



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“Suffering”

Excerpted from

The Gift of Life: Death & Dying, Life & Living

Fr. Thomas Keating

SUFFERING LEADS TO WISDOM, WHEN IT'S ACCEPTED.

It is evident that at certain parts of the dying process, suffering – however great it may be physically – is not commensurate sometimes with the spiritual suffering that is going on as the ego is asked to let go, it looks as though they're having a terrible struggle consenting or letting go of life; or it's fear or anxiety of what is to follow, or even fear of God, or of punishment, depending on their religious and cultural background.

The same sort of states occurs in extended periods of the Dark Night of the Soul, especially of the Spirit, in St. John of the Cross. In his writings you find a classical description of what to the ordinary devout person would seem like impossible states of consciousness for a devout person. They wonder whether they are saved, or they feel rejected by God.

In regard to the suffering patient, you can't very well tell them they're in the Dark Night unless they would find some consolation in that. They don't have to be told ... they're in it! And they *are* it and they are identified with it, and so their suffering can be almost unbearable.

So, in regard to suffering, everything depends on the attitude and what is unbearable, unreasonable, and irrational, or against reason, and all the superficial ways we complain about God not answering our prayers, or not taking care of us or didn't provide us a sort of sweet and happy death, depending what you mean by happy, I guess. We get angry at God, and we've had enough, and some people will even reject God at that point. Job came kind of, close to that himself in his difficulties. So, it can be extremely serious when the patient is faced with the unbearable and feels he is not getting a fair deal from God. “Why me?” But, the “Why me?” is the basic question that perhaps suffering and God's permission of it has had in mind: “Who are you actually?” And the answer is that the human condition physically involves a certain amount of pain by the very nature of this creation and the earthly living, which is somewhat precarious – to put it mildly.

Suffering is when we resist the pain of life or the circumstances of life which are challenging our idea of ourselves and undermining the way that we understood our life and its meaning for us, which is

now obviously not happening, and empty of the promises it may have held out for us, and the culture we were over-identified with. So, suffering is the psychological consequences of the situation of the pain and of the inevitability of death and now its proximity and the impossibility of avoiding it. So, if there are any issues in the history of the patient that are very painful – people that they've ceased to speak to, or parents that they've never seen or forgotten about, or friends that they felt betrayed them, or children that are obviously too busy about their own affairs to be really concerned, and then there are the beloved ones who *are* concerned who can do nothing for whom the patient can't do anything either because he is barely able to handle his own suffering – no doubt one can be at a point that, where the situation is, as it continues, absolutely unbearable.

And yet, as sometimes happens in deep prayer, especially in the context of the Night of the Spirit, when one is most at the fullest extent of one's endurance, and that isn't working – out of nowhere comes the release or the grace of God that appears from nowhere and can put the person in a sense of great peace or lead them into a further transcendence of their present stage of consciousness into one of total acceptance and surrender. So, when there is surrender, then suffering – one's personal suffering – is not really suffering anymore.

It's suffering that leads to wisdom, when it's accepted. And wisdom is the perception of the divine goodness and purpose in everything that happens. So, it's the wisdom and the peace and calm and faith – that is to say, perfect trust in God – that transforms suffering into a – I won't quite say 'joy' – but it gives it a meaning that takes away the resistance so that one sees a value to suffering that is ... well, God-like. There is this shift into a new state of consciousness in which the increased awareness of this Ground of Being, or of the Holy Spirit, or of Christ ... of being embraced by God, of being in this divine house, you might say, where there are many mansions. And so, although the suffering, the reasons that it doesn't go away, the attitude towards the negativities of the dying process are balanced by the beginning of a power to enjoy the eternal life that is dawning.

In other words, there is still suffering and sometimes more than they can even articulate. But at this deepest level of the ground of being, it's not blowing them away because they have the further intuition that the suffering is meaningful, that it is bringing – including their own participation in the suffering of the loved one – is providing the energy of love that is transforming the whole body in varying degrees, depending on the intensity and purity of the love that is there. Christ's example is the major example. There's no self-centeredness in the transcendence, or the transformative purpose, as there was no preference in Christ, but a compassion that is willing to take on the sufferings of others, without an undue regard for oneself.

So, death really is resurrection because the rising from the dead, as Christ did, is inherent in the very process of suffering.