

A large, dark tree stands in a grassy field at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by the tree's branches, creating a bright glow and lens flare. In the background, there are rolling hills or mountains under a hazy, golden sky. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

Living *with* Hope

In Times of Illness

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INTRODUCTION

To suffer in God's way means changing for the better and leaves no regrets, but to suffer as the world knows suffering brings death.

2 Cor. 7:10

When my father lay dying of cancer, we reflected together about the *why* of his suffering. “Maybe it’s helping someone else,” I lamely ventured. “I suppose” came his unconvinced reply. Yet as death came nearer, my father became noticeably more loving, more affectionate than ever he was before. His smile seemed to say that he was, in some sense, already rising from the dead. He was definitely more at peace. Was that slim slice of meaning (expressed with an *I suppose*) sufficient to transform his suffering?

A friend once told me that long ago he had made friends with his pain. What did he mean? The search for meaning is somehow found within the context of God’s love for us.

We are convinced that God does not want suffering, that it was not in God's original plan for us. Jesus invariably responds to suffering in the Gospels by relieving it. So much so, that this is how we could describe the gracious goodness he brings as one who will ultimately overcome suffering. "He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone." (Rv. 21:4)

Yet in the meantime, for some reason, the God who loves also accepts suffering in the world. We are invited to do the same, both with our own suffering, and (what may even be more painful for us) the suffering of those we love. It helps if we can find some purpose, some good, no matter how obscure, within it.

Modern research concludes that such an attitude actually enhances healing. Spirituality and prayer have a positive effect on a person's well-being and health.

These are some of the topics that will be presented in this booklet. Hopefully, these thoughts and reflections can bring comfort in sickness and the many kinds of suffering it brings. Such a journey

invites you to learn profound lessons of love and compassion. Your suffering teaches you, and in turn, teaches us. It is hoped that *Living With Hope* will offer some thoughts and spiritual insights that other believers have learned from their own suffering.

God bless you on your journey!



CHAC File Photo

Acceptance

*Whatever experience comes your way,
accept it as a blessing in the certainty
that nothing can happen without
God.*

St. Barnabas, 2nd Century

While walking in Ireland a pilgrim was forced into a barn to take shelter from the rain. Another man was already there and was obviously busy praying. As they chatted, the pilgrim remarked how the other must be close to God. “Yes,” came the reply without hesitation, “God is very fond of me.”

What a grace to really *know* that God loves us! It is a discovery as unearned as it is life-giving. God goes to great length to assure us of the truth of his love. At times God almost begs us to accept and embrace the mystery of this love.

There is a relationship between love and suffering. What may seem meaningless takes on new meaning when we walk with Jesus Christ in faith through his life, death and resurrection. When suffering and

sickness do occur, they can have positive meaning in a person's life. They do not represent a punishment or curse, but can be an aid to spiritual growth.

The love of God represents a relationship that is unbreakable. It is also intimate. For Jesus, God is *Abba*, that is, *Father*. We are told this term conveys something of the affectionate intimacy similar to our expression *daddy* or *mommy*. Such an intimacy, with its promise of a relationship that endures, helped Jesus to accept the difficult moments of his life. When we seek that closeness with God, we are also comforted and strengthened.



At Gethsemane Jesus prayed:

Abba! Everything is possible for you.

Take this cup away from me.

But let it be as you, not I, would have it.

Mk. 14:36

Taking Charge

*Each stage of life has its own beauty
...and its own tasks.*

John Paul II, Letter to the Elderly, 1999

A young priest was asked by a tired looking husband to visit his wife who was critically ill at home. Standing in the bedroom, filled with the paraphernalia for the gravely ill, the pastor noticed the husband's gentle care for his wife. But even in sickness, the wife seemed to be concerned for her husband. "Jim, you look tired. Are you getting enough sleep?"

Soon she turned this care to the visiting priest when she discovered that he was new to the parish. "I hope everyone is making you feel at home Father?" She listened to the prayers, received the Sacrament of the Sick and the Eucharist, and felt blessed by her husband and the pastor. The young priest went away feeling equally anointed by this encounter with a person who was sick and by her caregiver. Illness may sometimes make us feel we are losing control, or may even challenge some of our long held beliefs.

It can force us to grapple with fear, anger, and the unknown. Still, we need not see ourselves as victims.

We can take charge of our illness. We can find small ways to continue to live life fully and meaningfully with the people we encounter each day. A smile, a kind word, a concern even for those who are concerned for us, brings peace.

We never lose the power to influence another person. Relatives, nurses, medical technicians, and cleaning staff, often report how they are encouraged by the courage and goodness they observe in a person who is sick. Our own pain can make us more willing to forgive others, so it may be a good time to reach out to someone who has something against us.



Gracious God, through our own troubles may we grow more sensitive to the suffering of others. Help us to show them your compassion.

Liturgy of the Hours

Paying Attention

We were carrying our own death warrant with us, and it taught us not to rely on ourselves but only on God ...He will save us again.

2 Cor. 1:9-10

Saint Paul paid attention to his suffering. Difficult though suffering can be at times, his letters challenge us to look beyond suffering and see it in a new light. It was a “thorn” that humbled him to keep him “from getting too proud.” (2 Cor. 12:7). Loss was seen as a way to receive new insights and depth.

There is an Islamic tale about a man whose son brought home six wild horses. “What a blessing,” said his father’s friends. “We’ll see,” said the father. The next day the son broke his leg while riding one of the new found stallions. “What a pity!” cried the neighbours. “We’ll see,” replied the father. Then the Emperor’s servant arrived to conscript all the young men into the army for an impending campaign, but because of the broken leg, the son was exempted. “How lucky,” the father was told. “How do we

know?” he replied. One person’s tragedy is another person’s opportunity.

What happens to us is not nearly as important as how we react to what happens to us. Grace is the gift that comes when we pay attention to our suffering, when we walk with a bearing of acceptance rather than escape, of courage rather than anger.

In some ways we create our own realities. When scientists examine light, if they look for particles, they find them; and if they look for waves, they find them as well! Sometimes we can avoid reality, but not for long. Christians see that at its core, reality comes out of God’s loving heart. Everything that is or can be originates there, and so is marked with his love.



Gracious God, may everything we do begin with your inspiration and continue with your saving help; let our lives find their origin in you, and through you come to completion.



Photo courtesy of
St. Joseph's Health Care, London

The Art of Patience

So I will be very happy to make my weakness my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me.

2 Cor. 12:9

Recently I saw a slogan posted at the local gym for those people sweating through their exercise. *No pain – no gain!* it read. That may seem glib but there is some truth to this, truth beyond the waistline. Cabinet makers tell me that woodworking is the art of patience and persistence. It requires long hours of sanding the wood and polishing the finish.

Spiritual truths, and the consolation that results from our search for them, are not like instant coffee. They are more like wine; they take time to appreciate and to accept. That is why we call these truths wisdom. Wisdom is the polished oak of our hard-earned experience and suffering. It is the treasured heirloom we value and hold on to. It is the pearl of great price.

Being patient is not always easy. People who are sick must often wait to get an appointment with the

doctor, wait for tests to be done, and wait again for the results. We pray, and it seems we must even wait a long time before God answers.

Waiting can seem like a time of testing. But maybe it is more about refinement, time spent polishing the shine of our relationships with our heart and soul, our family and friends, and our God.

You can wait like people waiting for a bus at the bus stop, impatient and too conscious of time. Or you can wait like two friends at a park bench, oblivious of time, engaged in their friendship and conversation. Either way you have to wait. But it need not be another burden to carry. It can become an opportunity, a privileged moment of encounter.



Giver of all Wisdom, deepen our awareness of your Presence in our lives. Show us your way so that we may live in your truth. May every moment be a moment of encounter with you.

Taking Refuge

In you, O Lord, I take refuge. Never let me be disgraced. In your righteousness deliver me, rescue me; turn your ear to me, make haste!

Psalm 31:1

Once when going through difficult times, I discovered Psalm 31. The first six verses expressed what I was feeling so well that I memorized them. Even Jesus prayed from the psalms as he hung on the cross (Lk. 23:46). His prayer came so naturally that he likely learned it by heart at his mother's knee.

The Psalms are prayers or songs inspired by the Holy Spirit that speak of the experience of ordinary people. They express to God every kind of human need and emotion from anger and anxiety to praise and gratitude. There are even curses in the psalms. "It's alright to be angry with me," God seems to say, "Sometimes I get angry with you too." If they are anything, the psalms are honest and direct.

Leonard Cohen, in speaking of Jesus in his poem *Suzanne*, remarks that "only drowning men can see

him.” It is in our desperation that we cry out to God. Prayer seems to arise most poignantly out of our need when we have no place else to turn.

It is when we are sick or when we are suffering that the psalms make most sense to us. “How much longer will you forget me, Lord? Forever? How much longer will you hide your face from me? How much longer must I endure grief in my soul, and sorrow in my heart by day and by night?” (Ps. 13:1-2)

Try leisurely leafing through the psalms. Pray a few every day for a while. Note the passages that speak to you. Pray that the Spirit guide you to the psalm you need. You will discover that God is the reliable saviour you seek.



Lord, teach me your way, how to
walk beside you faithfully.

Ps. 86:11

The Mystery of Suffering

*God whispers to us in our pleasure,
speaks in our conscience,
but shouts in our pains!*

C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Why do we suffer, get sick, feel pain? There is no simple answer to this age-old question. In the *Bible*, Job bluntly puts this question to God after losing everything – possessions, children, health. Three friends try to convince him that he is suffering deservedly since he has sinned. Don't we all ask, "What have I done to deserve this?"

Sometimes we do feel our suffering is a punishment. Sometimes we feel we are being tested. Sometimes suffering helps us learn deeper and more enduring values in life. Sometimes it helps us sort our priorities. Ultimately, suffering is simply beyond our understanding.

While suffering remains forever a mystery, God's love in Jesus sheds further light on it. "Yes God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone ...may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16).

The gift of life is achieved through Jesus' suffering and also reveals the very heart of the mystery of love.

Christ suffered in our place. Still we are invited to join in his redeeming suffering. To love is to suffer, the poets tell us. Is the opposite true as well? To suffer is to demonstrate love. Our suffering, when we see it in this light, can be raised to a new level of grace. (Rm. 12:1) This kind of suffering becomes our consolation (2 Cor. 1:5).



Gracious God, help us to accept what we have to undergo. Keep us close to your Son Jesus who suffered to heal us. Join his love to ours so that suffering with him, we may know your consolation in him.



Photo courtesy of Huy Lam
St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto

You Are Not Alone

*All will be well, and all will be well,
and all manner of things will be well.*

Julian of Norwich, 14th Century
Revelations of Love

The Sacrament of the Sick begins with words from the letter of James, “If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the church, and they will anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him.” (James 5:14)

This truth reassures the person who is sick that they are not alone. Those who are sick remain a vital part of the community. God has not abandoned them. Jesus reaches out to those who are sick to heal their bodies, hearts and souls.

The oil used is blessed during Holy Week and is a healing ointment, a salve – a word that comes from the Latin word *salvare* meaning salvation. The anointing provides the sense of “being made whole again.”

A friend of mine who was diagnosed with cancer did not welcome an invitation to receive the

Sacrament of the Sick because he thought it was only a last resort, a place for miracles. Further discussion helped him to understand that while miracles do occur, the sacrament's greatest gift is probably seen more in the forgiveness it provides, in the confidence it arouses, and in how it clears away whatever might block the healing process.

The church prays for healing by praying for what the sick person most needs. The church prays that families, doctors, and other caregivers be strengthened, that treatment be effective, and that all the sick may know God's care. This is accompanied by words and gestures as hands are placed on the one who needs reassurance.



Comfort those who suffer. When afraid, give them courage; when afflicted, give them patience; when dejected, afford them hope, and when alone, assure them of the support of your people.

Liturgy of Anointing

School of Compassion

The God of all consolation, comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation that we received from God.

2 Cor. 1:4

Shops are filled with *Get Well* cards because that is the hope we carry for ourselves or for those we love who are sick. When we do find ourselves back on the road to recovery, how do we react? Will we forget the hard-earned wisdom, the discipline, the humility learned from our suffering? Will we sink back into mediocrity? Or will we have come to a permanent new level of sensitivity and faith?

Suffering is a school of compassion. Native wisdom states that we understand another person only when “we have walked a mile in his moccasins.” Our experience of sickness can soften our hearts with empathy, making us more acutely aware of another person’s pain. Suffering can activate our imaginations to help in more creative ways.

In the parable that relates the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 29-37), the priest and Levite (who nervously move over to the other side of the road to pass by the half-dead robbery victim) may have never suffered a similar experience. The Samaritan, on the other hand, rejected by mainstream society, probably had often been a victim or at least close to victims. Moved by the sight, he springs into action, first treating the person's wounds, getting him up on his mount, leading him to safety, and financing whatever it took to get him well.

An experience of sickness also makes us particularly open to the presence of God. We discover more clearly our personal mission in life.



Eternal Creator, may our hearts beat with your Son's tenderness, our senses feel with his sensitivity, our minds imagine what you dream for us all. Unbind our hands so that with them you can reach out to touch each person we meet on our journey.

Forgiveness

God comes like the sun in the morning – when it is time.

Carlo Carretto

Have you ever misaligned the buttons on a sweater? Ever ended up with an extra button and no button hole to put it in? In many ways we do this in life too. When we are sick we have a lot of time to reflect on our lives – on what went right and what we could have done better, on what needs to be celebrated and on what needs to be given attention. Often this reflection dwells on our relationships.

Setting things straight is never easy. It's like the buttons. The only way to put things back on track is to undo all the misaligned buttons, go back to the beginning and start buttoning up again.

Strangely enough, being sick can become the right time to deal with long-standing hurts (those inflicted on us and those we have inflicted on others). Maybe we have not spoken with someone in our family for

a long time – too long. Maybe this is the right time to call that person.

Forgiveness is powerful medicine. It heals in unknown ways. Nelson Mandela, the former freedom fighter who spent 26 years in prison for his desire to make South Africa a nation of equal opportunity for black and white citizens alike, left prison to become the first black President of the nation. He did this because he was able to leave prison harbouring no bitterness against those who had inflicted a great deal of pain on him and his people. He had every right to be angry, but his forgiveness set the nation on a road to healing.



Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope ... For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

Prayer of St. Francis



Photo courtesy of
Misericordia Health Centre, Winnipeg

Letting Go

There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under the heavens. A time for giving birth, a time for dying.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

Saint Francis welcomed Sister Death, singing joyfully his *Hymn to Creation* as, blind and feeble, he lay dying. The spirit of poverty that he embraced taught him that to lose something was a way to gain something better.

Little deaths occur all life long, preparing us for bigger ones. We let childhood go only to discover adolescence; adolescence gives way as we enter young adulthood, and so on. Each letting go teaches us new lessons and prepares us for the next stage of life.

Growing older brings more personal losses – selling our home and moving into a senior’s residence or long term care facility. If we have never been sick we might have real difficulties when we become seriously ill. Sometimes we see such losses as

personal failures. We become afraid, depressed and disoriented.

Letting go doesn't mean giving up hope. There is a time for doing all that we can to enhance our health: exercise, diet, surgery, physiotherapy. There is also a time to make the necessary adjustments, and carry on the best we can, grateful for what we still have left, using it to the best of our abilities. Living with a disability, an illness or even impending death need not be defeating. Living each moment in hope, Terry Fox (the young Canadian stricken with cancer) did more with one leg than most of us do with two. Letting go can be a time of remembering special times with people, a time of gratitude for all the experiences and people who have been a part of our lives.



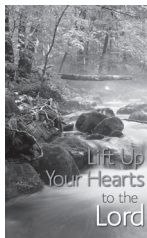
God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

The Serenity Prayer

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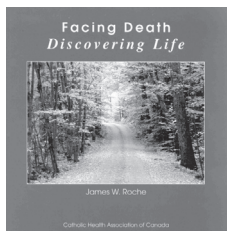
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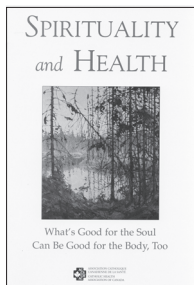
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Suitable for patients, parishioners or anyone who is sick or cares for them.

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