

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ Research shows that women caught in a domestic violence situation do not decide to leave it immediately. On the average, they will leave seven times before leaving finally. In your ministry context and knowing your community, write a list of reasons you think this could be true. Realizing this, how would this knowledge affect your work with women in domestic violence?

⇒ Spirituality is a recognized support for a woman experiencing domestic violence in her intimate relationship. How can you help a woman who has an underdeveloped relationship with God develop and strengthen her spirituality as a resource for her situation?

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## Serving the dying *by Stephen Faller*

**A**s a hospital chaplain, it is not unusual to serve people who are actively dying, i.e., in their last hours of life. Doing so is always a profound experience, but there were two patients whom I will never forget. They are united in my mind, not only because they were on the same oncology unit at the same time, but because of the contrast in their faith responses to impending death.

It was clear that they had lived in different worlds: one in wealth and privilege, the other in poverty. Both were Protestant, one of a Mainline

denomination and the other of an urban, apostolic congregation. There is no reason to think that these women knew each other, but they were sisters in Christ.

What distinguished them was the contrast in how each experienced and expressed her suffering. The woman who had lived most of her life in poverty chanted a mantra through her worse pain: "Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus." She was sweating and laboring and the mantra gave her a focus, and, I can hope, a comfort. The other woman was distraught and angry. She cried out and shouted, "Why am I still here? What's the point

## RESOURCES:

of this! Why won't God take me?" She was miserable.

These two responses represent two very different views of God – neither one to be judged or challenged. The woman repeating the mantra, on the one hand, saw God as one to turn to during her suffering; the other woman believed in a God who takes away suffering. Or perhaps she believed that suffering was something outside the framework of the devout life. After all, many passages in the Bible argue that death and suffering are the enemy and ultimately defeated by Christ.

As a hospital chaplain, or for anyone choosing to be present with someone suffering or approaching death, what do we learn from these two responses and what should our role be? The other question raised here is, what does the church teach about how to understand suffering?

In regard to how these two women interacted with God in their suffering, we must first recognize that prior to hospitalization, patients have spent years working out their own faith in God with fear and trembling. We respect that, and seldom will the chaplain challenge deeply held beliefs about the nature of God, and certainly not at the time of death. For instance, a chaplain would never question a patient who is angry at God during such vulnerable moments. The commerce of life and death and the currency of suffering are much too sacred an economy to allow outside speculation. When someone gives his or her life back to God, it is a transaction of infinite intimacy, and whatever the terms of agreement and disagreement are, they are not to be second-guessed. Any conjecture regarding the why's or how's of the mystery of death should be explored long before, if at all.

Beyond the immediacy of ministering, a chaplain or pastor also must wonder what the Christian church teaches about suffering. Part of ministry is to pass on the beliefs and practices of the spiritual tradition as received – including beliefs about

<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/>

This 1998 multipart National Public Radio program examines the American experience of dying, including how Americans understand the grieving process.

<http://www.hospicefoundation.org>

Hospice Foundation of America has many resources for helping clergy and ministries address end-of-life issues.

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1932>

A first-person account of a Presbyterian woman and her own cancer story as well as her husband's fatal cancer. She offers thought about how clergy can better minister to their members' needs as they confront death and dying.

suffering – so that each generation can benefit from those who have gone before. Such a tradition establishes a grid of understanding for us to plot and navigate our own life events. There should be some comfort and assurance in knowing that we are not on our own to understand life in Christ.

Are today's theologians and spiritual leaders teaching people how to deal with suffering? Given the fact that it is something we all must

face, shouldn't these lessons find their way to the top of the curriculum?

Many believers have now completely divorced their Christology from their theodicy. Adversity and hardship have no mooring in this kind of Christianity, other than as a foil for deliverance. Scripturally, this is problematic because it is exactly the proverbial simplicity that Jesus hopes to reverse in the moral ambiguity of the parable. In the world of the parable, God can redeem a scoundrel, and sometimes nice guys do finish last.

Some of this can be attributed to the human propensity for the denial of death coupled with Christianity's deliberate choice of emphasizing the resurrection over the crucifixion. But even among believers who don't pass over Good Friday too quickly, their theology of suffering often seems superficial. If individuals do find religious significance in their pain, it is often interpreted as some kind of punishment, prepayment, test, experiment or medicine to improve their moral fiber. Again, if one finds solace in these responses, then the discussion ought to end here. But these kinds of interpretations aren't any more sophisticated than the attitudes of the friends condemned in the Book of Job.

Simplistic answers and flimsy reframing cannot bear the weight of the kind of transformation from mourning into joyful dancing that the psalmist references in Psalm 30:11, nor do they convey the painful depth of the exodus out of Egypt (or the suffering and dying of a disease such as cancer).

The Christian tradition provides centuries of insightful thought and guidance on the subject of suffering and hardship. There are the ancient, mystical writings of Saint John of the Cross, Nicolas of Cusa, Julian of Norwich, and the contemporary theology of Thomas Merton or Martin Luther King, Jr., to name only a few. All of these hint at higher intimations that suffering can be a kind of solidarity with Jesus, and that God may use the most painful experiences in life to communicate mystery.

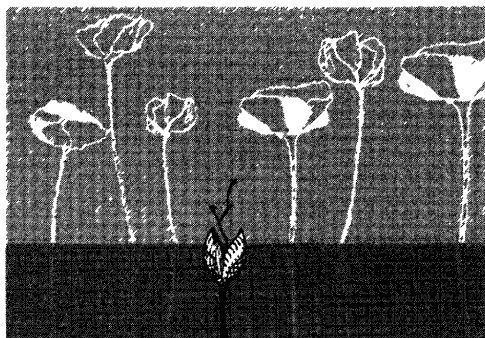
Returning to the two women who prompted these questions, I am convicted by a final observation. When someone is begging to die, all kinds of reactions occur in the caregiver that ultimately are not helpful. When all a patient wants is for it to be over, I feel a heightened urge to “fix” things. There is nothing to be fixed, and if left unchecked that impulse can prompt a lot of clumsy pastoral care. This is when hurtful, careless things get said – perhaps more to comfort ourselves than the one dying.

On the other hand, when someone is actively working out a personal salvation with a personal God – whether it’s raging against that Creator or calling to Jesus through a mantra – the only thing to do is to sit back and be a respectful witness to this sacred passage.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ How are today’s theologians and spiritual leaders teaching people how to deal with suffering? Who has been an influential teacher for you in your own ministry in this area?

⇒ How could your church or ministry help individuals become more accepting of death and suffering as a part of life?

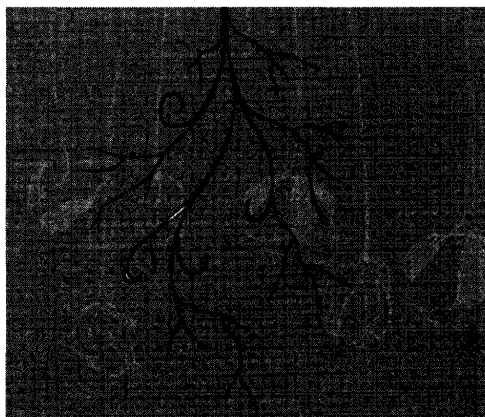


### When God Created Me

Formed in love by Holy Mystery,  
Woven to be only me.  
Emanation of God’s Splendor,  
A unique epiphany.  
Known by God before all others,  
Conceived for maturity.  
All I can do is be thankful.  
God, my Life, who created me!

Implanted in God’s great mercy,  
Nurtured through Divine action.  
Overshadowed by the blessing,  
“You are my Beloved son.”  
Gifted, graced, beyond all measure,  
Free to flee or to believe.  
All I can do is be thankful.  
God, my Life, who created me!

– Michael Sciretti, Jr.



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