

Bloom

Hope...for the uprooted woman



Surprised by Suffering by Ann Kelley

Last July my husband, Doug, and I packed up the car and drove out of Phoenix for a West Coast road trip we'd been planning for months. The myriad details of leaving our house and dog had been worked out and we were happily anticipating the open road and memorable stops along the way.

By the time we got to the Oregon coast it was evident that Doug was pretty ill. Fevers, chills, fatigue. Thankfully, we were able to extend our stay in a friend's condo to allow Doug to rest and "get over" whatever he had come down with.

Three days later we found ourselves in the emergency room of the local hospital and learned that I needed to get Doug home ASAP to seek more medical help.

Doug was admitted to the hospital the day after we got home and we soon had a diagnosis of Acute Myeloid Leukemia. A life-threatening disease. The only hope they offered him was intensive chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant.

In that moment our lives started on a new trajectory of doctors, hospitals, chemo side effects, and the possibility that life would never be the same.

Given our current circumstances, the topic for this *Bloom* – suffering – is very timely for me. The suffering that Doug has gone through and will continue to go through and my own suffering as I care for him is very real for us.

My practice most days is to stay present to today – to this moment – and to look for anything I can be grateful for. Stats for this disease and the possible side effects of treatment are discouraging. My imagination can easily run to dire outcomes and images of great suffering that immediately produce fear in me. Before I know it, my entire body is tied in knots and I'm overwhelmed with emotion. When I'm able to reign in those thoughts and turn my focus to what I know to be true *today, right now*, and what I can be grateful for, I feel my mind and body calm. Worrying about the future – about something that may not even happen – is a waste of my energy and threatens my own well-being. Plus, when I focus on the future I'm more likely to miss the gifts that this moment – this day – has for me.

“Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” Matthew 6:34, MSG

But what about other, “less serious” kinds of suffering? **Should you downplay or dismiss suffering loneliness or disappointment because it seems minor compared to the trials others are experiencing?** I don't think so. There are different degrees of suffering, but all suffering is difficult, meaningful, and should be acknowledged.

Suffering has been defined as not getting what you want. I think there's real truth to that. We all have suffered! Granted, you can gain perspective by reminding yourself that there are others who are worse off, but it doesn't change the fact that you wish you could change your circumstances.

In this issue of *Bloom* we'll examine suffering. Why does God allow suffering? How should we respond to our own suffering? How should we respond to the suffering of others? How can we care for ourselves during times of suffering? Read on.

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Bloom provides inspiration as you seek to grow and thrive during times of life change.

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Receiving the Gift of Suffering by Dr. Ted Wueste

Suffering. Anguish. Pain. Sorrow. Not words that we want to embrace. In fact, we generally try to distance ourselves from suffering of any kind. However hard we try, suffering and pain always come knocking at the door of our lives.

Because we've been so conditioned by our culture to try to avoid suffering, we can miss the reality that it has a place in our lives that is indispensable. Going through times of suffering produces something in us that nothing else can.

In Romans 5:3-5, the Apostle writes: "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Why do we rejoice? Because of what suffering produces in our lives: endurance, character, hope, and the experience of God's love.

The good news is that the love of God has been poured into our hearts because of Jesus. However, it is when we respond well to suffering that we experience that love. His love becomes a lived experience rather than simply a theological fact.

As I've experienced times of suffering, I've often thought, *Can't there be another way?* The truthful answer is *no*. Before we begin to enjoy and appreciate the gifts of suffering that lead to knowing His love, we have to let go of all the other things to which we cling so tightly. And we don't just let go. Most often it's a loss of some kind or a life-threatening illness or a betrayal that leads us into a *posture of letting go* – if we let it.

Author Richard Rohr made the observation that "All great spirituality is about letting go." When we come to God with empty hands, they can be filled. We don't earn His love. It is already ours but living in His love and knowing Him deeply only come as we let go.

As we suffer, the angst we often feel is the loss of control. We can't control our health, we can't control that relationship, we can't control the changes that life always brings. The emptiness that we experience in those times can be met by denial, trying to fix things, or even numbing ourselves. Or, we can receive the emptiness as a gift and welcome it as a space that God's love can fill. This can be scary because we are taught, throughout our lives, to be strong. Welcoming emptiness leaves us vulnerable and seemingly weak. However, it is vulnerable, empty hands that can receive everything we've ever really wanted – His love. Suffering is indeed indispensable.

In the midst of suffering, ask yourself, *What do I want? Do I want to know and experience God at the depths of my being?*

There is so much that we don't know about suffering and may never know this side of eternity, but we can know that He is graciously at work in the midst of it, drawing us to Himself. So, we can respond with gratitude in the midst of pain.

I challenge you to consider a prayer by Thomas Keating that has helped me receive the gifts of suffering, especially in my journey with cancer and multiple hospitalizations for months at a time.

Welcome, welcome, welcome ...

I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person, or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within.

Amen.

Sitting With Suffering by Richard Foster

(In an article for Renovaré, Richard Foster wrote of the latest tragic incident in a string of tragedies suffered by a family that is very dear to him. When confronted with such pain and suffering he asks, “What can anyone say or do?” He does, however, offer thoughts about what we do not say, what we do not do, and, finally, what we are to say and do that often do not include words.)



What We Do Not Say

I will tell you what we do not say. We do not say that these horrible events are the will of God. We live in an evil world, a tragically fallen world, and sometimes we are crushed under the weight of it all. To be sure, God—whose power is over all—can take the horrible and the unspeakable and, in his time and in his way, work all these terrible things for good . . . but he never authorized the evil. In fact, he hurts with us over the awfulness of it all. His heart is an open wound of love.

May I tell you something else we do not say? We do not come forward with those God-awful platitudes about clouds with silver linings and painless victory in Jesus. That is an affront to the gospel of the suffering God, the God who stands with us in our agony and our perplexity and our confusion. It is an offense to the gospel of Jesus Christ who in his moment of greatest agony uttered the cry that you have cried and that you will cry; “My God, my God, Why? . . . Why? . . . Why?”

What We Do Not Do

Then, too, let me tell you what we do not do. We do not pretend that the evil and the tragedy did not happen. We do not act as if all is well when all is not well. In 1849 an eleven-year-old, Catherine Elizabeth Havens, wrote in her diary, “I think spelling is funny. I spelt infancy ‘infantsy’, and they said it was wrong, but I don’t see why, because if my seven little cousins died when they were infants, they must have died in their ‘infantsy’; but infancy makes it seem as if they hadn’t really died but we just made believe.”

Shakespeare concludes his magnificent play King Lear with a haunting couplet that speaks, not just for the play, but for the life and experience of us all: *The weight of this sad time we must obey, Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.*

And whether we look at the tragedies of life through the macrocosm of human history or the microcosm of our own personal histories, we must see the sad time, we must listen to the sad time, we must obey the sad time: “Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” Everyone tells us that we ought to say that God came to the rescue, that the tragedy was averted, and that everyone lived happily ever after. But we must be more honest than that. We must look the sad time straight in the face. We are able to do this because Jesus did it. When faced with the darkest of tragedies, he never flinched but stared it down. And as a result he stands with us in the darkness of our own tragedy.

What We Are To Say and Do

And standing with people is what we are to do. Often at such times words fail us, but that does not matter, for what people need is not our words but our presence. We are to be with them, hurt with them, cry with them, agonize with them. The most valuable thing we have to give people in times like these is our presence. And, thus knit together in our pain and our sorrow, we wait for that day when God will wipe away every tear and right every wrong.

We must look the sad time straight in the face. We are able to do this because Jesus did it.

This Much I Know . . .

A few things I've learned on my journeys of suffering and pain by Susan Miller



Take deep breaths when you wake up in the morning, during the day, and when you wake up in the middle of the night. It helps to settle and steady your body and emotions. It also reminds you that you are alive.

Take time for yourself. You're not being selfish, you're surviving. Do things that you enjoy. Pamper yourself. Take long walks and exercise. It's healthy for your body and emotions. I started working out at the YMCA. It has helped restore me physically and emotionally.

It's okay to cry, just don't get stuck there. Realize that the smallest thing can trigger your tears. Allow yourself to grieve and feel your pain. Know yourself well enough to recognize if you need grief support, counseling, or time with a close friend who will listen to your raw emotions.

Do the next thing, whatever that looks like. It's so easy to get overwhelmed with what seems like a hundred things that need to be done. STOP. As Elizabeth Elliot said, "Just do the *next* thing." The next thing for me was as simple as watering my plants.

Reach out to someone. You redeem your pain when you invest in the lives of others. Because you've been through suffering, you can offer the understanding and sensitivity that someone else needs. I invited a young woman over for coffee who had just lost her husband in a tragic accident. It was therapeutic for both of us.

And most of all, my friends, saturate yourself in God's word. Cover yourself with His promises. Wrap yourself in His love, comfort, and care. Run to Him in your suffering. Soak up His presence. God is your lifeline of hope. Trust Him in all things. He is faithful. He alone will bring restoration and healing to your life.

Adapted from *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* by Susan Miller. Available at JustMovedShop.com

Where Is God When It Hurts? an excerpt from *Where Is God When It Hurts* by Philip Yancey

He has been there from the beginning, designing a pain system that, even in the midst of a fallen world, still bears the stamp of his genius and equips us for life on this planet.

He transforms pain, using it to teach and strengthen us, if we allow it to turn us toward him.

With great restraint, he watches this rebellious planet live on, in mercy allowing the human project to continue in its self-guided way.

He lets us cry out, like Job, in loud fits of anger against him, blaming him for a world we spoiled.

He allies himself with the poor and suffering, founding a kingdom tilted in their favor. He stoops to conquer.

He promises supernatural help to nourish the spirit, even if our physical suffering goes unrelieved.

He has joined us. He has hurt and bled and cried and suffered. He has dignified for all time those who suffer, by sharing their pain.

He is with us now, ministering to us through his Spirit and through members of his body who are commissioned to bear us up and relieve our suffering for the sake of the head.

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