

Holy Ground

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A quarterly reflection on
the contemplative life



Ouch!



Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. Jeramiah 15: 8

. . . in spite of being right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression. Job 34: 6

For this I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals and mourning like the ostriches. For her wound is incurable. It has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem. Micah 1: 6-9

Where do you hurt? How bad is your pain? Are you ready, as Micah, to howl

like jackals and roar like ostriches? Many of us are in one kind of pain or another. Mental, emotional and physical suffering is spread before us day after day. Injury, illness, death, war, famine, earthquake, fire, flood, and horrifying violence demand lamentation and grief. It is as though a huge seeping wound extends across our planet. Every day begins to look like Good Friday. And I am Peter, pulling on Jesus' coattails, saying, "No Lord, no cross! No death! Haven't we had enough of this pain?"

Pain is an urgent signal from our bodies that something needs our attention. Chronic pain is defined as significant discomfort for at least three months. The wound, the incurable sickness at the heart of our lives, festers and resists a myriad of diagnoses and treatments. Something is fundamentally amiss.

Recent research in *Demography Journal* found that more Americans are living with chronic pain than ever before. Chronic pain has increased the most for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. "What we're seeing in the younger age groups demonstrates how

pain in some ways functions as much as a mental health problem as it does a physical health problem,” says Grol-Prokopczyk. “Pain can be exacerbated by stress, and stress can bring about alcohol use.”

- Demography, “Pain Trends Among American Adults-2002-2018, Duke University Press

According to the *Institute of Medicine 2011*, Chronic pain is a major public health problem given its high prevalence and costs. Nationally, the number of people experiencing chronic pain exceeds those affected by heart disease, cancer, and diabetes combined. The annual economic cost of pain in the United States was estimated at more than \$600 billion. Further, pain is an enormous problem globally. Estimates suggest that 20% of adults suffer from pain globally and 10% are newly diagnosed with chronic pain each year.

One in five of us is in pain. The pain of anxiety and depression is at crisis level for teens and young people, according to The Center for Disease Control. Next time you are in a gathering of people – at the grocery store, attending a concert, sitting in church, watching a basketball game – look around. Somebody here is really hurting.

What happens when we are in pain? How

does pain effect our sense of self, our relationships with others, and the quality of our lives? What do you do with your pain? What kind of relationship do you have with it?

Of course, we want to make the pain stop. We may do almost anything to make it stop. I have lumbar stenosis and sciatica. I have been busy making the rounds of caregivers, remedies, ointments and potions for four months.

Pain pushes us, if not to seek help, to worry, get angry, crabby and turn on ourselves and others. Pain tends to isolate us. It attacks our joy and sense of personal agency. It prevents us from doing things that give us pleasure. It forces some of us to leave our source of income and social contacts at the workplace. Pain undermines our sense of worth. We see the censure in the word often used to describe people who live with chronic pain: invalid. In a culture



that measures worth by accomplishment and production, pain may bring shame and guilt.

TESHUVAH

We do have more help for physical and mental pain than ever before. How does one respond to spiritual pain? Lenten scripture offers an ancient medicine – *teshuvah*. This Hebrew word means, literally, turning back to something you strayed from or looked away from. It is usually translated as repentance. Repent does not mean that you have done something bad to bring this on you. It is a call to turn back to something you wandered from or stopped paying attention to. Repent means, Hey! Heads up! You are missing something here. You are preoccupied with the pain and have lost your focus on the whole of reality.

Pain naturally demands our attention. It may totally consume us in its grip and carry us into a dark tunnel, where we can see only the pain we are experiencing and our own helplessness. How do we shift our attention, how do we repent? There is no easy way or fail-safe protocol. There is God in this with us. There is Christ suffering with us.

There is hope, even when you have no hope. I do not remember how or when I came across poet Vassar Williams, but

her work has lodged itself in my heart. She was born with cerebral palsy in 1924. She was a theologian, a voice for the disabled, and a teacher of creative writing at the University of St. Thomas. She published numerous books and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and poet Laureate of Texas. Vassar Williams was a woman who knew pain well.

WITHOUT CEREMONY

Except ourselves, we have no other prayer; our needs are sores upon our nakedness. We do not have to name them; we are here. And You who can make eyes can see no less.

We fall, not on our knees, but on our hearts, a posture humbler far and more downcast; while Father Pain instructs us in the arts of praying, hunger is the worthiest fast.

We find ourselves where tongues cannot wage war on silence (farther, mystics never flew) but on the common wings of what we are, borne on the wings of what we bear, toward You,

Oh Word, in whom our wordiness dissolves, when we have not a prayer except ourselves.

- Vassar Miller



When we have no words to express our suffering, Father Pain instructs us in the arts of prayer. After one has tried everything, the doctors, all the remedies your friends have suggested, after you have fought against the pain, shown up at the demonstrations, lobbied for the poor, cried out for justice – you, exhausted, are invited to surrender, to give up your will and give yourself over to the Healer with the holes in his palms and wound in his side.

Here, all we have to offer are our failed, pain-filled, messy selves as the content of our prayer. Can pain really be known as a father, a teacher, a friend? Father Pain takes us beyond the ceremony of ritual, the right prayer, our activism, or any of our efforts to conjure up relief for the suffering. Pain itself goes beyond language – is it an ache, a buzzing, a sting, a stab, dull, sharp, a burning flame, or a number on the pain scale... a 6, or 3 or 9.5?

Might the suffering itself, the body contorted in pain, our own deep need, be our offering? Could our fast be our anguish, when the law didn't pass, the treatment doesn't help, our mission failed?

When we stop resisting *what is*, the reality before us, no matter how much

we dislike it, a shift or a turning back in repentance may occur. Resisting only perpetuates what we resist. You may have noticed this with teenagers, politics, and wars. Sometimes we need to slip off the pew and lay our whole body down as an offering, saying with Jesus, not my will, but yours.

If we can allow and consent to the pain there is, instead of pushing it away, we may begin to work with it and care for it and ourselves with compassion and love. Here we find “*a humbler posture, far and more downcast.*” We have stepped out of a dualistic framework, where we are pushing something away or grasping after something we desire. This limited either/or world view doesn't work with a both/and God.

When we stop distracting ourselves, we can say to Father Pain, “Okay, you can be here too.” We now have the space to be curious and ask what we need to learn about the arts of praying. We say to our body, “which keeps the score,” as Bessel Van der Kolk wrote, “What do you need from me?”

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in healing of Trauma.

This turning back, this repentance is a gift of hospitality to ourselves. It opens the door to the Still Point in the turning



world, as T.S.Eliot called it. When we make space to accommodate with kindness, what we least want around, we step toward a unitive conception of Christ and our world – a place where everything belongs, and we are one with it all in Christ. The still point exists in the center of the conflict and pain and brings spacious awareness, equanimity, and acceptance beyond our wordiness.

*At the still point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still
point, there the dance is, but neither
arrest nor movement. And do not call it
fixity, where past and future are gathered.*

*Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for
the point, the still point, there would be
no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I
cannot say where. And I cannot say, how
long, for that is to place it in time.
The inner freedom from the practical
desire. The release from action and
suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet
surrounded by a grace of sense, a white
light still and moving, Erhebung *
without elimination, both a new world
and the old made explicit, understood in
the completion of its partial ecstasy. The
resolution of its partial horror.*

*A German word for: hurling upwards, levitation, elation, edification
Excerpt from Burnt Norton (No. 1 of 'Four Quartets') by T.S. Eliot



Eliot's Still Point is our union with Christ, who is the reconciliation of all opposites. Christ is the binding factor, who holds us, along with all things, together in the midst of the chaos.

T. S Eliot was influenced by how St. John of the Cross described peace in the midst of pain, or loss in his instructions for *Ascending Mt Carmel*, which is a metaphor for the union of the soul with Christ. St John tells his story of self-emptying, self-denial and wholly identifying with the will of God.



TRUTH TELLING AND TRAUMA

We live in a time of truth telling and trauma. We are occupied with our stories of suffering and damage and how to be kinder and more accepting of each other. Some find these conversations so unsettling they try to shut down the speakers and ban their books. Such discussions can be like land mines – one misstep may be a deep sword thrust to someone else’s heart. We want to be trauma-informed, but we often unwittingly trample all over somebody’s chaffed and aching soul. As difficult and distressing as it may be, we need to have this time of pain sharing.

In this detachment the spiritual soul finds its quiet and repose; for since it covets nothing, nothing wearies it when it is lifted up, and nothing oppresses it when it is cast down, because it is in the center of its humility; but when it covets anything, at that very moment it becomes wearied.

The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, trans. & eds. Kavanaugh, Kieran, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies.

There are many names for this place: Howard Thurman called it *centering down*. Paul speaks of it, when he writes, *I have learned to be content in all*

circumstances. Philippians 4: 11-13. Jesus, who is the consequence of God’s own self-emptying, in turn asks us to deny ourselves and shows us how to do it.

You are familiar with the Still Point. You have been here too. You may have no words for it or need words. You have lived from this place. And like us all, you have been distracted and drawn away. We do not see the beauty in our brokenness or the freedom in our humility. We do not see the sanctity of our wounds.

To see into our sin and dysfunction with love, as we fumble, however poorly, to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe, is to repent. To see the hunger, humiliation, and pain behind the eyes of the angry, disillusioned, and violent ones is to see with God’s eyes.

Why surrender and turn back to the Still Point? *Because the soul feels its worth!* Even under all the trash, pain, and loss—the soul protests, and cries out for help. The soul knows its God given value and dignity in the presence of contempt and disdain.

Ultimately, it is up to us to embrace our own wounds to rescue ourselves individually and corporately from the lie



of our unworthiness. As author and teacher James Finley writes: Do not perpetuate violence against the part of ourselves, [the part of our communities, families, and nations] that needs to be loved the most.”

You are precious. You are worthy. You are deeply and eternally loved.

Loretta F. Ross

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining.
Till he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices. For
yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!*

Oh Holy Night, French lyrics by
Placide Cappeau



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for your generous support of this Wayside
Fruit Stand. The Sanctuary and its programs
are open to serve a wide range of people. And
we have a great assortment of the fruits of the
Spirit ready for you.

What the Sanctuary Means to Me

*I am teaching a class on conflict resolution this
quarter to freshmen at Seattle Pacific University,
and I assigned your article Appliance Violence from
Holy Ground to them about a month ago. In a recent
reflection paper, two students mentioned that your
article was one of the most helpful and insightful
ones they've come across. THANK YOU for the gift
of your words.*

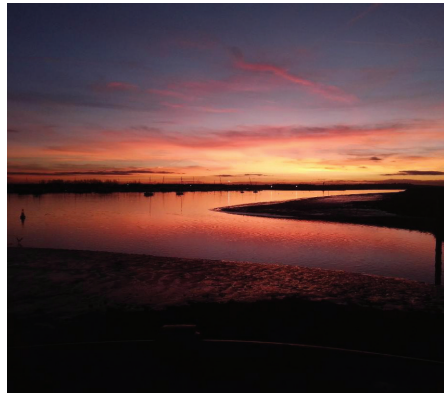
- Emily Huff



How can it be that this beautiful, beautiful planet can both ravish and ravage us; devastate and delight us. I stand and watch a sunset and my heart is enlarged to bursting point. I turn on the News and I can scarcely compute the destruction and desolation that a quake brings. My heart, my heart must sing. But it must also weep and wail and wonder, 'Why?'

Still listening and thinking and pondering. Some days my 'yes' is a tennis ball thrown up that I decline to hit. And sometimes I go chasing after that ball as if my life depended on it. It is well. In the depths, in the deep waters of life, it is well. And one day, all manner of things will be well. I await that day by living.

Rosie Benjamin, a *Holy Ground* Reader, lives in England where she watches the seals play in the river Crouch.



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...the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2-3

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