

## Suffering and Teaching Writing

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Ten years ago, an article I wrote titled “Imperfection: The Will-to-Control and the Struggle of Letting Go” appeared in *JAEPL*. My impetus for researching the piece came from realizing that the lessons drilled into me during my doctoral training as a writing teacher—to do anything and everything possible to help students become *perfect writers*—was some of the most damaging advice I ever received. The fact that popular media often idolizes the driven, dedicated, selfless teacher only made things worse. After all, I thought, these were the teachers “Hollywood made movies about” (1). Why shouldn’t we all strive to transform our students into perfect writers who consistently wrote gripping introductions, never misused commas, and always analyzed their audience thoroughly before undertaking a writing task?

As I said in that article, after years of struggling to help students reach the unrealistic goal of perfection in their writing, I found that not only had I made myself miserable, I also had allowed my own *willful needs* to define the very relationships I had with students. When in the classroom, I didn’t see individuals sitting at desks with varied backgrounds, academic pursuits, and interesting stories to tell. Instead, I saw a collection of imperfections that needed ironing out. Justifiably, some of the worse teaching of my career then followed. My pedagogy became prescriptive, my commentary on students’ drafts became directive, and I regularly appropriated student texts wholesale. Though I thought all of this was “for their own good,” I had a nagging feeling that I had not become the teacher I always imagined myself to be.

Finally hitting rock bottom (and through the process of researching and writing the *JAEPL* article), I discovered there was hope. Various spiritual thinkers and scholars of writing studies, like Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum, Wendy Bishop, Mary Murray, Michael Downey, Mary Rose O’Reilly, and Jerome Miller had already done the hard work of examining notions of *imperfection* and how it was an essential part of the human experience. In simple terms, these and other writers told me to relax. Imperfection was something to be honored, not eliminated. By embracing (and even celebrating) imperfection as a trait shared by humans throughout time and cultures—both my students’ and my own—I was, in a sense, delivered back into the writing classroom to facilitate real teaching. Oh, the perfectionist in me put up a good fight for control, but ultimately this was a happy ending.

Sort of. Truly, ten years ago I did experience an epiphany about my teaching practice and wanted to share it with *JAEPL* readers who may have found it insightful. But I hate to admit it that the black cloud has descended once again. No doubt, the nature of my suffering has changed over this last decade. Some of it comes from the dreaded mid-career slump. The jittery excitement of the first class day is a faint memory. I assign fewer and fewer writing assignments. My mood tangibly darkens as I collect a batch of essays (just ask my partner who has learned when to steer clear of me). My feedback on those essays has become shorter, more perfunctory. I don’t meet individually with students as much, my attendance at professional conferences has become sporadic at best, and journal articles go unread. With each passing semester, I feel like an unhappy shift

worker standing on a production line. I realize public admissions like these seem reckless, but having tenure affords the luxury of honesty.

The problem of teacher burnout is perennial. Arguably, an entire industry has evolved to provide solutions—conferences and seminars, motivational speakers, books and other publications. If I wanted a band-aid (or a tourniquet), I could look in a hundred different directions for practical suggestions. Improving learning environments, reinventing the professional self, sprucing up writing assignments, introducing new technologies into the classroom to energize student feedback sessions—scholar-teachers tackling topics like these have practically defined the discipline of rhetoric and composition over the last few decades and are far too numerous to mention here. I've tried many well-meaning approaches over the years, but like a yo-yo dieter I always seem to end up in the same place: a place that feels a lot like suffering. So, instead of blindly adopting some technique that may or may not salve my wounded psyche (and the psyches of my students), perhaps the time has arrived to actually travel in the opposite direction and investigate issues of suffering—yes, I said suffering—and what role it plays in the life of teachers voluntarily engaged in the seemingly endless endeavor of college composition.

While you might not believe it, my goal here is not to grouse about the material working conditions of writing teachers. Instead, just like ten years ago when I wrote the article on imperfection, I want to do the more challenging work of *being in* the difficulty of it, attempting to discover some insight, some idea, some notion that might explain why teaching writing and suffering seem to go hand-in-hand, at least for me. Using the phrase “expressive suffering,” David Bakan argues that enhancement of understanding is a natural option for coping with suffering, and that amelioration of suffering through understanding is a superior approach (see Reich 88). To accomplish this, I again feel driven to turn to the spiritual with this inquiry: How can academic conversations in theology and philosophy about suffering—both physical and emotional/existential—enlighten us about our craft, when we feel our darkest? I suspect that such an inquiry is likely to lead to more painful questions than soothing answers. Hence, any readers searching for feel-good solutions are urged to move along. That's already been attempted by writers who have more concrete goals (and perhaps more optimism). I simply want to know why, as the new academic year approaches for the nineteenth time in my career, it feels as though my life is slowly being drained away? And when I feel this way, how is it coloring my practice? Does it have to be this way? To what end? Is there a purpose to this suffering? And most important, how is this affecting my students?

### Suffering and Art

Before analyzing those teaching-related questions, it's prudent to acknowledge that the more general issue of suffering (due to physical or mental illness) and *art* is well represented. One of the premiere books on this topic is Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. In addition to categorizing the many illnesses befalling great artists (including bipolarity, postpartum depression, deafness, alcoholism, and anorexia, among a host of others), Jamison wonders what would have happened if great writers like John Keats, Virginia Woolf, and William Blake had access to the modern pharmaceutical “marvels” of anti-depressants. In

a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Lisa Russ Spaar admits that if they were medicated, “these writers might have led happier, more stable and, in the case of Woolf and others, longer lives,” but who knows how this would have affected their art? Other work in this area, such as Richard Berlin’s *Poets on Prozac* and Pulitzer prize-winning poet Philip Schultz’s *My Dyslexia*, also show the close relationship that suffering—in a multitude of forms—has with the art of writing, as well as the impact modern medicine may be having on the world of art in general.

In a similar vein, the discussion regarding trauma and its relationship to *student writing* is not a new one in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Many notable scholars have examined the effects trauma can have on students’ processes and products (Rose, Kellner, Harris, Borrowman, Micciche). Much has been written to not only help teachers thoughtfully navigate the suffering experienced by our writing students, but to also guide them to understand and potentially use their traumatic experiences to enrich both their personal and academic writing. In this regard, writing teachers are some of the most trauma-sensitive and heart-smart people I know.

While perhaps related, these intriguing conversations are beyond the scope of this article. In my opinion, examining the ways in which *teachers of writing* suffer requires a different kind of perspective than either of these inquiries. When illness and art are discussed, the suffering experienced by the artist is often personified as a muse, a source of creativity and inspiration, something to be endured, or at least acknowledged, for art’s sake. Similarly, most writing teachers are urged to take a “positive attitude” regarding trauma when working with student writers, showing them how their experiences are both legitimate and a source of strength in writing. Paradoxically, it often seems the disciplinary conversation regarding teaching and suffering leans primarily towards inventing ways to cure that suffering somehow, so we can get on with the important work of the classroom.

Arguably, most pedagogical research in this area strives to ameliorate the suffering of writing instructors with practical (and sometimes impractical) solutions, instead of attempting to grapple with the origins of the suffering. So what might be the result if we examined the nature of suffering—as it stems from our practice?

### **Attempting (and Qualifying) an Operational Definition of Suffering**

I’ve delayed researching and writing this piece for a while now. During that time, I’ve imagined a colleague in the field of Holocaust studies finding the published article, raising an eyebrow in protest over my use of the word suffering, and confronting me during a faculty meeting. Equally, I envision a respected writing colleague in a non-tenured position without benefits and a heavier teaching load than I, pounding on my office door demanding an apology—what right do I have to speak of suffering? In other words, given the subject matter and context, how can I possibly justify using such a grave word to describe my pitiful teaching woes?

This is a compelling argument. Indeed, the term suffering may be too strong (and too religiously laden) a descriptor to name the negative state of mind that I and other writing instructors confront—and the negative behaviors we exhibit in response. It would probably be safer to diagnose it as a form of professional depression requiring a

daily (or at least a semesterly) prescription. Even if this is the case, if left unattended and unexamined, simple depression can lead to a deeper suffering—for us and all the people we impact, including students, colleagues, and family members. But as a medical designation, does the term *depression* really do justice in naming the particular kind of suffering that some teachers of writing—especially veteran teachers—experience in a chronic way? Think about it: From the dread of facing mounds of student essays to the despair of scheduling endless one-on-one conferences, it seems a more complex notion is needed.

In her book *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, Kathleen Norris exhumes the ancient term *acedia*—first recorded by fourth century Christian monk Evagrius Ponticus—to try and explain a kind of suffering that extends beyond our contemporary ideas about depression. Best translated as “the noonday demon,” the word was initially employed by monastics, and then later by laypersons, to describe a paralyzing “absence or lack of care” in completing the most basic tasks—from praying to bathing, from eating to answering the phone. It is a lethargy that is almost like a “kind of spiritual morphine,” making it impossible to “rouse yourself to give a damn,” and it forces the sufferer to question the importance of engagement in the world (3). But very early in her book, Norris argues that while the two may be interdependent and related, *acedia* should not immediately be equated with depression. Instead, *acedia* has a spiritual quality to it. The demon of *acedia* takes up residence in the soul, and not only in the mind. And, as Norris boldly states, its cure is not a quick trip to the psychiatrist for a prescription:

The boundaries between depression and *acedia* are notoriously fluid; at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counseling and medication, *acedia* is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer. (3)

Especially interesting, there are some characteristics of *acedia* that seem to elucidate the kinds of suffering that writing instructors often experience. For example, Norris illustrates how monastic writers through the ages who have discussed the term often point to the repetitive nature of their tasks—saying prayers or performing tedious tasks hourly or daily, for example—and how this repetition seems to invite the numbing effect of *acedia* into the heart. As a simple example, Norris discusses her hatred of daily chores when she was a teen: “I was a bratty kid that didn’t want to make her bed. To me, the act was stupid repetition. One of the first symptoms of *acedia* . . . is a refusal of repetition” (13-14). Certainly, a large part of our lives—especially our professional lives as literacy teachers—is characterized by repetition. Case in point: How many hundreds of times in my life have I pointed out a sentence fragment to a student? How many thousands of times have I sighed after reading a perfunctory and unengaging introduction to an essay, or circled a comma splice while hastily scribbling directions on how to fix it? Feeling my sense of care slowly slipping away, I’ve had to remind myself that while I’ve encountered this error or that shortcoming innumerable times before, the student himself or herself is new to the problem. Letting apathy win and ignoring these teachable moments seems attractive when I am in my darkest place. But that’s not what I was hired to do. Yet, there are human limits, and mine have been repeatedly tested in this regard.

As semantically nuanced as it is, the term *acedia* doesn't necessarily resolve the issue however. Am I simply experiencing depression regarding the repetitive nature of my professional obligations? Or is this an existential crisis? Being unable to clearly respond to this internal conflict, I've relinquished the need to offer an answer and instead focus on the fact that suffering, its origins, and our varied responses to it are relative and complex. By academic standards, such complexity suggests that an operational definition of the term suffering is needed. Other than making some surface distinctions between physical and emotional or existential suffering however, fabricating a catch-all definition not only seems impossible, but also unnecessary and potentially insulting. In "Speaking of Suffering," Warren Thomas Reich says suffering is often characterized by "an anguish which we experience...as a threat to our composure, our integrity . . . and to the concrete meaning we have found in our personal existence" (85). However, he qualifies that definition by suggesting an "experiential interpretation of suffering," rather than a universal definition, is probably preferred (84). That is, we all know our own versions of suffering. You might not identify with the moments of suffering I described as a writing teacher in the introduction to this article. Chances are likely, though, that you do have your own.

While a singular definition of suffering may be reductionist, there are some commonly held religious beliefs about the idea of suffering which we've inherited from various theological traditions. For example, those growing up in predominantly Christian environments may have learned lessons like these: Suffering is brought to us by God; God sanctions it and is responsible for it; we must accept suffering as part and parcel of sacrifice, which Christianity is based upon; suffering always carries some meaning or purpose with it; and, because we might deserve to suffer in some way for past actions or beliefs, the act of suffering cleanses us, tests us, or improves us. As a child who was dragged to Christian church weekly (usually drowsy and protesting), I adopted these ideas with miraculous efficiency. As an adult, these notions would pop into my head unbidden every time the teaching job felt too painful to endure: Maybe some higher power was actually presenting me with a veiled opportunity, a gift, to become a better teacher through my sacrifice. After all, there had to be some greater purpose, some enlightenment, behind this awful, heavy, overwhelming feeling, right?

Well, I was only half surprised to discover that progressive thinkers reject many of these well-worn ideas regarding suffering. In his article "How Should Christians Speak of Suffering?" Claude Ortemann, writing about the physical and emotional suffering he has witnessed as a hospital chaplain, calls these notions "habitual conceptions" that are, interestingly, *not* borne out by the gospels. Even worse, these ideas may actually hinder our ability to turn things around: "Suffering is not meant to sanctify us, to stimulate our faith, or to contribute to our salvation" (44). Ortemann admits that he himself sees "no particular good in suffering itself" and urges sufferers to "attribute no value to it, but to combat it and to go on loving" (45). Similarly questioning whether suffering contains inherent meaning and should be willingly endured, Dorothee Soelle, in her book *Suffering*, protests that traditional theological interpretations of suffering have always assumed there is a greater cause that undergirds pain: "The physical pain of giving birth, which is used again and again as a metaphor for such suffering, cannot be compared with senseless kidney stones. Mystics have tried to turn all suffering into labor pains and to abolish all senselessness" (95). Emmanuel Levinas, in "Useless Suffering," argues simply that

“the least one can say about suffering is that in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless, ‘for nothing,’” regardless that individuals or societies might have uses for causing or enduring pain (158). In a more contemporary vein, Stan Van Hooft in “The Meanings of Suffering” concludes that

Western thinkers have usually falsified our experience of suffering in trying to make sense of it. In a postmodern age, their accounts seem implausible. A central project of human thought is to make [suffering] bearable or acceptable, and one of the most common ways of doing this is to show it to be good in some way. If suffering were seen as a positive event or force in our lives, we would be better able to endure it. Accordingly, our cultural tradition contains many attempts to make suffering positive. (1)

But if we accept that suffering is neither positive nor negative, and without inherent value, what is the nature of our relationship to it?

### Responses to Suffering

For Levinas, Ortemann, Soelle, and many others, suffering simply exists: “It is impossible to remove oneself totally from suffering, unless one removes oneself from life itself, no longer enters into relationships, makes oneself invulnerable. [Suffering] is a part of the smoothest life one can imagine” (Soelle 88).

Accordingly, if we adopt the viewpoint that suffering itself is both ubiquitous and possibly senseless, what matters is not the suffering we may undergo as writing teachers, but our response to it. Over the last decade, I’ve done a good deal of thinking about the ways I have responded, pedagogically, to my own suffering in the writing classroom. (Warning: I wouldn’t call any of the following approaches “best practices” by a long shot.) In my suffering, I’ve opted to not engage students on a personal level; while I would of course agree to meet students if they requested a conference, I’ve avoided proactively offering up my time outside of class. I’ve chosen to provide only the requisite, and frankly scant, comments on their essays. I’ve opted to rely on the same lessons, approaches, and writing assignments year after year. Essentially I have, in Ortemann’s words, adopted the “resigned attitude” by surrendering without complaint (35). Soelle discusses this same typical human response to suffering as a kind of *stoic tranquility*: “It is borne—as a burden, suffered—as an injustice; it is tolerated, although intolerable; borne, although unbearable” (103). Even though my pedagogy has devolved over time, I have continued to begrudgingly, yet quietly, do what is expected of me as a college writing instructor with no outward show of pain—just with less engagement, less enthusiasm, and less substance. Being no stranger to this kind of torpor, Kathleen Norris says “I did what was expected of me” in order to get through the day, but that *acedia*, “feeding on a willing withdrawal from the pains and joys of ordinary life,” was a constant stalker (9-10).

Norris proves my experiences are not unique. I’ve often found myself scrutinizing a disordered stack of 75 student essays awaiting commentary—a feeling of absolute dread washing over me. And as masochistic as it may seem, in order to endure it, I tell myself that I deserve this feeling somehow. Due to choices I’ve made, or due to my past actions, I’ve arrived at this point in my life, and I need to make the best of it. This type

of response points to how deeply some of us believe, almost on a genetic level, that suffering is *punitive*—we endure suffering because the suffering belongs to us in some way, it is meant for us. Suffering as punishment, even for actions we may not understand or remember, is a notion that stretches back to the story of Job. In *Messengers of God*, Elie Wiesel describes Job as a once happy, caring, fulfilled man who, through a rapid succession of disasters and tragedy, becomes a “hapless victim drawn into the abyss” (217). Though ultimately it is revealed that poor Job is simply “a battlefield, a living example” of a power struggle between God and Satan, Job only wonders in what way he deserves all the suffering visiting him (222).

As September approaches, I hang my head and tell myself I must in some way deserve this suffering, as if it is a natural response. Indeed, it is also Job’s first response to his calamities. Delineating the various stages of suffering, Reich calls this first stage “mute suffering.” It is a state where “suffering reduces one to a silence in which self-disclosure, that is, communication about one’s suffering, cannot occur” (86). More dramatically phrased, Simone Weil likens this to a situation where “the victim writhes on the ground like a half-crushed worm, having no words to describe what is happening to them” (Ramakrishna Math 441). Considering, as writing teachers, that we are in the business of communicating, the concept of mute suffering seems particularly poignant, even ironic. Yet to make a further distinction, when we march through the hallways loudly “communicating” our teaching woes to whomever will listen, this doesn’t exempt us from mute suffering. Reich says that “an individual may experience mute suffering even when exercising the power of speech” (86). In this case, although we may be protesting loudly about plagiarism cases, the paper load, or lack of institutional support, we aren’t really “recognizing and describing our own feelings. Thus persons affected by mute suffering may not be mute, but their suffering itself is mute” (87). Ultimately, the nature of our suffering does not change; we continue to experience it, to endure it.

As I previously mentioned, I’ve sought a number of mainstream, practical solutions to this problem that are readily available on the market. New texts every once in a while, “blended” learning environments, cutting edge technology to boost the efficacy of peer-review sessions, and even making class “optional” here and there (where I am usually sitting in the computer lab alone waiting to see if any of my students will drop by for assistance and conversation). But still, the black cloud descends—and persists. Why do these approaches never seem to work for me?

Opting for the word *affliction* over *suffering*, Simone Weil argues that there may be nothing at all wrong with the various approaches I’m trying to use; instead, the reason why my situation doesn’t improve may be due to my complicity in my own suffering. She says that one major effect of affliction is that it “injects the poison of inertia” into the sufferer; the state of suffering itself can

. . . impede all the efforts [the sufferer] might make to improve his lot; it goes so far as to prevent him from seeking a way of deliverance, sometimes even to the point of preventing him from wishing for deliverance. Even worse, this complicity may induce him, in spite of himself, to shun and flee from the means of deliverance. (Ramakrishna Math 443)

Though it might be reductionist, in contemporary psychological terms we'd probably call this self-sabotage. The idea of self-sabotage is predicated upon the notion that "the attitude with which we approach something will have a substantial impact on the outcomes of experience" (Formica). Hence, if we suspect, even subconsciously, that a solution to a problem is not going to work—for example, making class optional every other Wednesday—chances of failure are high. I suspect as writing instructors, many of us experience less-than-stellar outcomes like these on a regular basis. For me, after several years of trying new approaches, I shouldn't be surprised to find that very little of my reality has changed regardless of the band-aids I've applied.

But rather than delving too deeply into clinical psychology, I want to remain focused on academic conversations, especially theological ones, regarding suffering. To that end, the question arises: If suffering is part and parcel of human existence and is itself without intent as progressive scholars generally maintain, what do these same scholars say about our responses to suffering? Do different responses create different effects on the sufferer? Are there responses I should avoid? How can our responses alter the material situation in which we suffer? Simply put: Will it ever matter what I do?

First, scholars have identified many different responses to suffering, and their opinions on these various responses are relatively clear. For example, if I were to ask Dorothy Soelle whether mute suffering—self-induced or otherwise—is a proper response to pain because I believe I somehow deserve it, she would say no: "The doctrine about the punitive nature of suffering . . . needs to be silenced forever. It is almost incomprehensible that it has survived and been renewed again and again through the centuries" (114). Counseling other hospital chaplains how to discuss the issue of suffering with patients, Claude Ortemann writes, "[I]t is very important that suffering should not be presented in our liturgical texts as a demand imposed by the Father, since they are nothing of the kind. Similarly, suffering should not be presented as a condition made by the Father, a condition which must be satisfied before he consents to forgive us. Let us clearly understand that the Father does not demand suffering" (44). While Ortemann's audience—and hence his rhetoric—is firmly rooted in religion, a more secular translation of his point is possible: Most human suffering is not punitive or required.

On the other hand, say I were to quietly resign myself to my suffering, not because I think I deserve it necessarily, but because I believe there is some kind of purpose or meaning behind it that will eventually rise to the surface, miraculously transforming me into the world's best academic writing instructor ever. Or better yet, my suffering may show me, in a flash of brilliant light, that I should be teaching oil painting or bread making or sailing across the world instead of teaching students about effective rhetorical arguments and how to cite sources. While those romantic notions might be enticing to some, Ortemann would suggest that enduring suffering in hopes of such a revelation is misguided. For him, the best response to suffering is not to resign to it without protest—nor to offer it up as a sacrifice, nor to expect any fruits from it. More poignantly, Daniel Harrington in *Why Do We Suffer?* says, "The slogan 'expect a miracle,' while a source of hope to some, is discouraging to others. What happens when the miracle does not come?" (105). Instead of patiently awaiting enlightenment of some kind, Ortemann suggests that the sufferer, if possible, should "combat it and go on loving, even in suffering, even when suffering is so hard to bear . . . even when illness prompts the invalid to

withdraw into himself and to lose interest in everyone but himself” (45). Soelle echoes this same idea of perseverance in love, saying, “The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be only with an infinitesimal part of itself” (442).

What this means for writing instructors may be less practical and more *attitudinal* in nature, but this notion of “persevering in love” might lead us to believe that no material change should take place in our hearts, minds, or classrooms. You might come to the conclusion that, as thoughtful writing instructors, our only responsibility is to stay engaged and to care deeply about the learning of our students, even in the face of darkness. After all, what *good* teacher would argue with that? But it’s not quite that simple. Look again at Ortemann’s use of the word *combat*. He suggests that we have a fight on our hands; in some way, we are going to have to fight the good fight, to act, to roll up our sleeves and confront this suffering with an eye toward change. His only insistence is that we do so in love.

In his book *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Andrew Solomon gives this same blunt advice to those who are feeling down: “Don’t give in to your depression. Don’t accept it as the norm. Dig up from somewhere within you the will to fight back” (15). Borrowing from ideas presented in Paul Tillich’s *Systemische Theologie*, Dorothy Soelle makes a similar point, distinguishing between *meaningless suffering* that simply incapacitates or paralyzes human beings and *meaningful suffering* that may offset inertia and actually be *productive*. In short, while suffering may not be supernaturally foisted upon us with purpose or as punishment, and it may be misguided to expect suffering to lead us to some inexorable truth or solution, this doesn’t bar us from reinventing suffering as a powerful motivator:

Suffering can bring us to the point of wishing that the world did not exist, of believing that non-being is better than being. It can make us despair and destroy our capacity for affirmation. The division into meaningless and potentially meaningful suffering seems to me the closest to reality. There is meaningless suffering on which people can no longer work, since it has destroyed all their essential powers. I would like to distinguish this meaningless suffering from suffering that can be meaningful since it impels one to act and thereby produces change. (107)

Soelle’s observation here may be nothing more than common sense, an acknowledgement that suffering itself can be a catalyst to action and can hence provide the sufferer with some meaning. However, it is important to note she is not saying that suffering has *inherent* meaning, and that indeed some suffering is meaningless—specifically, she refers the suffering of children that could otherwise be easily ameliorated (107). Though as teachers it may be challenging for us to act when faced with overwhelming suffering in our jobs regardless of the particulars, Soelle’s words give us a starting place, a foothold, to begin creating or finding whatever change might be helpful. And even if the ultimate decision is to cycle through a variety of temporary, mainstream fixes to the various problems plaguing us (as I’ve done), at least we have *first* spent some serious time examining the nature of our suffering, our natural and immediate response to it, how the process of suffering has affected our practice, and what outcomes we realistically expect from those external solutions.

### Point of Arrival (Again)

As noted, I'm not interested in blenderizing these rich observations into a pleasant tasting cure-all. The practical has never been my strong suit. Nevertheless, I believe that distilling some of these notions might help in understanding a general approach to the suffering we encounter in our jobs. With a keen eye on not reducing these ideas too much, here's what I've learned from this inquiry: First, if I willingly endure suffering, all the while expecting there is some transcendental, supernatural prize at the end of the process, I may need to check those romantic notions. Thoughts such as these may only serve to prolong suffering and enable paralysis. Second, just like eschewing resignation, a key part of "getting real" is avoiding embitterment. Many scholars suggest that we take a combative stance to suffering while continuing to participate in and love this world, not to hate or resent it. Third, it's accordingly acceptable if we can only participate in a reduced capacity for now—the important lesson is to keep participating. This reminds me of a common refrain that exists within the world of 12-step spirituality. Alcoholics who are feeling overwhelmed by their attempts at sobriety—and the stressors of the world—may feel compelled to start drinking. When confronted with such anxiety, they are often counseled by their sponsors to "just show up" to a meeting. In other words, regardless of what is being experienced, alcoholics are urged to simply keep participating, even at a reduced capacity. Fourth, this participation is naturally anathema to all-consuming self-concern. For sufferers who withdraw into themselves, "the soul, even in this life, falls into something which is almost equivalent to hell" (Soelle 442).

Practically speaking, what do we do when we feel overwhelmed? Though it may seem like I am avoiding an answer, the truth is that I can't tell you what to do because what works for me might not work for you. The state of mind and heart being discussed here is highly individualized, and our paths through it, around it, or away from it vary from person to person. (This is also the primary reason why I am generally suspicious of pre-packaged pedagogical solutions.) About our individual paths, Norris says:

Over the years I have learned what generally helps me navigate life's more treacherous passages, but I have little idea of what might work for someone else. I have seen people blossom and mature with the help of therapy, and others become infantilized by it. I have witnessed people who had been all but crushed by despair be restored to life with the right combination of medication and counseling. And then there is my young friend who reached all the way back into the fifth century to find healing in John Cassian's description of the "spirit of sadness". . . . I believe that both science and religion have a legitimate place in the conversation. God talk may not be your fancy, but it is what worked for this woman. (265-9)

When it comes to formulating an individual plan of attack, though, there is a common thread woven through much of the literature on suffering. And while it may seem trite to some, it is a reality: No one is alone in suffering. Believe it or not, even though our individual paths and solutions may diverge, it doesn't mean we don't need each other. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham's *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* has much to say on this point. According to the authors, the only way any of us can survive and understand our suffering is by wholly participat-

ing in “communities of love.” Though the phrase implies something warm and fuzzy, a “community of love” is surprisingly *not* a place of sweetness and light, but is instead “earthy and earthly.” To them, truly participatory communities are not “places of angels and refined spirits . . . filled with heavenly bliss.” On the contrary, real communities are “painful places, places of grieving, places of loss” (86). True healing can only occur in a community that speaks the language of brokenness, unhappiness, frustration, ennui, depression, and addiction. *Mutuality* is the term Kurtz and Ketcham use when describing these communities, where members “give by getting, and get by giving” (85). Once a community based upon mutuality is founded, then in such company “one is likely to find friends who are also guides; wise women and men who listen well, who offer advice and support, who help us to clarify our questions, to recognize our options in making choices, *and who seek and find in us the same realities*” (87). In other words, mutuality. Norris simplifies this idea: “If I go to church feeling depressed, a congregation by its very nature, reminds me that I am not in the struggle alone” (274).

Personally, I know that I need look no further than the door across the hallway from my office to find another instructor who wrestles with the same personal and professional issues as I. While the particulars of her suffering—and her response to it and solutions for it—may diverge from mine, there is solace in knowing that, even if we are a community of only two, we are not slogging through the heaviness in isolation. As mentioned, withdrawing into ourselves and disengaging from others in the face of our suffering, while understandable, is likely to only worsen our outlook.

I distinctly remember one of the first places I encountered the *idea* of suffering as a child—something deeper and more complex than the surface pain caused by scuffed knees or bee stings. Attending Sunday school, I learned of the travails of Jesus’ first disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. These fishermen were to be made fishers of men, and when Jesus came recruiting, they gladly threw down their nets and joined the cause (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). I remember thinking it sounded like a fun adventure!

However, underneath the story, something less pleasant lurked. Daniel Harrington notes: “As fishermen they would have enjoyed a relatively stable existence . . . since commercial fishing in the Sea of Galilee was (and is) a fairly prosperous business enterprise. However . . . the disciples leave behind their families, business, and stable lives to follow Jesus. (T)hey were willing to suffer” (95). In fact, other would-be early disciples ask Jesus if they might say goodbye to their families. In one instance, a potential follower asks if he might bury his dead father first, before striking out on the road. Jesus’ response is a firm no. Why? Clearly Jesus is using this “teachable moment” to inform his followers that they are to expect great suffering by relinquishing their stability, forfeiting material comforts, and disowning family members as they join his public ministry.

There are of course earlier (and more acute) stories of suffering throughout the scriptures, and the idea of personal suffering is fundamental to many spiritual practices. But this was my first vague sense of what suffering really was—the suffering of those early adoptees as they walked out of town into the unknown. If left at that, this parable is pretty straightforward: Living virtuously requires sacrifice and concomitant suffering. But Harrington illustrates that a much more complex reality exists. As these early dis-

ciples encounter increasingly darker suffering on the road to Jerusalem (akin, in a small way, to how my sense of suffering has increased the longer I teach academic writing courses), it doesn't quite work out as planned: While they start out fairly well (just as I did when I was a novice teacher), "the first followers of Jesus were not entirely successful in facing up to the challenges of discipleship" (104). Faced with the mystery of Jesus' passion, with mounting persecution, and with increasing physical suffering, many of these early disciples simply flee. Or they denounce the ministry altogether.

Apparently, suffering—at least in a prolonged or intense way—is not something many of us will endure willingly.



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