



# Suffering Is in The Knowing We Hurt

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I confess that, as a person who ministers to many people in their suffering, I more often than not desire to be a helper, trying to find the proverbial lifeline to throw to the drowning victim. Seldom do I picture myself in the water with the person. If we were both in the water, I figure, who would save whom?

But, we *are* in the same water — or in the same boat, I guess. I sometimes think that there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who suffer and those who try desperately to avoid it.

I feel frustrated that Francis of Assisi, the medieval founder of my community, sang his *Canticle of the Creatures*, but it always takes so much translating for our contemporary experience. In an otherwise joyous and upbeat song of various creatures praising God simply by being who they were created to be (sun, moon, stars, fire, water, air, earth), the saint of nature and birdbaths gets to the human creature and, in a real downer, points out humanity's unique contribution to this praise: Human beings suffer.

"Praised be You, my Lord," he prays, "through those who forgive and bear sickness and tribulation."

I think there's a profound insight lurking in this almost sadistic image. Women and men, we human beings, are the only creatures on the planet who "know." The popular astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, PhD, once queried: "Are we the only creatures in the universe who KNOW that we're in the universe?"

Well, we're the only ones on this planet who KNOW we hurt. We know that we hurt other

people. We know, in fact, that we didn't hurt yesterday. We know that we hurt today, and we don't want to hurt tomorrow. We mourn hurt's presence, and we wish for its passing from us.

## KNOWING THAT WE HURT

Although few of us want to "suffer fools gladly," suffering itself is hardly optional for humans, nor is it, in itself, a glad enterprise. Though it's a simplified paraphrase of medieval metaphysics, I think it still bears much truth: Suffering is not in the hurt, it's in the knowing we hurt.

In his story about perfect joy, Francis of Assisi asks his companion, Brother Leo, to write down the meaning of the phrase. Leo lists many things that the brothers would hope make up a "perfect" life — like being popular preachers, making the deaf hear, the mute speak and the blind see, being able to travel into Hell itself and converting it to Christ.

**Praised be You, my Lord, through those who forgive and bear sickness and tribulation.**

— FRANCIS OF ASSISI

“Write this down,” Francis said. “This is not perfect joy.”

What is? In a brief narrative, he pictures the two of them arriving at their friary after sunset, cold, wet and hungry, only to have the brother who answers the door reject them. In fact, the friar mistakes them for thieves and beats them away with sticks, leaving them out in the cold, still hungry and now bruised and battered.

“And if we bear it all with peace in our heart, thinking that God wants it this way, and the Evil turns into Good, write this down: This is perfect joy.”

The current opioid epidemic has been linked to an increase in people’s despair at situations they cannot change. Anesthetizing our fears, numbing ourselves from frustration, drinking and eating to avoid living or avoid feeling, or pretending we can run away from difficulties is virtually epidemic.

Is it shameful to recognize that we are powerless and we share the sadness that things cannot be changed in an instant? Is it so blasphemous to know that suffering itself is a passage into our frailty? Is it heretical to our human optimism to recognize that our very need for each other is a truly human privilege? Perfect joy doesn’t come from the uncontrollable events that happen “at us,” but through the consciousness of what we learn and the love we show one another in and through them.

Don’t we all know health care co-workers who prefer drugging someone to sitting (suffering

through) with someone through their tears, their complaints or their fears? As a film called “Whose Life Is It Anyway?” once asked: Are we anesthetizing the patient to calm them, or are we numbing the patient to calm ourselves?

The Latin root of “compassion,” mind you, is to “suffer with” or “bear with.” Being in the water and wading with them is nothing to fear — or avoid.

I think we can all agree that health care exists because of our loving (and deeply divine!) desire to relieve suffering. Valiant attempts by health care professionals to relieve suffering are com-

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mendable and so necessary and humane. Yet, simply numbing human hurts or masking mortality, either the patient’s or our own, seems neither noble nor human.

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