

the end of suffering



the end of suffering  
*finding purpose in pain*

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*The End of Suffering: Finding Purpose in Pain*

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## prologue

The day itself is noticeably bitter, with a steady, blowing cold that makes my knuckles ache and my wet face numb as I bend to shovel more dirt from the heavy wheelbarrow onto our dogs' graves. We buried one Labrador in December, and a second in February. Mona was Leo's mother, and I called her the "mother of all Labradors." She went first. Leo followed, as he was wont to do. On this bleak day in March, I've noticed that the graves have settled some, and that is why I'm shoveling on more dirt.

---

It so happens that I have been puzzling over the ubiquity of grief and pain for a good while now—pretty much off and on since my father fell ill in the fall of 1985 and more continuously since he died of that long illness in the winter of 1988. I suppose that those years mark my conscious entry into the

“valley of the shadow of death.” In fact, I remember saying to my brother Steve—some weeks after witnessing our father’s final throes—that I was having a hard time shaking free of a deep heaviness that kept weighing on me then.

I also recall that in those disquieting days I spoke of this heaviness as *dread*.

In any case, all of this is to say that like most people I, too, have been blindsided by personal grief now and again over the years. And I have an increasingly keen sense that, wherever I am, someone nearby is suffering now.

For that reason, I lately have settled in to mull the matter over, gathering my troubled wits to undertake a difficult essay, more like what we used to call an *essay*, really—an earnest inquiry. I am thinking of it just now as a *study* in suffering, by which I hope to find some sense in affliction, hoping—just as I have come to hope about experience in general—to *make something of it*.

Given affliction’s generous availability, and given the wide, but so far unsatisfying, range of apologia that the nagging enigma of our human suffering has provoked over the years, I thought I might press ahead for a more satisfying glimpse of why it is we

suffer, and why it is that some of us—even among the apparently innocent—appear to suffer far more than others.

At the very least, I would like to come up with a less specious way of talking about it.

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I don't especially want to point fingers, but I am pretty sure that most of us have had our fill of the disturbing pieties that swirl about in the aftermath of suffering and loss, most of which strike me as being, at best, the unfortunate hybrids of good intentions and poor theology. And I am pretty sure that we would all like to feel less tongue-tied as we attempt to comfort a friend who has suffered a devastating loss.

Whenever I hear such commonplace yammerings as "God took him," "God needed her in heaven," or "we don't know why God would send us a hurricane," my heart registers a particularly heavy weight, and my dim wits teeter in chagrined incredulity.

I wouldn't say that my current purpose is all that Miltonic; that is, I don't feel compelled, exactly, to "justify the ways of God to man," but lately I do feel a pressing need to mitigate some of the

nonsense that we habitually lay on the invisible God, presuming, as we seem to do, that He is the only one who has *acted* in every case.

That is to say, while I am nonetheless confident that He and His bodiless messengers have kept me and mine from harm, off and on, I am similarly confident that when harm does come to us, He is not necessarily the one who sent it.

His ways are not our ways—true enough—but I am not convinced that our every disaster or tragedy or accident is rightly attributed to be one of His inexplicable ways. It would be an added and very welcomed bonus not to feel myself tempted toward sin against the pastor every time I hear an ill-considered eulogy.

Finally, I would admit as well that my own faltering faith has come to demand a somewhat more satisfying take on this ubiquitous business of affliction.

The graves of two dogs may seem to some to be a relatively poor starting point—maybe even, to some, an insulting starting point—for this sort of inquiry. I hope not. I would never mean to equate the loss of a dog—or even the loss of two very good dogs—with every other occasion of human

suffering. Still, I will not discount how hard, how sharp, even this loss remains—and how puzzling. It's the puzzlement, frankly, that makes even this current, specific grief remind me more generally of other grief, of other painful occasions, and of our overall predicament.

In any case, as I shovel and as I weep over my big sweet dogs, I wince off and on, a little embarrassed that in a world where each newscast and newspaper brings new images of heart-wrenching human tragedy, I continue to be so broken up over losing my dogs.

My only defense for the moment will have to be that these really were extraordinarily good dogs. And they loved me.

They were Labradors, no less.

Big yellow Labradors.

Innocent as rain.



the end of suffering



## one waking up

*My heart is troubled; my strength fails me,  
And the light of my eyes, even this is not with me.*

—PSALM 37:11

I am guessing that it must have been fairly early in February of 2002 when I was first asked how the tragedy of September 11, 2001, had changed America. The young woman standing before me—my trembling and breathless interlocutor—appeared to be a fledgling student-reporter-on-the-street, and as she spoke I was thinking that she was asking her weighty question too lightly. Her self-conscious embarrassment and acute nervousness, in retrospect, were what had made her rush, what had made her nearly sing out her question, and probably what had made her smile as she did so.

Being accosted this way is par for our course hereabouts. I live in Columbia, Missouri, and thanks to a famous journalism school at the University of Missouri, ours is a modest town overrun with journalists, with professors of journalism, and with

a largely giddy cohort of young men and women who are hoping to prepare—over the next four or so years—for gainful employment as print or television journalists. At the beginning of each semester, walking onto campus from the adjacent downtown can feel like running a gauntlet as the newbies try their hands at “doing journalism.”

In any case, on this crisp February afternoon, a trembling young woman held a microphone to my mouth and stood waiting for my response. More specifically, she held the microphone at just about eye level, making it all but impossible for me to see her face as she spoke. Her hand—which I *did* see very vividly at the end of my nose—was shaking, and she seemed generally unsteady in what looked to be her new heels. Her partner, a gangly guy with something of a sophomore belly beneath a pea-green hooded sweatshirt, wore an orange stocking cap and sported multiple piercings in the one ear I could see; the rest of his face was hidden behind an oversized shoulder-cam, which also appeared to tremble some. As I have said, it was very early in the semester, and this may have been the rookie pair’s first attempt at cold-calling a street corner interview.

Inexperienced as these two may have appeared, they nonetheless managed to snag me as I hurried back to campus after lunch, and they had opened with a question that—I suddenly realized—no one had actually asked me directly until that minute.

I stopped walking.

I stood, slack-jawed, puzzling how to answer them.

For a few mute seconds, I couldn't think of anything to say at all. And then it occurred to me to say something that I don't think I had fully acknowledged until I heard it come out of my mouth.

Of course, I had to tilt my head in order to see around the microphone and meet the young woman's eyes, but then I told her that I didn't think the tragedy of September 11 had changed our actual situation much at all; what it did, I supposed, was reveal how deeply mistaken our earnest illusions had been. The events of that day confronted us with an ongoing reality that—for many, many years—most Americans (and me included) had been content to ignore, even if it was also a reality that most folks in the world lived with on a daily basis.

"Hey, that's good," blurted the guy behind the shoulder-cam. He sounded genuinely surprised.

“Yeah, really,” said the girl with the microphone, still smiling. “Like a wake-up call.”

It was my turn to be surprised.

A wake-up call.

Precisely.

Now that I have had the chance to mull over these nagging matters with something in the neighborhood of deliberation, I’m thinking that this is what most, if not all, of our afflictions are inclined to do.

It is, at the very least, something that our afflictions are capable of doing.

They grab our attention.

They shake us up and, by thus rattling the bars of our various cages, they serve to shake us—blinking all the while—awake.

In this way, our afflictions oblige us to glimpse and to appreciate a somewhat bigger picture; they offer us a chance to see the greater, more troubling scope of our situation—the roiling reach of what, back in my own college days, we were fond of calling “the human condition.”

And they help us to acknowledge the seriousness of that condition more deliberately than we may have felt obliged to do before affliction’s painful

occasion reared up, grabbed us by a tender ear, and bid us to attend to the lesson at hand.

In the case of 9/11, the event and our shock at it have come to illustrate for me a famous, particularly uncanny aphorism penned by the philosopher Simone Weil,<sup>1</sup> whose own life became something of a study in affliction, albeit affliction with a purpose. She writes: “Affliction compels us to recognize as real what we do not think possible.”<sup>2</sup>

That is, our afflictions import a healthy dose of credence into our incredulity.

Which is to say that they have a chance of making believers of us.

Under most circumstances, then, the occasions of our suffering are capable of revealing what our habitual illusions often obscure, keeping us from knowing. Our afflictions drag us—more or less kicking—into a fresh and vivid awareness that we are not in control of our circumstances, that we are not quite whole, that our days are salted with affliction.

They insist on our noticing how our seasons move through cycles of joy and pain, and that our very lives—not to put too fine a point on it—are fairly (and sometimes unfairly) riddled with death.

If we take care to acknowledge these truths, and are canny enough to attend to them, faithful enough to lean *into* them, then the particular ache of that waking can initiate a response that the Greeks were wont to call *kenosis*—an emptying, an efficacious *hollowing*.

Under ideal circumstances and duly appreciated, this hollowing can lead us into something of a *hallowing* as well.

These recognitions can lead us into some serious decentering—vertiginous and transforming moments. These also can become illuminating moments in which we see our lives in the context of a terrifying, abysmal *emptiness* (that would be the hollowing), moments when all of our comfortable assumptions are shown to be false, or misleading, or at least incomplete. They are shown to be downright insufficient.

If we are lucky,<sup>3</sup> an emptying like this can avail a glimpse of the somewhat broader view—the abysmal *fullness* in which “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

This lucky realization would initiate what I will call our hallowing; and, as one might suppose, it can feel very much like a consolation—having

transformed our painful, kenotic emptying into a *means* to a desirable end.

---

More than a hundred years ago, a chronically afflicted Emily Dickinson observed something of pain's curious effects and aftermath. "After great pain," she wrote, "a formal feeling comes." Her poem continues:

The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—  
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'  
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—  
A Wooden way  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—  
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—<sup>4</sup>

In Dickinson's poem, the human person's experience of great pain is decidedly taken for granted; it is presented as *a given*, a patent and unavoidable

circumstance. Also, it is figured—assuming that one survives it—as having passed.

The poem's attention focuses on what we—and the “Freezing persons” of the simile—are in the midst of this “chill” obliged to accept “the letting go.”<sup>5</sup>

One might well think to ask, “The letting go of what?”

Very good question! And while I expect that we will make our way back to that very good question, for the moment, let's assume that the implication is apt—that we are all of us clinging to something.

Let's also assume that it might be to our common advantage to discover what that something is; let's also say that we might want to know *if* this habitual clinging of ours is helping our situation or hurting it.

Meantime, there are a great many ways to speak of pain's effects, lots of ways to appreciate its—what? Its purpose?

Maybe so.

Let's say yes.

One such way is offered up by Saint Isaac of Syria, a seventh-century saint who begins his observation by speaking of one particularly desirable outcome, and then—in a teacherly manner—proceeds to deduce for us how we are likely to find our way to it.

“The love of God,” he writes, “proceeds from our conversing with Him; this conversation of prayer comes about through stillness, and stillness arrives with the stripping away of self.”<sup>6</sup>

It would be good to notice the actual efficacious process that is in this way—albeit in reverse chronological order—presented: first occurs the stripping away of self, which produces a species of stillness, which avails actual prayer, which occasions the love of God.

If that particular phrasing, “the stripping away of self,” strikes the contemporary ear as being a little painful, I am thinking that is probably because it most often is. The “stripping away of self” may also help to answer our very good question above, identifying what it is that we must be obliged to *let go*.

To be sure, I have stumbled upon a good bit of this business the hard way; but I am now supposing that this is the stubborn truth that has been nibbling my mind from the start—that the *hard way* is pretty much the only way most of us ever manage to learn anything.

Affliction, suffering, and pain are—even if they are nothing else—remarkably effective.



## two *against self-esteem*

*Why do you boast . . . O mighty man?*

—PSALM 51:3

Among the slow—the apparently lifelong—lessons I seem to be catching on to, one significant discovery has to be the paradoxical, shooting-yourself-in-the-foot nature of self-interest, the self-defeating nature of self-regard. As you may remember, following the tragic madness and confusion of September 11, 2001, various angry and frightened American citizens responded in a startling variety of ways, supplying to our singular moment an *additional* tragic madness.

Among the more visible responses, we beheld earnestly patriotic gestures—a proliferation of American flags, impromptu rallies of solidarity, pathos-laden newspaper columns; these ranged from laudable expressions of empathy and of rediscovered community to less laudable, acutely disturbing expressions of rage directed at an invisible enemy. We witnessed, as well, no shortage of actual violence undertaken against citizens and against foreign visitors who had the bad luck of

merely resembling those who had actually struck the blows against us.

Here in Columbia, Missouri, a much-beloved citizen—whose person and whose business happened to be named, respectively, Osama and Osama's—bore the brunt of some of this anxious patriotism—a broken storefront window, obscene graffiti, and racial slurs hollered by passing idiots.

Our little town was not unique. A Pakistani restaurant in Salt Lake City was set on fire in the night. A mosque in Allentown, Pennsylvania, was the target of a series of bomb threats that kept its community in turmoil and hunkered down anxiously for months. In Mesa, Arizona, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh, was shot to death as he pulled weeds in the garden outside his Chevron service station. Waquar Hasan, a Pakistani, was murdered in his downtown Dallas business, Mom's Grocery. The list goes on.

In the weeks following 9/11, the FBI opened 325 investigations into what were believed to be 9/11-related hate crimes. The Council on American-Islamic Relations received over 300 reports of harassment and violence during the 96 hours spanning Tuesday, September 11, and Friday,

September 14—nearly half the number it had received throughout the entire previous year.

The days following the attacks also delivered to American cars a self-conscious array of bumper stickers. One bumper sticker in particular caught my attention at the time, and has served in the interim to trouble my thoughts regarding our current state of affairs. It was a fairly simple—one might even say a *manifestly artless*—design: an American flag set in the center of a squat rectangle, framed by three words: *Faith. Hope. Pride.*

The word *Pride*, serving as the pedestal upon which the flag sat, was printed in slightly larger typeface and—perhaps not surprisingly—in bold.

Anyone with so much as a passing knowledge of the New Testament epistles probably could identify the text that had been so glibly revised into this curious new trinity of terms.

In the first of his letters to the young church in Corinth, Saint Paul writes:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that

I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

The apostle concludes his observations on the matter with these words: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:1–3, 13).

The bumper sticker of the moment had effectively replaced the “greatest of these” with what—in a more long-standing, moral economy—would be recognized as a meager virtue at best, and which, not all that long ago, would have been readily recognized as chief among sins, if not their primary cause.

How does such a curious evolution—such a significant slippage—come about?

How is an essential sin recuperated into an estimable virtue?

Why are those who speak of the power of their pride so certain of their position? And why—one might well ask—are they smiling?

This odd recuperation of *pride* has become in recent years a commonplace. Earlier this fall, to make room for a familiar fund-raising scheme,

the red brick and concrete walkway to our campus alumni center was torn up and replaced with a span of newer red bricks, each bearing the name of an alumni center donor. Sections of red brick have been separated by broad strips of granite, and each of these is engraved with a single word.

For the most part, these words sport laudable sentiments; most are at least benign: *Discovery*, *Diversity*, *Respect*, *Responsibility*, and *Tradition*. The presence of *tradition* strikes me as ironic, given that etched there amid the other stony abstractions one polished strip of granite offers—boldly and with nary a qualm—*Pride*.

In an age that so insistently privileges self-help, self-discovery, and—most troubling—self-esteem, *pride* strikes many of us as a likely path to liberation, freeing us from, say, oppressive cultural biases, from dysfunctional families, and from nagging self-doubt. As far as I can tell, it appears to be our generation's best defense against self-loathing, which is without question an even greater sin.

From what I have gathered in recent years—as I have observed the legion advocates of self-esteem performing earnest interventions—I am pretty

sure that regardless of how much we advertise our ostensible pride, we appear mostly to be masking (none too convincingly) that same, pervasive self-loathing.

*Methinks* it smacks of our protesting too much.

I also suppose that when we childishly privilege our own self-aggrandizement, and when we—by so doing—cut ourselves off from our communities, both past and present, we are doomed to reinvent a fleet of troubled wheels, and, as the venerable Art Linkletter once observed about children in general, we “say the darnedest things.”

It might be good for us to reconnect with our communal past, our shared traditions.

It certainly would be good to grow up.

---

Saint Isaac counsels, “Blessed is the person who knows his own weakness, because awareness of this becomes for him the foundation and the beginning of all that is good and beautiful.”<sup>7</sup> Affliction appears to be our only reliable access to this kind of knowledge, this necessary confrontation with our own weaknesses, and this advantageous mitigation of our pride. And it seems to be the only way we come

to glimpse and thereafter *to know* our condition, to appreciate our vulnerability, and to live according to this new and chastening light.

I have come to think of this knowledge as an efficacious and corrective tilt of the head, an opportunity to see what I previously had not been prepared to see. More than that, it may compel me to see what I, subconsciously, had worked very hard *not* to see.

If we were to take greater advantage of these suddenly new perspectives, we might appreciate affliction as *the foundation of the foundation, the beginning of the beginning*—as Saint Isaac has presented it—“of all that is good and beautiful,” but that is assuming we manage to respond *well* to these our afflictions, responding alertly, seriously, humbly, and in good faith.

I have a strong sense that most of us, most of the time, do respond fairly well—at least to our own suffering. Still, even if that is the case, I am now beginning to suspect that this more or less *local* focus may not be enough.

Faced with personal affliction, immediate pain—the prospect of cancer, or heart disease, or the heartrending loss of someone we love—most of us

respond wisely, with something like a chastened, sober, more circumspect life. I remember the words of a wise monk I happened to meet very briefly on Mount Athos near the end of his life; he was fully aware that he was dying of cancer, and had once comforted his (and my) beloved friend Stelios by saying to him that “paradise is filled with men and women whose cancer saved their lives.”

This is quite a radical perspective, no?

Shocking as his words may sound to us nowadays, I am inclined to think that the Athonite father had an uncommonly keen sense of certain facts that most of us dimly apprehend. While we may be tempted to respond to such final pains with bitterness, disappointment, and resentment, I’ve personally known dozens who have seized this opportunity to become the men and women that they had, in their deepest hearts, long desired to be.

It was as if their imminent deaths freed them *from* petty, distracted lives, and freed them *into* greater, genuine living—however briefly.

Addressing the fact of his own terminal cancer, writer Raymond Carver left the following observation in a very late poem called “Gravy.” Despite the dire and daunting circumstances that his poem effectively