

Beyond Belief and Explanation
St. Augustine's Chapel
March 9, 2008

“Unbind him, and let him go.” The raising of Lazarus is one of the great gospel stories. It’s a story of loss, and of finding again, when you think that what you’ve lost can never be found again. There are the two sisters, Martha and Mary, both of whom tag-team Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” There’s Jesus, weeping at the tomb, and there’s Lazarus, bound in his shroud and dead. Powerful drama it is, but there is something that bothers me about the story as we have it. What gets to me is the incessant grinding of a theological axe: it’s the intrusion into the narrative of the issue of belief. And this theological axe is not just being ground in this story—we heard it last week in the story of the man born blind. And we hear it throughout John’s gospel, which is all about seeing and believing, who *really* sees, who really gets it, and who doesn’t. John wants you to see that you may believe, as he says toward the end of his gospel, that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

There is an enormous rhetorical stress in conventional Christian life on what you believe, although I suspect that many of us believe different things, and say parts of the creed, as John Thatamanil likes to say, with our fingers crossed behind our backs. I don’t know about you, and maybe this is just the way my mind works, but I’ve always run into a dead end trying to figure out what I believe. Christian faith for me has come to be not so much about what I believe, but about what, over time, I’ve come to know is true. Let me see if I can explain.

The Why and the What of Suffering

When I was a young theology student, I was struck by how many of my male classmates had suffered some loss in connection with their fathers. For many of us, our fathers were either dead or distant or absent. It would be years before most of us would begin to understand how our losses affected the choices we would make in love and work, but we found in each other a fellowship of persons magnetically pulled toward suffering. Along with our theological studies, we worked in hospitals and prisons and with the homeless

and the hurting. In my first year of study, a delightful thirteen year-old girl named Lynn, a real day-brightener and favorite of mine in the parish where I worked, over a three-month period fell ill and died, a brain tumor ending her young life.

I hated that Lynn died and hated how cancer hurt her and hurt her family. There was no raising her from the tomb. Having little sense then of how to mourn this loss, and less of how to help her family with their loss, I set myself to try to explain the why of suffering if not to them, at least to myself, and to reconcile the evident fact of suffering with Christian testimony to divine loving presence. I took courses in the Wisdom literature and Theodicy of the Old Testament. I studied Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov* and Albert Camus's *The Plague* and read endlessly about the Holocaust. But just beneath this attempt to explain suffering was a visceral refusal of a world in which such things as Lynn's death could happen.

It was suffering that drew me to theological education over thirty years ago, and suffering has been the subject that links the energies of my professional life and spiritual practice. If there is one theme that runs like a red thread through most of the books on my bookshelf, it's the fact of suffering.

Suffering reached out and grabbed me by the throat when I was nineteen, the night two childhood friends died, their car slamming into a tree in my front yard. Since then I've been engaged in what at various times has been a long argument with suffering, a life and death struggle with it, learning how sometimes to relieve it, and sometimes simply to sit with it. Huston Smith, the great teacher of comparative religion, once observed that all religions begin with the cry for help. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. Even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." In the face of suffering, what actually helps? And what doesn't?

I'd like to begin to approach these questions of what helps and what doesn't with an invitation. For a moment close your eyes, sit quietly and notice how your body receives your in-breath, and how it releases your out-breath. Then notice what comes to mind with the word "suffering." What images, what memories, what stories present themselves? And as you stoke the material around this word "suffering," what do you notice happens in your body?

I want to approach the matter of suffering in an “experience near” fashion. It is tempting around the fact of suffering to use a lot of energy, as I have in the past, in trying to *explain* suffering, explaining Lazarus or Lynn in the grave: explaining *why* suffering happens, explaining why *this* suffering is happening. My own experience has taught me that the turn down the road *why* is a wrong turn. The question *why* is, in my experience, finally an unsuccessful detour around the implacable *what* of suffering.

An Exit from Hell

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina tore apart the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans, I was asked to come to Baton Rouge to work with chaplains and social workers providing care to the emergency responders working in a group of hospitals run by Franciscan sisters. Flying into Baton Rouge a week after the hurricane, I met a Hasidic rabbi from the New York City Chief Medical Examiners Office. He had come to help identify unclaimed bodies in the mortuary. This man had seen a lot of suffering in his life, and he knew something about helping people pick up the pieces in the aftermath of devastation.

The population of Baton Rouge had doubled overnight, and needless to say, there were no hotel rooms available anywhere near. Some of the hospital staff told me they had as many as twenty or thirty people staying in their homes. I slept on a couch in an empty doctor’s office. For days, persons fleeing New Orleans had slept under the ramps of LSU’s Pete Maravich Assembly Center, which served as the largest field hospital for acute care injuries ever created in U.S. history. In eight days the Emergency Rooms of the Franciscan hospitals alone had seen over 3000 people. There were 3000 homeless pets in the LSU Agricultural Center.

The blue H for “Hospital” signs on the interstate, the first ones north of New Orleans, pointed the way to these Franciscan hospitals. People fleeing New Orleans found an exit from hell, and though their suffering didn’t end when they found a hospital, they did find kindness. What responders told me they universally received from those who came for assistance was gratitude beyond words. “Ya’ll treating us like we’re human” was the refrain these helpers heard over and over. One social worker told me she had never seen so much physical trauma, that after a few days she went numb to the spectrum of suffering she witnessed, from the horrific to the frustrating. A nurse who had

worked for over forty-eight hours without sleep said her own grief broke through while she was bathing an old man. He had been taken off a bus of nursing home patients, one of whom had died during the trip out of New Orleans. While she was sponge bathing the old man, he softly patted her hand, offering her both comfort and gratitude for her care. An act of kindness from this vulnerable old man just broke her wide open.

There were, amidst all the suffering, powerfully moving reunions, people finding one another again when they feared they never would. Like Lazarus and Mary and Martha, finding each other again. And there were even, as is so often the case with children, moments of hilarity. As nurses were undressing one little boy out of his filthy clothes and putting him into a hospital gown before he was treated, he yelled out to his younger brother, “Quick! Run for your life! They take your clothes and underwear and don’t give them back!”

I was reminded of the Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who observed that when people are hurting, what they need is not an explanation, but a community capable of helping absorb their suffering, helping them simply cope. And I thought of Herbert Anderson, a wise pastoral theologian, who said that the question in the face of suffering is not “what can we say?” but “what can we bear to hear?”

As staff members were given a safe place to talk about what they had experienced, one woman said after telling her story, “It’s all here in my stomach, and I can’t face it.” Another said, “I didn’t realize it’s all here in my shoulders—I feel like I’ve been carrying the weight of the world.” As we held their images of suffering while they breathed, many of them said, “It’s like I’ve forgotten to breathe.” When we talked about what hadn’t helped and what had, one of the nuns said, “Well, what sure didn’t help was the visit of the official delegation from the Vatican. We didn’t really have time for that. And you know, what did help me was a little glass of port each night.” Nobody in Baton Rouge had a whole lot of energy to try to explain *why* anybody’s suffering had come about. They were all about *relieving* suffering as best they could, not explaining it.

My friend Rabbi Rami Shapiro says: “The way of Wisdom is not the way of why, but the way of what. The Hebrew word [for Wisdom] *chochma* can be read as *choch mah*, ‘what is.’ Wisdom will not tell you why things are the way they are, but will show you what they are and how you can live in harmony with them.” Rami is right. Wisdom

teaches us how to live with what is, and when necessary, how to grieve what is. In the process of grieving, we may even come to accept what is, to find how we can live in harmony with it. Not to like what is, but to accept that it has happened and stop refusing suffering.

Rami tells the story of the great Rabbi Akiva, who was once lost in a shipwreck at sea. He alone survived, and when asked how he did it, he replied, “Whenever a wave arose, I bent into it.” Rabbi Akiva bent into the wave and it washed over him. Rami says, “This is how we are to live in the world, bending into what happens and allowing it to wash over us rather than sweep us away.” How do you learn to bend into the wave? How do you learn to give up the habit of refusing what is?

Bearing Suffering

In my youth I had imagined that if somehow I could understand the *why* of suffering, it would hurt less. In time I would learn that was not the case. More than any of my attempts to understand the why of suffering, it was an image of the *what* of suffering that brought an end to my fruitless young efforts to explain suffering. The image was the German artist Matthias Grünewald’s sixteenth century painting, the *Crucifixion*. This image is part of an altarpiece painted for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim, Alsace, now in France. The monks of the monastery cared for patients with what was then known as St. Anthony’s fire, and we now know as a poisoning from a fungus growing on rye, which afflicted its sufferers with convulsive and gangrenous symptoms. At the center of the Isenheim altarpiece is an enormous, agonized Christ, the weight of his body bowing the crosspiece. The body on the cross is contorted in pain, the flesh stuck with thorns and oozing blood and pus.

Patients at the monastery hospital were brought before the painting, and they would not have failed to recognize themselves, for the figure before them displayed the very symptoms of their own disease. The patients would have known the one hung on the cross as one of their own, “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). In Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* there is no attempt to explain suffering. There is only solidarity with the sufferer. The artist knew that in the face of physical and emotional and spiritual suffering, solidarity helps.

So here is what I know to be true. This man Jesus knows suffering, and ever since his earthly incarnation, people have found in him one who knows *their* suffering. I know he never explains anything, he just says, I will walk with you through this. And I know he knows the way to freedom—he knows how to call people like Lazarus out of the dead zone. He knows how to unbind people. Because he has been there, bound, dead. And he doesn't unbind you just because you believe in him. He unbinds you because *he believes in you*. And he brings to you a loving presence and asks not that you believe in him, but invites you to bring the same loving presence to yourself, and to others. I can believe in someone like that.

C. Gordon Peerman