonishing candor, painstaking effort, and admirable courage.

Those who have lost their spouse to death often feel alone in their grief and sense that others "don't get it." Pastors and other caregivers, wanting to be supportive to widows and widowers, may be unsure of what to say or how to act. Others may simply be curious about what's it really like to become single after having formed an identity as a married person. For all of these kinds of people, *Grief and Sexuality* provides insight and resources.

**One of the strongest contributions of this book is the words of those who have been there: Hartzler herself and the 152 people who completed her questionnaire.**

Hartzler was fifty-one when her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. As she grieved her loss and rebuilt her life, she became a seminary student, in part "to work at emerging questions about life and death" (13). *Grief and Sexuality* resulted from her master's thesis on widowhood. One of the strongest contributions of this book is the words of those who have been there: Hartzler herself and the 152 people who completed her questionnaire. (I suspect that the unusually high questionnaire response rate—nearly 70 percent—illustrates the eagerness of such individuals to speak about their experience.)

Hartzler explores themes of loss and suffering, lament, transformation, sexuality, and implications for pastoral care. She speaks of

"living well beyond the crisis" (105), a reflection of her interest in and capacity to see "suffering as an opportunity for life-changing and life-giving growth" (195). She invites readers to consider how widows and widowers respond to these theological themes. Her invitation, if accepted, can benefit those who walk compassionately with the bereaved, especially given that these experiences of loss are so common. Another strength of the book is the section on pastoral care, which is chock-full of guidelines for care of the bereaved. The practical, realistic suggestions are excellent, in large part because they come from the mouths of those who know what helps.

Hartzler's willingness to explore, reflect on, and write about sexuality after the death of one's spouse is particularly brave and insightful. Her material on death, sexuality, and identity introduces a host of life and faith questions, ones to continue to ponder and discuss in pastoral care and congregational settings. Her own deep faith and robust relationship with God set a solid foundation for her remarks.

The book presents a few challenges for the reader. Occasionally *Grief and Sexuality* reads like a master's thesis: some transitions could be smoother, and the material is sometimes dense and could benefit from unpacking. Now and then the tone is heavy, as in this sentence: "Things with which society lures us—youth and beauty, health and power, admiration and financial success—will not endure" (25). Such prose occasionally distracts from the author's stated intention to engage in a research-based exploration of widowhood.

*Grief and Sexuality* can help educate caregivers about widowhood "from the inside." It deserves a place on the pastor's bookshelf, where it should be well-thumbed and serve as an inspiration for pastoral practice! Church librarians may want to include it in their collections as well.

## About the reviewer

Melissa Miller is a pastor, counsellor, and author. A recent graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, she is currently pastor of Springstein Mennonite Church, Springstein, Manitoba.

# Book review

David W. Boshart

***Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice***, by Harry Huebner. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005.

The best way to read *Echoes of the Word,* a deeply insightful collection of Harry Huebner's work in theological ethics, is to begin with the last chapter. In it he writes, "We do not know everything, hence we have to act on faith. The only question is which faith: the faith of scientific rationalism, the faith of pure mystery, or the faith of God in Jesus Christ" (255). Which faith, indeed?

*Echoes of the Word* has three parts. The first focuses on the function and role of Word. Here Huebner seeks to "make it clear that it matters less where we begin. It matters more from where we come and hence where we are headed and, perhaps even more, what we say along the way" (13). The second part of the book, "Church/World," speaks to "how we narrate our being in the world" (13). In the third section of the book, Huebner addresses four Christian virtues: patience, hope, peace, and wisdom.

**Pastors are sometimes tempted to present a version of the gospel that attempts to help people manage in this world just a little more easily. This book renews a mandate to remind the church that we live toward hope.**

Rooting himself in the philosophical tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Huebner states his main argument most tersely as "Language constructs worlds" (1). For him the key to understanding God's truth is to enter "God's dramatic story" (65). Huebner's approach has freeing and profound implications for how we see the world and how we are in the world. The implications are freeing because the "discerning community is placed at the center of epistemology" (127). The implications are profound because this approach goes

to the very nature of our view of reality: "Christians believe that since gracious God created the world, peace and wholeness are ontologically more fundamental (more real) than violence and brokenness" (98).

Understanding our call to embody a story relieves us of the need to base our ethical framework on scientific, rationalistic understandings of truth dependent on external verification. It saves us from settling for the pervasive fatalistic view that evil is a more fundamental reality than good. It calls us to a posture of trust rather than defense. We do well to ponder with the author why it is that "we know much of the power of evil, but we appear to know so little of the power of God in Jesus" (253).

*Echoes of the Word* provides an important link that is often missing in theological-ecclesial conversation. The author is an effective interlocutor who bridges between scholarly theology and the life of the Christian community. In this work we see why the academy and the church need each other.

Pastors are sometimes tempted to present a version of the gospel that attempts to help people manage in this world just a little more easily. This book renews a mandate to remind the church that we live toward hope. As a collection of essays, Huebner's book provides excellent material for a theological book club or a pastor-peer group study. For an energetic Sunday school class, *Echoes of the Word* could provide an invigorating elective option.

**We do well to ponder with the author why it is that "we know much of the power of evil, but we appear to know so little of the power of God in Jesus."**

*Echoes of the Word* is best read at a leisurely pace. The first two chapters tone the muscles of rhetorical practice to prepare the mind to see the world in a particular way. From there, each essay or sermon offers theologians, church leaders, and church people an ethical forum for discerning what we say to one another on the way. For what we say to one another on the way "is the medium through which the world becomes the world to us" (1).

## About the reviewer

David W. Boshart is pastor of West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa, and a doctoral candidate at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

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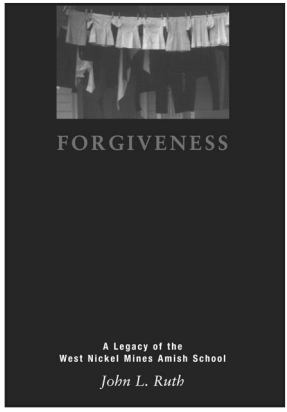


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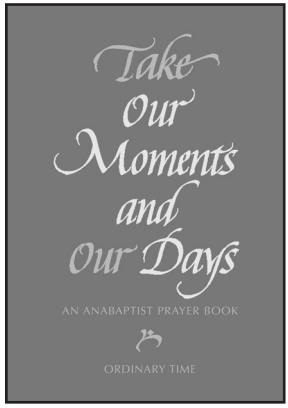


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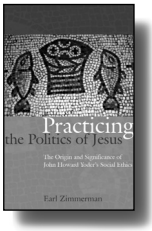


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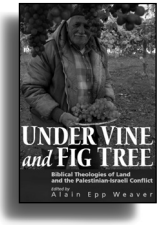


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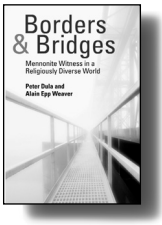


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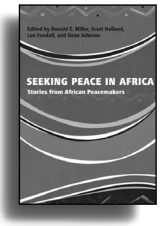


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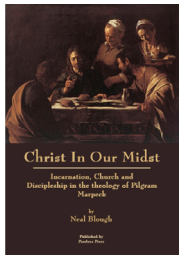


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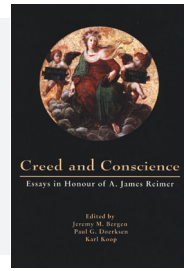


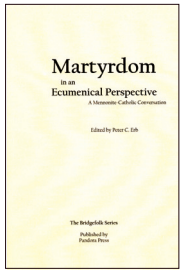


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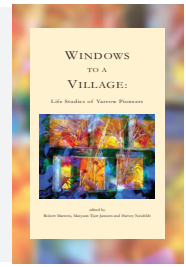


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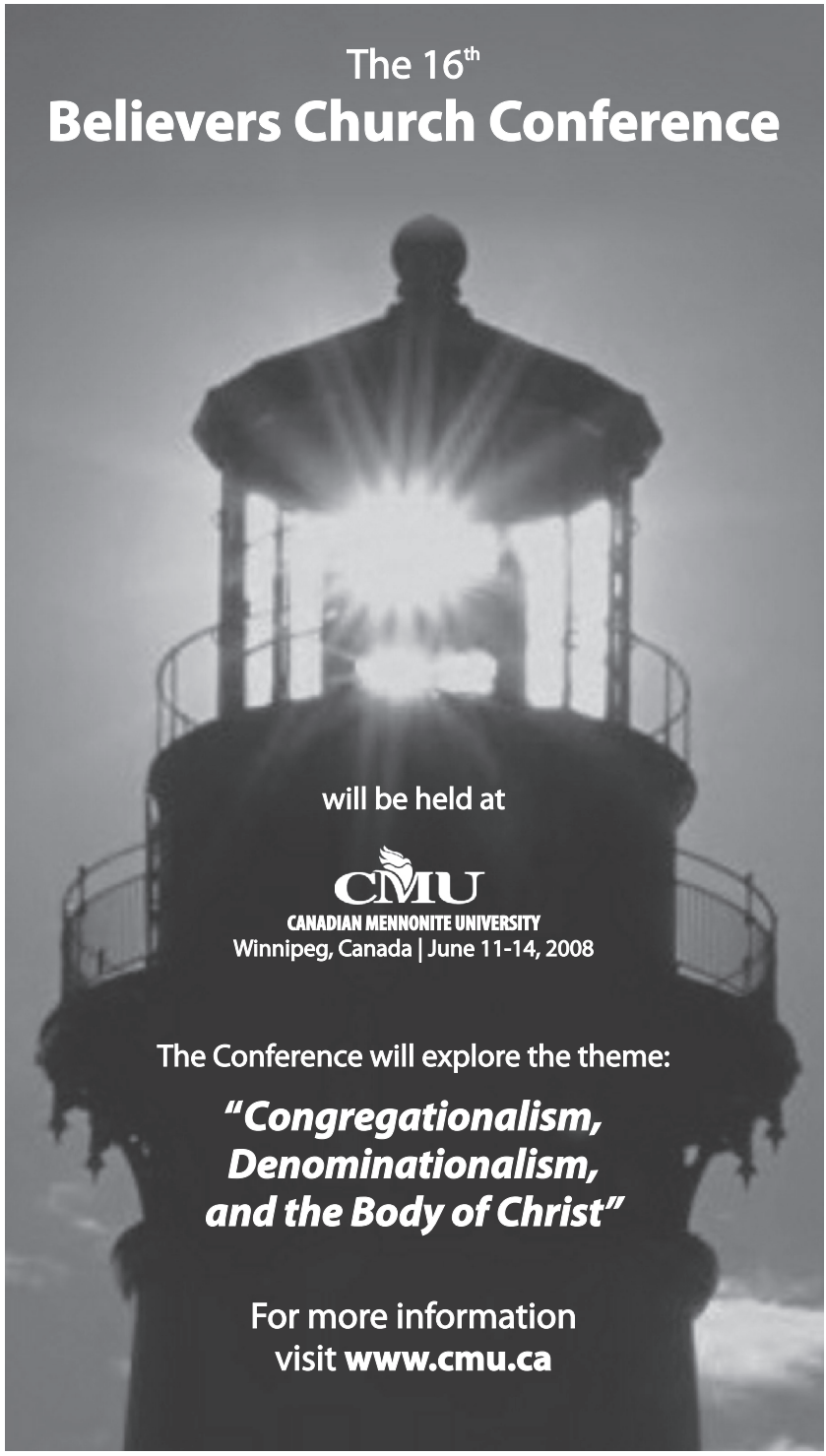
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