

Supplemental Reading
Faith to Endure: Grief
May 24, 2009

1. Reading Recommendations

2. Love is Stronger Than Death – Peter Kreeft

3. Deceived by God? *A Journey Through Suffering* – John S. Feinberg

Reading List – Series: On the Horizon

Making Sense Out of Suffering – Peter Kreeft

“A book of great clarity and comfort and one that really makes a difference. This is the real answer to the question why bad things happen to good people.” – “This book is for anyone who has ever wept and wondered, “Why?”

Heaven: The Heart’s Deepest Longing – Peter Kreeft

“This expanded edition of *Heaven* examines the hunger for heaven that is so strong in all of us. Fascinating and upbeat, *Heaven* thoroughly explores the psychological, philosophical and theological dimensions of this search for total joy and for the ultimate reality that grounds it.”

Love is Stronger Than Death – Peter Kreeft

“Kreeft’s book is a new statement of the Christian vision, the Christian message: the meaning of our existence, and of death, is the fulfillment of our deepest and purest desire: the desire for the infinite joy and love of God.” “One might suppose that a book on death would be a somber experience: in the end it is a joyful one.”

Unspeakable: Facing Up to the Challenge of Evil – Os Guinness

Where on earth does evil come from? Isn’t there something we can do? Isn’t there any good in all this bad?

[some editions combine *The Problem of Pain & A Grief Observed*]

The Problem of Pain – C. S. Lewis

“Lewis is the ideal persuader for the half-convinced, for the good man who would like to be a Christian but finds his intellect getting in the way.”

A Grief Observed – C. S. Lewis

After his wife’s tragic death, it contains his reflections on that period: “Your bid—for God or no God; for a good God or a Cosmic Sadist; for eternal life or non-entity. You will never discover how serious it was until the stakes are raised horribly high.”

“It is a beautiful and unflinchingly honest record of how even a stalwart believer can lose all sense of meaning in the universe, and how he can gradually regain his bearing.”

Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be – Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

“Plantinga has carefully staked out the nature of sin and re-stated aspects of its relevance for a new generation.”

“Even non-Christians who are troubled by undefined evil would read his words with profit.”

A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss– Jerry Sittser

A tragic accident claimed his mother, his wife, and his young daughter. “A Grace Disguised plumbs the depths of our sorrows, whether due to illness, divorce, or the loss of someone we love. The circumstances are not important; what we do with these circumstances is.”

Love is Stronger Than Death – Peter Kreeft

[Published by Ignatius Press, 1992; Among other books, Kreeft has authored:
Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing; Making Sense Out of Suffering;
Making Choices: Finding Black & White in a World of Gray]

Chapter 4: Death as a Mother

Mother is a relative term. Mothers are mothers in relation to children, as children are children in relation to mothers. What a mother is *to a child* is therefore part of her essence as a mother.

What, then, is a mother to a child? A place. To a child a mother is a place, like a womb, both before and after birth. "Mother" means "home": the center of the cosmos, the navel of the earth, the sacred space. Primitive tribes, especially those close to "Mother Earth," often erect their temple or sacred tent at the place believed to be the geographical center of the earth, with the tent pole sticking umbilically into 'the earth's navel'.¹ To a child, a mother is such a temple. She escapes Einsteinian relativity; she constitutes an absolute point of reference in space. This is why children love fat mothers: They are more obviously *places*; they seem more *put*, more placed, more like the earth itself.

Their simple instinct to see mother as a place is accurate; for what makes a mother a mother, literally and physiologically, is precisely a space, a hole. A mother is a birth canal, or a structure of flesh surrounding a birth canal: life surrounding life. She gathers, surrounds, and makes concave shapes because her body is itself a gathering, a surrounding, a concavity.²

(A *woman* is not essentially a birth canal, because a woman is not *essentially* a mother. For nothing can ever not be what it essentially is, and a woman can obviously be a woman without being a mother.)

DOORS

A mother, then, is essentially a canal (at least from a biological point of view). Now a birth canal is a door--a magic door, in fact, not merely a door from one part of the world to another part, but a door from one whole world to another. Fairy tales are full of such magic doors or passages, for fairy tales are expressions of our deep, unconscious longings, loves, and wonderings, and few things are more wonderful than a door into another world. Imagine how you would feel if you discovered such a door in the so-called real world!

Children love doors, for doors can be either open or closed; thus they fulfill two great needs of the human spirit: the need for mystery and for exploration. The two alternatives to a door are a wall and a space, mere closed-ness or mere openness. Neither is as wonderful as a door. Children, like adults, hate enclosing walls, for they signify confinement and frustration. Claustrophobia is latent in everyone. But

children, unlike many adults, also hate door-less, room-less, open houses where every room is open to and flows into every other room and everything lies naked and open to view at once, for such a modern interior design expresses the loss of mystery, like the larger modern world outside. There is efficiency but no surprises. Children love to explore houses with secret panels, hidden staircases, and so on. They love to make hiding places such as tents, forts, or little enclosures; for these promise surprises, secrets, mysteries.

So does a door. A door offers the best of both worlds, both mystery (when closed) and the exploration of mystery (when opened). But a door must be not just open but opened; an open door that was closed until just now is much more exciting than an open door that was always open. A door that is never open is frustrating; a door that is never closed is boring. (The dilemma of boredom vs. frustration is far more profound than it seems. It plunges us directly into the greatest question, the question of happiness, the question of heaven. How can there be a happiness which is neither boring--if the end is attained--nor frustrating--if it isn't?)

A sacrament is also a door, and not an ordinary door but a magic door; not a door from one part of the world to another, but a door to and from another world--like a birth canal. (This is part of the meaning of the concept "sacrament." Whether a sacrament is true, whether it really "works," is a matter of faith, but what "sacrament" means is a matter of definition.) The "other world" into which a sacramental door opens is the world of the supernatural, the world of God.

A sacrament is thus a miracle. The word that is usually translated as "miracle" in the New Testament really means "sign."³ The miracles of Jesus were called signs; they were interpreted by his disciples not simply as power displays but as signs from His Father, little liftings of the curtain between man and God that had fallen in Eden, little peepholes through which man could see what God was like and what God was doing (healing, enlightening, and so on). Some of the ancient Greeks thought the stars were miracles in this sense, peepholes in the dark curtain of the night through which man could glimpse the light of the gods.

The New Testament calls Jesus "the Word of God,"⁴ the expression or manifestation of God, the window or peephole through which man can see God, the sign ("miracle") of God. Jesus also says: "I am the door."⁵ A door is even more than a window; for a window is only to see through, while a door is to go through. Protestants believe sacraments are like windows, that is, signs, symbols. Catholics believe sacraments are like doors, that is, that actual transactions are carried on "ex opere operato"⁶ by them and not just by their users. A sacrament is thus defined in Catholic doctrine as a sign that effects what it signifies.⁷ Protestants too see Jesus as a sacrament in the Catholic sense, not just in the Protestant sense.

He actually effects transaction between man and God, the exchange of grace for sin, eternal life for eternal death, God's heaven for man's hell. The cross is the place of this interchange, the cosmic door, the primary sacrament of all human history. In the Christian story, Jesus' death opened the door between Heaven and Earth. The veil in the temple was torn in two at the moment Jesus died.⁸ This veil separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world. This holiest place symbolized the dwelling of God. Thus Jesus' death opened the door between two worlds. This is also why "the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead" at the same time⁹--they were travelers through the newly opened door, the door of death.

DEATH AS A DOOR

All death is a door. Jesus' death, for a Christian, is a special door. All death is a sacrament, the primary sacrament in every person's life. Jesus' death, for a Christian, energizes these other deaths, opens the door of death, wins through to heaven for man, transforms death from a hole into a door, from a door to non-being into a door to being, from a door to hell into a door to heaven. The early Christians called the day of their death *dies natalis*, birthday.

A door has two sides. So does death. We saw in Chapter 1 that death is not merely a part of this world, not merely a natural event. Another person's death is a part of the world to me (though not to him), but mine is not. A door between two worlds is not merely a part of either of these worlds. It is that fascinating thing, a boundary, an edge, an absolute. My own death appears as such an absolute, as an emptiness, as "the jaws of nothingness." But an emptiness may be either a hole or a door, either a bottomless pit or a passageway, either a tunnel opening to nowhere or a tunnel opening to somewhere, some other world . . . like a birth canal.

If death is like a birth canal, then life comes out of death, fullness out of emptiness, as a baby comes out of the birth canal. Perhaps this is one of the deeper meanings of Sampson's mysterious riddle. Sampson found sweet honey in a dead lion's rotting carcass, and formulated the riddle "Out of the strong came forth sweetness; out of the eater came forth the eaten."¹⁰ Death is like that lion: strong, an eater of men, and a rotting corpse. If death is like a birth canal, then out of it also comes the sweetest honey of life.

A Christian would see an even more specific and striking meaning in Sampson's riddle. Eternal life comes out of a cross of death. Man finds God--where? There, where the terrible cry goes up: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"¹¹

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: DEATH AS BIRTH

Let us make another thought experiment. Let us suppose that death is indeed a door, not a hole; a birth canal, not a bottomless pit; a mother giving life, not a spider sucking it away. Let us suppose that dying is a kind of being born; let us suppose that this most suggestive image of the world's greatest poets, this commonest belief of the world's greatest religions, and this profoundest thought of the world's greatest philosophers¹² is true. Let us make the daring and paradoxical supposition that our wise men are really wise. Let us not yet *believe*, only *suppose*, as a thought experiment. Let us gaze at this picture a while before deciding whether to buy it; let us finger this jewel, heft it, explore it, shine many-angled lights on it, before deciding whether it is an authentic diamond or a man-made imitation. Let us explore the landscape of death as a mother.

LITTLE DEATHS

A first consequence of our thought experiment is that if it is true, it fits in with and makes sense of a most pervasive feature of our lives; that is, throughout our lives, death and birth repeat themselves. Many little deaths lead to many little births. We die to wombs and are born into worlds. But these worlds become larger wombs for us. We die to them and are born into larger worlds: our mother's womb, the breast, the nursery, the home, neighborhood, family, school, each grade in school, friends, jobs, cities. We are like multistage rockets; each stage dies and falls away when its job is done, for its job is only to launch us forward.

Death is the mystery present in all of life:

The mystery which was supposed to be at work in the life of Israel . . . and which was made present to them in the rite of the Tabernacle, was the mystery upon which all life proceeds and which will never be outgrown since it is there at the root of all things. It is the mystery of My Life For Yours. It is expressed in the words "I owe my life to you, and I lay down my life for you."

No one has ever drawn a single breath on any other basis. No child has ever received life to begin with without a "laying down" of life by the two people to whom he owes his conception, and by the laying down of his mother's life for months in bearing and nourishing him. . . . And no one has ever sat down to the smallest pittance of food that he did not owe to somebody's life having been laid down, if it was only a prawn or a lettuce leaf. . .¹³

The multistage rockets that we are include not only ourselves but others; in fact, they include the whole cosmos. Stars, dinosaurs, and spermatozoa must die for us to be born; the principle of the co-inherence of

life and death works both before and after our birth. As worlds had to die for us to be born, so we must die to worlds after worlds once we are born.

If all of life is a series of little births through little deaths, it seems to be a clue (though not a proof) that birth and death as such always imply and contain each other; that just as our birth is the beginning of our dying (as soon as we are born, we begin to die), so also our death is the beginning of our being born: Death is our mother.

Let us explore more of the similarities between death and birth, more of the brush strokes in the portrait of death as a mother.

THE PROCESS OF DYING/BEING BORN

The process of being born looks like the process of dying. Labor and delivery is the most radical and rapid change a human body ever experiences. We are thrust violently out of a comfortable, homey, confining place. We seem to fight for air as we are forcibly expelled from our old body, the womb. In the womb, we were not clearly conscious of our body as distinct from the womb; the whole womb *was* our body. Now that we are being expelled from it, it seems as if we are being expelled from our body, rather than being born into our body. Just so, when we die, it seems as if we are separated from the body, not that our true body is then born.

The place into which we are thrust does not appear as home but as "unhomely," *unheimlich*, uncanny, terrifying, the great unknown behind the door. Yet it is in fact our truer home, just as the earth is more ours than the womb, which is not *our* womb but our mother's womb. We have only tenanted it; it was ours only on loan. So the world after death is more ours than this world, which is only tenanted, rented from Mother Earth for a while.

Yet even though there is a terror of this new "unhomely home," there is also a natural drive or desire, a purposive movement toward it, toward this unknown goal. We perceive this drive from without, objectively, in the case of the fetus, as a biological fact; but we do not know whether the fetus experiences the drive within itself, subjectively, as a desire or longing to be born. But we do experience the subjective, inner desire or longing in this world for something more, for the ideal, for heaven, for truth and goodness and beauty, for perfect freedom and "the peace which the world cannot give."¹⁴ This is the "restless heart,"¹⁵ the "divine discontent,"¹⁶ the "Is That All There Is?" "Thou hast made everything beautiful (fitting) in its time," says Ecclesiastes, but "also Thou hast put eternity into his heart,"¹⁷ the seat of the de-

sires. While we can observe the objective goal but not the subjective desire for it in the case of the fetus, we can observe the subjective desire but not the objective goal in our own case. Unless we are told by some word from another world, by some outside observer who stands to us as we stand to a fetus, we do not know from our experience of this world alone whether or not death is a birth and the fulfillment of our deepest desire, just as the fetus cannot know (as we objective observers can) whether birth is its fulfillment, until it happens. "Under the sun," says Ecclesiastes, "who knows if the soul of man goes upward while the soul of the beast returns into the earth?"¹⁸ Unless we are told by some word from another world--but that word can be accepted only by faith, by trust in the report based on trust in the reporter. It cannot be proved by worldly experience and reason; the camera without its own inner flash bulb of faith to cast additional light on the world can take only available-light exposures, and the available light from the world is riddling and uncertain. Nevertheless, it is full of hints, shadows that seem to point to substance: parallels, analogies, likenesses that amount to likelihoods. Perhaps it is not enough for faith, but it is enough for hope.

We may hope beyond appearances because appearances do not reveal all. We see only dying; we do not see death. Within the process of being born, birth pains are not yet birth, and do not reveal to the fetus the true meaning of birth. So death pains and the process of dying are not yet death, and do not reveal to the dying person the true meaning of death. If death is a door, as our thought experiment has supposed, it has two sides, as the sea has two shores. We see only one, the less important one: the common departure from the familiar place, not the various arrivals at the new one. All the ships depart from the same shore and seem to pass into the same nothingness--we seem to be all the same and all extinguished in death--yet ships arrive at different ports; neither their existence nor their uniqueness is extinguished.

RETURNEES FROM DEATH?

When a few people do seem to catch a glimpse of the other shore, whether through mystical experience or through medical death (or near death) and resuscitation, it is only a distant glimpse; it is a vision of another country from afar, not a living in it. (In fact, since they return, it is not an experience of true death, since death is essentially irreversible, non-returnable, a one-way trip. No one has simply returned from death. Even Jesus did not return to his mortal body but resurrected to his immortal body.) One feature reported by all such travelers is the ineffability of the experience: "Words can't describe it."¹⁹ For language is the horizon of meaning, or at least of communication; and at death the ship of self passes under that horizon.

Shortly after birth, how much does a baby know of this world? About that much, or less, in our

analogy, do such travelers in the country of death know of life in the next world. We should probably take their accounts seriously, but only as we should take the account of a baby. The death-traveler, like the birth-traveler, is a neophyte; he cannot comprehend his new world at first any more than a newborn baby can. There is indescribably more to it.

Yet they say something. Their experience of life after death is not so utterly different from life before death that absolutely nothing can be communicated about it. Their words are not random nonsense, but meaningful symbols, pictures, hints, or shadows.

There are three possibilities for any word's meaning. A word can be used univocally, equivocally, or analogically. A word used univocally always has the same, literal, clearly definable meaning. A word used equivocally has two completely different meanings, which are unrelated, so that from one use of the word we cannot know anything about the other (for example, the bark of a dog and the bark of a tree). A word used analogically has two different but related meanings (for example, "I see" with my eyes and "I see" with my mind).

Now if the two worlds, the world before death and the world after death, are the same, then words describing the world after death will have the same meaning they do when used to describe this world. They will be univocal. If the two worlds are wholly different, all words describing them will be equivocal, and there can be no communication at all of the other world to us in this world. But if the worlds are different but related, then words describing them will be analogical.

And if the worlds are related by image--that is, if this world is an image, sign, picture, symbol, shadow, or likeness of another--then words describing this world are shadows or symbols or likenesses of the other world. It seems at first that this-worldly words are literal and other-worldly words are symbolic, but it must be the other way round. If this whole world is an image of another, then everything in this world shares in that image-status, and language about everything in this world is imagery in relation to the other world. The mystics' language is not symbolic but literal; it is our language that is symbolic. For instance, when a mystic or a resuscitated patient reports an inward vision of spiritual light, he is *not* borrowing from our sense experience of physical light to make a metaphor; it is the physical light, and the word that designates it, that is the metaphor.

If our parallel between birth and death is sound, the same relationship holds true between earth language and heaven language as between womb language and earth language. Imagine a little fetus; here it is, ejected from the womb, traveling the great journey down the birth canal; now it plops out into the world. It seems to be born. But its umbilical cord is not yet cut; therefore it is not yet born, not *irreversibly* born. Through an extremely unusual feat of medical technology, it might be returned to the

womb. Just so, a dying patient who seems, both to himself and to others, to have died, but is then resuscitated, has not died--not *irreversibly* died. He has not crossed "the border."²⁰ Now suppose this fetus, somehow put back into the womb, tells another fetus about "life after birth." (Suppose there is a fetus language and communication, for the sake of the story and its parallelism.) It would use such words as *life* or *pleasure* or *consciousness* to describe life outside the womb. Such words would mean something *like* fetus life, fetus pleasure, and fetus consciousness, but also something vastly different. Such words would be used analogically. Just so does our present language use words like *bliss*, *vision*, *union*, and so forth to describe life after death. These words are meaningful symbols, pointers down an infinite corridor; they can point our thought in the right direction, but they cannot carry it to its end.

LIFE AS FETAL REHEARSALS

In the womb, the fetus practices many of the acts it will need to perform once it is born, such as kicking and swallowing. Similarly, in the world, a person practices the acts he or she will need to perform after death, especially knowing and loving, the two values emphasized by all the saints, mystics, wise men, and resuscitated patients.

Some of the physical habits the fetus learns in the womb are necessary for its survival both in the womb and in the world, such as heartbeat. Others make sense only in the world outside the womb, such as kicking. These are essentially preparatory acts, rehearsals. So in our analogy, some of the spiritual habits or virtues that we learn in this life are necessary to our survival in the world, such as justice and wisdom; but others do not seem to make rational, this-worldly sense: virtues like humility, martyrdom, or the "divine discontent," the longing for perfection. The specifically Christian virtues taught in the Gospels are absurd to the world, even the wise world. Contrast the ethics of Aristotle with the ethics of the New Testament! Poverty, chastity, and obedience make no sense if this world is all there is. They limit the this-worldly me; they repress my desire for this-worldly gratification and pleasure. They seem to be weaknesses, not strengths. Indeed, this is probably the most popular criticism of Christian ethics, both among playboys and practical people, and among psychologists and philosophers like Freud, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Marx. But if this world is a womb, Christian values do make sense as training for the next world. Jesus preaches his ethic as an ethic of the New Kingdom, the "Kingdom of Heaven." A fetus might wonder what his feet are for, might wonder where in the womb he will find them useful and fulfilling; but the womb gives him no adequate answer. Similarly, the world gives me no adequate answer when I wonder what such things as self-sacrifice or my longing for eternal joy mean.

Therefore, the attempt to teach traditional Christian values such as idealism and self-sacrifice

without the vision of a life after death ultimately makes no sense, and is quickly detected as senseless by young, critical minds. Lip service may be paid to this ethic, but it is ignored in practice; or else its claws are pulled and it is reinterpreted in reasonable this-worldly terms, such as: if you have self-sacrificial love for others, you'll feel good, or people will like you. (But teachers are not honest enough to say it that simply; it sounds more "religious" to speak of "the search for inner peace" or "a sense of human community.")

THE FREEDOM OF DEATH

Both egresses--from the womb and from the world--are un-free, unwilling, unasked for. The two most important things that happen to us in this world are the only two in which we have absolutely no choice. How fortunate! For if we were asked, we would surely prefer the security of the womb, both wombs.

But if death is like birth, then "we're like eggs at present. And you can't just go on being a good egg forever. You must hatch or go bad."²¹ The "immortality pill" would prevent us from hatching, and thus make us go bad. What a basket of rotten eggs, a world of immortals would be! A deathless life would be like a birth-less fetus or a hatch-less egg. It would remove death's quarantine, death's tourniquet, death's barrier to the infinite expansion of our spiritual diseases. Our traditional wisdoms abound with myths of deathlessness as a curse: the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, Tithonus the Greek. Eternal life without God is not heaven; it is precisely hell. What a terrible thing death spares us from, from a fate worse than death. The seraphim's flaming sword barring the return to Eden is not only a punishment but also a mercy. Death is "a severe mercy":

It is a safety-device because, once Man has fallen, natural immortality would be the one utterly hopeless destiny for him. Aided to the surrender that he must make [to God] by no external necessity of Death, free (if you call it freedom) to rivet faster and faster about himself through unending centuries the chains of his own pride and lust and of the nightmare civilizations which these build up in ever-increasing power and complication, he would progress from being merely a fallen man to being a fiend, possibly beyond all modes of redemption.²²

But is death un-free? It *seems* un-free and passive--from this side of the door. So does birth, from this side of the womb. But if our analogy holds, then death, like birth, leads to greater freedom once the umbilical cord of dependence on Mother Earth is cut. After the involuntary plunge through the birth canal, voluntariness grows. "A man thrown into this world is like a plane catapulted into the air: he is launched by an external force, but then he must fly under his own power."²³

We do not see this new freedom; but we do see the end of the old un-freedom. Death removes everything in us that is unfree, passive, and accidental, everything that we receive from this world through the umbilical cord of our body: our heredity, our environment, our possessions, our social status, our wealth. What remains is what is free, what we have freely made ourselves into, out of this worldly raw material, the person we have freely chosen to become, The clothes the world gave us now rot away; we stand as naked *I*'s in death: "Naked I came into this world; naked I return."²⁴

In the Latin rite for the burial of an Austrian emperor, the people carry the corpse to the door of the great monastic church. The door is locked. They strike the door and say "Open!" The abbot inside says, "Who is there?" "Emperor Karl, King of X and Y and Z." "We know no such person here." Strike again. "Who is there?" "Emperor Karl." "We know no such person here." Strike a third time, "Who is there?" "Karl." The door is opened.

You can't take it with you--any "it." You can only take *you*.

AN ARGUMENT FOR IMMORTALITY

The distinction between the free, naked *I* and everything else puts us in a position to see why we must be immortal. A person not only is a body but *has* a body; that is, the "haver" is more than the "had." This "more" that every person is, is usually called the soul, or the spirit. What's that? Perhaps the best answer is that it is not a *what* at all; unlike everything else in the world, a person is not a *what* but a *who*, not an object but a subject. *What* I am is all my worldly clothes; *who* I am is their wearer, the naked self underneath. My heredity and environment have determined my *what* (for example, my race, sex, temperament, and taste for olives), but my free choices have determined my *who*. I am my own co-creator. Of course, my *what* has conditioned my *who*; that is, it has influenced it, both to limit it and to help it. But influencing is not forcing; conditioning is not determining. The world, which has given me my *what* by this determining, can and does take it all away in death. But since it has not given me my *who*, it cannot take it away, not even by death. If I am a person, I am immortal; if I am not immortal, I am not a person. *What* I am is not stronger than death, but *I* am. If I am not stronger than death, then I am not an I.

Another way of seeing this is that my anything and everything can die because it is possessed; it is what I *have*. There is a gap between me and what I have. The gap can become final, can become death. But I do not *have* my *I*. I *am* my *I*, There is no gap between I and I, as there is between me and mine; there is no place for death to fit, no "death-spot."²⁵ Death can separate me from everything, but not from myself.

Still another way is that a *what* is made of parts; therefore it is dissolvable into its parts; therefore, it can die. Not so with a *who*. Death is separation. Separation presupposes separable parts. The body dies because it is made of separable parts. Man dies because he is made of separable parts; that is, body and soul. But my soul, my *who*, my *I*, does not fall apart and die because it is one: it is me.

To say that death is not the end of me is not to say that death is irrelevant to me. It is my most radical transformation. It is my birth.

THE ECOLOGY OF DEATH

In birth there is (1) a new world--the earth, not the womb; (2) a new self--the baby, not the fetus; and (3) therefore, a new relation between self and world, between new organism and new environment--breathing, not the umbilical cord. The organism and the environment are ecologically related. If our thought experiment holds, death brings on something like these three ecologically related changes: (1) a new world, (2) a new self, and (3) therefore, a new relation between self and world.

1. There is a new world. The idea that the dead are ghosts (changed selves, bodiless spirits) haunting this same old world, would violate this point. So would the idea of reincarnation. Such ideas are a failure of the imagination. The only world they can imagine is the old world. They violate the basic law of ecology, that organism and environment are internally related. A new self cannot return to the old world any more than I can return to my mother's womb. That's why Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born anew"; and when Nicodemus asks, "How can I be born when I am old? Can I enter a second time into my mother's womb?" Jesus replies, "What is born of flesh is flesh; what is born of Spirit is spirit."²⁶

2. Anthropomorphic pictures of heaven, with us as we now are meeting our friends as they were, on the other side of the river of death is another, better land; or sitting on spiritual clouds playing mystical harps--such pictures violate the second of our three points. If there is a new world, there must be a new self too; if there is a transformed environment, there must be a transformed organism. Fish could not live outside water or fetuses outside wombs without learning to breathe. We could not live in heaven by breathing earthly air with earthly lungs. Its light could not be seen or endured by earthly eyes. We need new lungs, new eyes, a new body, "a spiritual body."²⁷ Dying is not only a change in the environment, like walking through a narrow door from a small, dark room into a larger, lighter one. It is a more radical change than that. *Radical* means "concerning roots." Death uproots us completely from earthly soil and re-roots us in new--not just new soil, but a new kind of soil. We therefore have to become new plants, not just go to new pots. Remember, death is not an ordinary door, a door between two parts of the same world, but a magic door, like a birth canal, from one world into another. Magic doors change whatever

goes through them.

3. The new self after death is newly related to the new environment. The freer self is related more freely to the freer environment. The freer *environment* is a larger environment, with a greater range of choices, just as this world is a larger environment than the womb. The freer *self* is one with more ability to choose, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as the child is more able to choose than the fetus. And the *relation* between self and environment is freer, as walking and breathing is freer than the circulation of mother's blood in the womb. When a baby is outside the womb, he is freer and more independent, yet also more related to the whole of the world, than when he is inside.

WOMBS WITHIN WOMBS

A further consequence of our thought experiment is that just as the little world of the womb is part of the unimaginably larger world that opens up to us at birth, so this world is part of--and not apart from--an unimaginably larger world that opens up to us at death. Death is not entering a coffin, a confined box in the earth. It is precisely *leaving* a confined box in the earth! For that is what our present body is, a confined box in the earth.

The body, earth, mother, and matter--these four concepts have a primordial identity, The "Earth Mother" is the basic myth. "Mother" and "Matter" come from the same linguistic roots. Both our mother and our earth are our greater body; narrowing the boundaries of the body to the epidermis is not innate but learned. I like to call it "epidermiolatry," idolatry of the epidermis.

The whole material universe is a maternal universe, a Great Mother, a womb. Its basic law, from galaxies to guppies, is growth, evolution, purposive change. Like a womb, it is not for itself or its own survival. It eventually grows old and dies. Its purpose is to mother a child. The human body is that child. The body is a womb within a womb, whose purpose it is in turn to mother the soul. Our body is a universe in miniature, a microcosm. It is also evolutionary, purposive, teleological, a growing instrument for a greater purpose, a place where something greater than itself is born, a birth canal within the cosmic birth canal, a door within a door.

And this womb within the universal womb, this body of ours, is larger on the inside than on the outside. Inner space is larger than outer space. Spirit is greater than matter. I am more than my body. In the Christian story, there was once a virgin's womb that was also larger on the inside than on the outside. What it contained, contained the whole world. Whether the story is historically true or not, it is a profound symbol of Everyman. Every human body is like Mary's body; it contains something bigger than the whole world. The world swallows our bodies like specks of dust; but our thought swallows the world.

It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thoughts. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought I grasp it.²⁹

The universe is a soul-making machine. Its gases and galaxies, its molecules and microorganisms, are nothing but its gears and wheels. They are not its point, its purpose. It exists not to produce suns but to produce sons, souls. The universe is our mother. Time is her pregnancy. "The whole creation has been groaning in travail together."³⁰ Our physical birth is her conception, the first appearance in time of this individual soul-baby. Our body's individual life is the universe's second pregnancy, a pregnancy within a pregnancy. Her first pregnancy bore our body; the second bears our soul. The goal of the first is a bodily life that ends in death, a life that gives itself up, like the placenta, to bear another life, a soul-baby. Life is a process down the cosmic birth canal, a "being-towards-death." The goal of the second pregnancy, the goal of our body's life, is also a death, a death to the womb-within-a-womb that is our body, for the purpose of being born into a deathless life. Our death is a mother. It gives itself up to bear life. As our life is a "being-towards-death," so our death is a "being-towards-life."

When we die, we move down the universe's birth canal, out of the cosmic mother, never to return to her womb. But perhaps not "never to return" to *her*. We may hope that when we have grown up in the larger world outside her, we can turn to her in new appreciation and love and understanding, just as an older child can do to his human mother. Once we are beyond her, we can be with her more truly:

. . . Come out, look back, and then you will see. . . this astonishing cataract of bears, babies, and bananas: this immoderate deluge of atoms, orchids, oranges, cancers, canaries, fleas, gases, tornadoes and toads. . . Offer her neither worship nor contempt. Meet her and know her. If we are immortal, and if she is doomed (as the scientists tell us) to run down and die, we shall miss this half-shy and half-flamboyant creature, this ogress, this hoyden, this incorrigible fairy, this dumb witch. But the theologians tell us that she, like ourselves, is to be redeemed. The "vanity" to which she was subjected was her disease, not her essence. She will be cured, but cured in character: not tamed (Heaven forbid) nor sterilized. We shall still be able to recognize our old enemy, friend, playfellow and foster-mother, so perfected as to be not less, but more, herself. And that will be a merry meeting.³¹

DEATH IS NOT SEPARATION

Death seems to be a separation, an absencing, a ripping away of the organism from its environment. That is why death seems terrible, why it appears as an enemy. Nearly every example of joy or happiness or

even pleasure seems to be an example of presence, of union--with a physical object, a person, God, beauty, or truth; and nearly every example of grief or sorrow seems to be an example of separation, of absence.

Death becomes acceptable *as part of presence* if we see it as our thought experiment does, as analogous to birth. When the umbilical cord is cut, the baby seems to be alone, alienated, lost to his mother. Yet he is not; he is less alone in the world than in the womb. He becomes capable for the first time of presence, of real union, of love, of I-Thou relationship.

This union, the union of comm-union, is not only happier and better but also more intimate, more unified, than the union of part to whole which exists in the womb. Love is the deepest kind of union. A finger cannot love a hand; a fetus cannot love its mother; there is no sound to one hand clapping. A child is more truly one with its mother at thirty years than at three years, and more at three years than three months after conception. The deepest meaning of the word *one* is not quantitative but qualitative, not mathematical but maternal.

The farther away from its mother the child grows, in independence and individuality, the deeper the possibility of union through mature love. For the individual ego exists for this purpose: to be given away in love, thus to be truly found:

This is the ultimate law--the seed dies to live, the bread must be cast upon the waters, he that loses his soul will save it. . . . For union exists only between distincts; and perhaps, from this point of view, we catch a momentary glimpse of the meaning of all things. Pantheism is a creed not so much false as hopelessly behind the times. Once, before creation, it would have been true to say that everything was God. But God created: He caused things to be other than Himself that, being distinct, they might learn to love Him, and achieve union instead of mere sameness. Thus he also cast His bread upon the waters. . . . Even within the Holy One Himself, it is not sufficient that the Word should *be* God, it must also be *with* God. The Father eternally begets the Son and the Holy Ghost proceeds: deity introduces distinction within itself so that the union of reciprocal loves may transcend mere arithmetical unity or self identity. . . .

For in self-giving, if anywhere, we touch a rhythm not only of all creation but of all being. For the Eternal Word also gives Himself in sacrifice; and that not only on Calvary. For when He was crucified, He "did that in the wild weather of His outlying provinces which He had done at home in glory and gladness."³² From before the foundation of the world He surrenders begotten Deity back to begetting Deity in obedience. . . . From the highest to the lowest, self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes the more truly self, to be thereupon yet

the more abdicated, and so forever. This is not a heavenly law which we can escape by remaining earthly, nor an earthly law which we can escape by being saved. What is outside the system of self-giving is not earth, nor nature, nor "ordinary life," but simply and solely Hell.³³

Love performs the contradictory, impossible feat of uniting by individuating and individuating by uniting. "At what moment do two lovers come into the most complete possession of themselves if not when they say that they are lost in each other." ³⁴

Through the death of the old dependence on mother, new independence and individuality emerge. These in turn are raw material for new relationships, new unions. A relationship of love is neither one of dependence nor one of mere independence. The opposition between these opposing categories is transcended when the categories themselves are transcended. A lover is neither a part of (and thus dependent on) nor apart from (and thus independent of) his beloved, but *with* her. The category of withness (*co-esse*) is one of the most important and neglected categories in philosophy.³⁵

The absence of a lover, caused by death, does not sever this *co-esse*. Love is stronger than death. It seems at first that death is mere absence, as it would seem to the baby being born that birth is absence and separation. Later it appears as another, deeper mode of presence. These two appearances are lived through in C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*: first the apparent absence, then the real presence:

We both knew this. I had my miseries, not hers; she had hers, not mine. . . . We were setting out on different roads. This cold truth, this terrible traffic-regulation ("You, Madam, to the right--you, Sir to the left") is just the beginning of the separation which is death itself. . . . she used to quote, "Alone into the Alone." She said it felt like that. And how immensely improbable that it should be otherwise! Time and space and body were the very things that brought us together; the telephone wires by which we communicated. Cut one off, or cut both off simultaneously. Either way, mustn't the conversation stop?

No! –

And then one or other dies. And we think of this as love cut short; like a dance stopped in mid-career or a flower with its head unluckily snapped off . . . [But] bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love. It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as winter follows autumn. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure. We are "taken out of ourselves" by the loved one while she is here. Then comes the tragic figure of the dance in which we most learn to be still taken out of ourselves though the bodily presence is withdrawn, to love the very Her, and not fall back to loving our past, or our memory, or our

sorrow, or our relief from sorrow, or our own love.³⁶

The "tragic figure of the dance" produces an even closer presence than the earthly marriage could have done. For a person is "bigger on the inside than on the outside," and death brings a person closer by removing the outside once it has done its work. Death unsheathes the sword; death strips us for the naked embrace.

UNION WITH THE WORLD THROUGH DEATH

Death not only unites us more closely with our beloved; it also unites us more closely with the whole world, as a mother unites her baby more closely with the whole world by giving birth. Our present body is both fatal and fetal. Like a fetus, it is extremely limited; it can unite us only with that portion of the whole that is somehow received or derived from our five senses. The body into which we are born at death transcends these fetal limitations. Such a body is invisible to us now, of course. This should not surprise us if we think in terms of our thought experiment paralleling death and birth: the present body is just as invisible to a fetus.

One way death unites us with the whole world is through a marvelous kind of time-transcending remembering. At the moment of death, according to widespread testimony,³⁷ we remember and review the whole of our life in detail at a single moment. This seems to be more-than-time remembering time, as some archetypal dreams may be time remembering less-than-time. Such dreams seem to be our remembering of our womb consciousness; they are the navel of our psyche, our souvenir from our travels on the former side of the magic door of birth.

Death also unites us with the whole world in a deeper way than merely remembering the whole of our life, if it is a mother. A fetus's body relates it only to a tiny part of the world we know (though it is all of the world the fetus knows): its mother's womb. The born person's body relates him to the whole world we now know. But this world in turn is only a tiny part of a much larger world.³⁸ The after-death body relates the after-death person to the whole of that world. But this world is included in that world, as a womb is included in this world. As a born person understands the meaning of a womb better than a fetus, a dead person understands the meaning of this world better than a living one, as Emily does in *Our Town*.

Oriental mysticism is an attempt to unite with and to understand the meaning of the whole of the world before experiencing death. This is why it is a flight from the body and the ego that identifies itself with its body, the body that limits us to *this* and not *all*. There are three philosophies of man's essence: Western secularism says man is simply finitude and matter; Eastern mysticism says man is simply infinity and spirit; Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) says man is both matter and finite spirit in relation to

infinity. The first says this body is everything we are; the second says this body is nothing we truly are; the third says this body is the seed, or fetus, of what we truly are.

Christianity is a sacramental religion ultimately because Jesus attained an intimate union with the world, with matter, not just by his incarnation but by his death. He went down to the roots of the cosmic tree and reinvigorated its sap. The image imposes itself of a gigantic Atlas humbly stooping lower than the lowest in order to bear the burden of the whole of reality on his shoulders, then straightening up and bursting through the primordial darkness into the heavenly sunlight. It is this death that a Christian dies "in Christ."

WHY WE MUST DIE

Death as a mother answers Zorba the Greek's question "Why must anybody die? Tell me." I must die to be born. The body must die because it has served its purpose and is worn out, like the placenta. It is as though nature cannot wait to reclaim what was hers, that body that would have obeyed only nature's laws of physics and chemistry if it were subject only to them, but that was used as the instrument of the spirit for a while. As soon as the spirit departs, the body begins to disintegrate, just as when the hand wielding the sword lets go, the sword drops, obeying the laws of gravity rather than the will of the wielder.

It is good that the body gets worn out. It is even good that it ages before it dies, for that makes it easier for us to abandon it. We naturally cling to it; bodily self-preservation is our most deeply rooted instinct, Mother Nature's first commandment. Aging teaches us a higher law; we learn detachment from the old womb when the time for birth approaches. .

Reincarnation would be intolerable, like repeating kindergarten, or having triplets at age fifty, or hearing the same symphony twelve times in a row. Enough is enough. We need not to repeat the dream of life but to wake up. "One short sleep past; we wake eternally." ³⁹

This explains why infants sleep most, old people least. Infants sleep most because they have been sleeping since the foundation of the world, and the habit is not easily broken. (Of course there are physiological reasons too; but they do not exclude other, higher reasons.) This life is also a sleep, though not so deep a one. We are weaned from the habit gradually. It is appropriate that old people sleep less than young, for they are closer to eternal wakefulness, closer to the divesting of the habit of sleep altogether.

Those who catch a glimpse of the next life, whether by mysticism, divine revelation, or resuscitation, always use images of waking, not of sleep. They never speak of eternal rest. Buddha calls himself "the man who woke up." Mystical experience is called "enlightenment." Resuscitated patients report seeing a "being of light." ⁴⁰ The Book of Revelation says of heaven, "There is no night there." ⁴¹ In

the womb there is no day; in the world there is both day and night; in heaven there is no night.

DEATH WEANS US FROM DEATH

But do we desire the day? Do we want to wake up? Freud detects in us two fundamental drives or desires.⁴² *Eros*, the life instinct, and *thanatos*, the death instinct, lead us in opposite directions in pursuit of happiness. *Eros* is the creative drive, the forward push. For Freud, it is primarily sexual, even genital; but all forms of creativity, including art and science, are erotic. *Thanatos* is the desire to return to a womblike state where no desire is frustrated, where desire does not exceed gratification. In the light of these categories, the function of death as a mother is to wean us. From what? From *thanatos*--that is, from death--from comfort, security, sleeping, dreaming--from the womb. Modern man especially needs death because he is history's greatest comfort and security monger, and, as we saw in Chapter 2, the deepest meaning of technology is as a tool to that end. Our society's comfort-dispensing machines are turning the world into a huge womb, where nearly every desire can be instantly gratified. And ironically, that society which above all needs death is on the verge of inventing the "immortality pill" to avoid it. This is technology's supreme triumph.

Death delivers us from a terrible thing, a fate worse than death. This terrible thing is something which our American Constitution calls one of our three fundamental rights! Not life, not liberty, but the pursuit of happiness is a terrible thing. In fact, one must choose either life (*eros*) and liberty *or* the pursuit of happiness, if we mean happiness in the modern, rather than the ancient, sense. The modern sense of happiness is subjective contentment, not objective perfection, not the fulfillment of the ontological purpose for which we exist. For us, if you think you're happy, you're happy. The ancients (such as Solomon, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas) would disagree: A fool thinks he is happy, but he is a fool.

Now this pursuit of happiness in the modern sense is really the death-wish, *thanatos*. Therefore, it is contrary to real liberty. Therefore modern man reinterprets liberty as he reinterprets happiness. Liberty is no longer freedom *to* attain my true, objective end, but freedom *from* obstacles and frustrations to my subjective desires; it is not freedom *from* a womb but the freedom *of* a womb.

It is a fate worse than physical death, for physical death kills only the body, while *thanatos* kills the spirit and its life, its drive, its *eros*. I have taught classes of students who thought *Brave New World* a utopia rather than a dystopia, and envied it; who were so stuck into the "do your own thing" philosophy that they said they would not "impose their values" on others by preventing a loved one from committing suicide or a son or daughter from spending his whole life playing with mud pies "if it made him happy." We moderns show in thousands of ways that our ideals are rarely higher than elaborate mud pies, that we

would rather live in comfortable dreams than confront reality. Do we even believe that the word *reality* has any clear meaning, that the distinction between the real and the unreal is objectively identifiable? Subjectivism and relativism is a comfortably womblike philosophy.

We are *thanatos* addicts, and death frees us from this addiction. Death is not thanatopic; death is erotic. It is like birth--it plunges us into the unavoidable light of objective reality.

We hate that light. This is why we kill most of our prophets and wise men, from Socrates and Jesus to Gandhi and Martin Luther King: because they tell the truth. They are lights, and mirrors, and alarm clocks; more, they are midwives. We would rather hide or sink into the womb. We need death as we need birth. It forces us, against our will, to grow, just as suffering forces our minds, against our will, to grow to wisdom:

Hour by hour, drop by drop
Pain falls upon the heart
And against our will
And even in our own despair
Comes wisdom from the awful grace of God.⁴³

From Socrates and Solomon to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, philosophers contrast the pursuit of pleasure with the pursuit of wisdom. Truth is a severe master, not a gentle one. We prefer tolerance to truth, kindness to love, compassion to idealism. We relate better to grandfathers than fathers. If the real Socrates, the real Jesus, or the real Buddha, as distinct from the harmless pastel figures of the selective modern imagination, were alive today, they would be hated as being too hard, too demanding, too "inhuman."

Progress in human history, according to Toynbee, is largely a matter of "challenge and response."⁴⁴ Man moved ahead only where he was kicked in the pants. Death is the ultimate kick in the pants.

The "immortality pill" is our kick back. It is the apotheosis of modern man's new *summum bonum*, the conquest of nature. Death is the last natural power to be conquered. The Pill will be the fulfillment of one of our deepest and darkest dreams, the Oedipus complex. Now we will be able to kill our father (God), and marry our mother (earth). For without death, and with an earthly technological paradise, we no longer want God or Heaven. We can now return with our phallic power of technology into our birth canal; we can impregnate Mother Earth with our life forever. It is the supreme obscenity of man's history, and the supreme illustration of the greatest of paradoxes, that "he that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life shall find it."⁴⁵

DEATH AS AN OPERATION

But man need not have this incestuous relationship with earth. Incest is the perversion of the mother-child relationship, not its essence. Possessiveness (on the part of the mother) is also a perversion of the mother-child relationship, not its essence. Death is not a possessive mother. Death means for us to grow.

The growth is spiritual, and moral. Death is our moral mother, our supreme instrument for moral growth. When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after, righteousness, for they shall be filled,"⁴⁶ he is talking about death. If we seek righteousness, we will not fear death but look forward to it, for in death we finally attain our goal. In death we finally become unable to sin, "dead to sin."⁴⁷ Death is the supreme healing operation. All of life is "pre-op."

How does this work? By a kind of anaesthesia. Only in death are we able to stop fighting the divine surgeon, able to stop saying "my will be done" instead of "Thy will be done." Only in death can the very roots of our being, where sin is, be conquered and healed. Only in death can we be radically remade from within:

We can set no limits to the tearing up of roots that is involved in our journey into God. . . .

There is a further step to take: the one that makes us lose all foothold within ourselves....

What will be the agent of that definitive transformation? Nothing less than death.... The great victory of the Creator and Redeemer, in the Christian vision, is to have transformed what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor.

God must, in some way or other, make room for himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if he is finally to penetrate into us. And in order to assimilate us in him, he must break the molecules of our being so as to re-cast and remodel us. The function of death is to provide the necessary entrance into our inmost selves.⁴⁸

Why is such radical surgery necessary? Not' only because of the radical disease (sin, separation from God) but also because we must be made totally receptive in order to be united with God because God cannot be the possessed, only the Possessor. God impregnates us, we do not impregnate Him. This is why He is imaged as a "He," not a "She": the sexual symbolism is appropriate to the spiritual relationship. God's essence is I AM--the subject, not the object, the living and active one, the First. Nothing can ever be what it essentially is not. Therefore God can never be an object. Therefore He can never be an object of human having, only the Haver.

Now our body is the foundation for all our having, the instrument by which we possess. The spirit or self cannot have, possess, grasp, or hoard:

The heart of man cannot hoard. His brain or his hand may gather into its box and hoard, but

the moment things have passed into the box, the heart has lost them and is hungry again.⁴⁹ Death removes the body, therefore removes having--so that God can then unite Himself with us in the only way possible, as Haver, not had, as Subject, not object, as I AM--that is, as He really is.

This union is the great marriage, the point of all life and history and creation, the supreme consummation of all existence. We need another chapter to explore this final face of death, the face to which we have been led by death's motherhood: the face of death as our lover.

NOTES

1. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).
2. Erik Erikson, Freud's maverick disciple, noted that infants who had not been conditioned by their environment to any sexist roles or stereotypes nevertheless persisted in spontaneously playing with blocks in sexually differentiated ways; the vast majority of infant girls made concave (womb-like) shapes and the vast majority of infant boys made convex (phallic) shapes. See *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950).
3. The word is *semeion*; see, for example, John 2:11.
4. For example, Revelation 19:13.
5. John 10:7, 9.
6. See *The New Catholic Directory* (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1929), p. 844; *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), vol. 5 ("ex opere operato") and vol. 12 ("sacraments").
7. *Ibid.*; *The New Catholic Dictionary* defines a sacrament as both "significative and productive of grace," p. 844.
8. Matthew 27:50-51.
9. Matthew 27:52-53.
10. Judges 14:14.
11. Matthew 27:46
12. It is also the wisdom of the cartoonist! Johnny Hart, in his "B.C.," has a baby dinosaur hatching out of his egg look around and exclaim: "It's true; there *is* life after birth!"
13. Thomas Howard, *Splendor in the Ordinary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1977), pp. 23-24.
14. John 14:27
15. Augustine *Confessions* 1.1.
16. Charles Kingsley, *Health and Education: The Science of Health*, 1874. The text reads: "To be discontented with the divine discontent, and to be ashamed with the noble shame, is the very germ and first up growth of all virtue."
17. Ecclesiastes 3:11
18. Ecclesiastes 2:19
19. See Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 25ff.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 73ff.
21. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960)
22. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 156
23. Roger Troisfontaines, "The Mystery of Death," in *The Mystery of Suffering and Death*, ed., Michael J. Taylor, S.J. (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974), p. 185.
24. Job 1:21
25. See Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching* 50.

26. John 3:3
27. 1 Corinthians 15, esp. vs. 44
28. See Augustine *Sermon 15* (Christmas)
29. Pascal, *Pensees*, 113 (trans. Krailsheimer), above, p. 59.
30. Romans 8:22
31. Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 80-81
32. George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Third Series (London; New York: George Rutledge & Sons, 1873), pp. 11-12
33. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp.149-152
34. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 265
35. See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), pp. 137, 237; *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), p. 77; vol. 2, trans. Rene Hague (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), p. 9; *Metaphysical Journal*, trans.. Bernard Wall (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), p. 170; *Du refus al invocation* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1940), pp. 50-52.
36. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 14-15, 58-59, 63-64.
37. See Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), pp. 64ff.
38. See William James on this in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. (London, N.Y.: Longmans, Green, 1909; New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1963)
39. John Donne, "Death, Be Not Proud"
40. Moody, *Life After Life*, pp. 58ff
41. Revelation 21:15, 22:5
42. See *Civilization and its Discontents*; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and *The Ego and the Id*.
43. Aeschylus, "Agamemnon"; cf. Richard Lattimore's translation in *Aeschylus I* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 44
44. See Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1947).
45. Matthew 10:39
46. Matthew 5:6
47. Romans 6, esp. vss. 2, 11
48. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 88-89
49. George MacDonald, quoted in C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, no. 287, p. 119 (New York: Macmillan, 1978)

Deceived by God? *A Journey Through Suffering* – John S. Feinberg

[Published by Crossway Books, 1997; Among other books, Feinberg has authored: *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*; *He Arose!: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*; *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*]

Chapter 3: RECIPES FOR DISASTER *Or How Not to Help the Afflicted*

IF THE RELIGIOUS PROBLEM OF EVIL (the problem about personal struggles with pain and suffering) is not primarily about justifying God's ways in our world but about how to live with the God who does not stop the suffering, how can we help others through these difficult times in their life? I can only answer in terms of things that were not helpful to me and things that did make a difference.

Invariably, people try to say something they hope will help. Sometimes it does, but often people can be extremely insensitive in the things they say, and this only drives the sufferer into further despair. No one means to do this; no one is trying to make the burden worse. Most just want to help. But despite good intentions, these would-be comforters often wind up doing more damage than good. Let me mention some things that are inappropriate to say.

"You Must Have Committed Some Sin"

Someone may say, "There must be some great sin you've committed; otherwise, this wouldn't be happening to you." I am very thankful that no one said this to me or my family, though it is a common reaction of some people when they hear of severe affliction. This was the reaction of Job's so-called comforters. They didn't really know what was happening, but they were sure it would not look good for God if a righteous man suffered. Therefore, they reasoned that God would only allow this to happen to the guilty.

While it is true that God punishes sin, and that the wicked will have a day of judgment, Scripture is very clear that sometimes the ungodly *do* prosper (Psalm 73), while the righteous suffer (Job 1:8; 2:3; 1 Peter 4:12-19). The truth is that in most instances we don't really know whether someone suffers as a righteous person or as a sinner. Outwardly moral people may be great sinners, and even those who seem righteous may be guilty of some hidden sin. The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16) is a vivid reminder that outward appearances do not provide a good basis for judging spirituality. If someone is truly suffering in punishment for sin, that person will likely know it without our saying a thing. If that person doesn't realize it, it is still probably better to ask him what he thinks God is saying through

the affliction, rather than offering our opinion that they must have committed some sin. If someone is suffering for righteousness' sake, as was Job, it will definitely not help if those who are not suffering assume an attitude of moral superiority and accuse the sufferer of sin.

Things vs. People

Another mistake is to focus on the loss of things rather than the loss of people. I do not speak from personal experience, but from that of a relative. Some years ago this relative was on vacation. While away, she learned that her home had burned to the ground, trapping and killing her son who was unable to escape. Her pastor tried to be of help but made some significant mistakes in handling the situation. For one thing, he made very little attempt to see her and allow her to talk out her feelings. The few times he did say something, he expressed concern over the loss of her house and possessions. You can imagine how hurt she was. The loss of one's home and possessions is not insignificant, but in one way or another, those things can be replaced. The loss of a loved one is the greatest loss one can suffer, for how does one replace a son? That pastor utterly missed the point of her grief. By his insensitivity, he missed the opportunity to minister to her in her time of crisis and hindered rather than helped the healing process.

"This Has Probably Spared You from Worse Problems"

Sometimes when we lose a loved one, people try to comfort us by convincing us that what has happened is for the best because it spares us from other problems. Here I relate the experience of one of my students. This student and his wife had their first baby, and he was in my class for the term just after the baby's birth. About midway through the term, the baby died very suddenly. After the funeral and toward the end of the term, he shared with the class some of what he had learned. Part of what he told us focused on things not to say to someone experiencing such grief. He told us how some people had said, "You know, it's probably a good thing that your son died. He probably would have grown up to be a problem. Maybe he'd have been a drug addict or would have refused to follow Christ. God knows these things in advance, and he was probably just saving you from those problems."

I trust that no one thinks this is an appropriate thing to say. Maybe that child *would* have been a problem, but it is hard to see how that information is a comfort at the time of loss. Parents and other relatives loved that child, and they loved him regardless of whether or not he was or would have been a problem. Their loss is extremely painful, and the pain is not eased, let alone removed, by insensitive

speculations about the future. Moreover, the comment is wrong, because it in effect says that it is good that evil has happened. I don't see how that can ever be an appropriate attitude for a Christian. Yes, James says we are to count it all joy when we fall into various afflictions (James 1:1-2), but we must not misunderstand this. The affliction is not joy; it is evil. The cause for joy is that in spite of the evil, God is with us and can accomplish positive things in our life even in the midst of affliction. But the affliction is not a good thing. If it were, we might be inclined to seek suffering. Obviously, nothing in Scripture suggests that we should do that. Anyway, we don't have to seek affliction; it has a way of finding us.

"Just Remember Romans 8:28"

It is not unusual for some well-meaning person to see us suffering and offer the following advice. "I can see this is quite a struggle for you. But just remember that in Romans 8:28 God promises that all things work together for good." Though quoting Scripture to the afflicted can be a good strategy, quoting this passage is not necessarily helpful, for a number of reasons.

For one thing, those who understand what you are saying usually remember that there is more to the verse. Paul says that this will happen to "those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose." It is not unlikely that reminding sufferers of this verse will stir up in them a variety of doubts. They may reason, "Since all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose, maybe the reason that this is happening and hasn't yet turned out for good is that my love for God isn't what it should be. Or maybe God has his will and purposes for me, but I'm out of his will, and that's why this has happened. In fact, maybe by quoting this verse my friend is implicitly accusing me of those problems."

Surely, such doubts in no way help the sufferer. The would-be comforter of course does not intend to make the burdens heavier by adding such a burden of doubt and guilt. However, there are other problems with quoting this verse. Clearly, Paul is appealing to the ability of a sovereign God to turn everything that happens to believers, even adversity, into something profitable for them. But in light of verses 29-30, which explain why verse 28 is true, it is clear that the good envisioned here pertains to the believer's salvation, not just anything that contributes to worldly convenience or comfort. Paul writes: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Nonetheless, those who quote this verse often think it guarantees comfort and convenience. If it doesn't, it is simply misleading to quote this verse as though it means that the afflicted should feel better

because God will soon restore all comforts and conveniences that were lost. That is surely not the verse's point.

There is a third problem with reminding the sufferer of Romans 8:28, especially if one uses it at early stages of the sufferer's affliction. The problem is that it again treats what is primarily an emotional problem as though it is only an intellectual one. We think that if we can just get the sufferer the "right" information, all the pain will just go away. If the mother of the little girl who skinned her knee quoted Romans 8:28 to her daughter, would that remove the pain? Of course not, and not just because she's a little girl!

Do not misunderstand this. There will be a time in the sufferer's experience when it will be helpful to offer this and other theological information in an attempt to comfort. But when emotional and physical pain are so severe, don't expect the sufferer's mind to be functioning at full speed. Even if it is, the right information won't remove the pain!

There are two other problems with quoting this verse, and I think these are the most significant. For one thing, at the point in our suffering when someone quotes this verse, God typically has not brought good out of this evil. Often those who suffer cannot see how or when God will do so. Reminding them of what God can do before God has done anything is not likely to help very much.

In addition, it is hard to see how that good, whenever it comes and whatever it will be, will make up for the evil that has happened. Surely, the would-be comforter does not mean to say that the evil that has happened is really all right because eventually God will overrule this adversity to do something good! Moreover, I hope that by quoting this verse no one is suggesting that since God will turn things to good, even the evil that has happened is not really evil! Unfortunately, quoting Romans 8:28 may just give the sufferer such false impressions. How insensitive to imply that a tragedy of a lost loved one, or some other tragedy, really isn't that bad or that it is not even evil, because God will eventually bring something good out of the experience! God used the murder of Jesus Christ on Calvary to purchase our salvation, but that doesn't make our Lord's death any less a murder, nor does it mean that those who put him to death deserve praise as moral heroes!

Remember that even Jesus wept when Lazarus died (John 11:35). The fact that Jesus had power to raise his friend from the dead (and did so) did not cause Jesus to think that what had happened was trivial. Jesus knew this was a terrible evil, and so he wept, even though he knew he could raise Lazarus from the dead. Scripture also tells us that as a result of sin, the whole creation was subjected to futility (Rom. 8:20). The fact that God will someday reverse the curse placed on creation (Rom. 8:21) in no way minimizes the evil that has happened. God's overturning the results of the sin in our world and using that to demonstrate

his glory and power does not mean the sin was good. After all, God told the human race he did not want us to sin. The fact that he can display his mighty and gracious hand in saving sinners does not mean he is actually happy that we sinned, making his salvation possible, or that our sin is not really sin!

Things happen in our world that really are evil! Do not minimize that fact by appealing to the sovereign ability of God to bring good even out of the most horrible situation. Somewhere down the road, after the sufferer's pain has somewhat subsided and there has been time to see what God will do in the midst of the tragedy, maybe then it will be a comfort to remind the sufferer of this verse. Don't be surprised if the afflicted person has already recited that verse many times over. Regardless of what good God has brought out of the evil situation, that doesn't mean the evil is not really evil!

"We're All Going to Die Someday"

There are other comments that do not help. Not long after we learned the truth about my wife's condition, someone said this to me: "Well, you know, everyone's going to die from something. You just know in advance what it is in your wife's case."

Even if this were true, how can it be a comfort? Does the thought of your own death bring you comfort? If you knew in advance the cause of your own death, would you be inclined to say, " Ah, well, very good; now I can rest easy knowing what will get me"? No one likes to reflect on their own or a loved one's demise. That it will happen to all of us is no encouragement, nor is knowing the manner of our death. That is true even if ours will be an "easy death," not to mention facing death from a catastrophic disease. At the time of someone's grief, do not think you will help them by reminding them we will all die someday, or that at least they know in advance how they will die.

The other problem with this comment is that it is not necessarily true--that is, that we can ever know for certain in advance the cause of our death. Indeed, the likelihood that my wife will die of Huntington's Disease is great, but it is not absolutely certain. She could die of a heart attack, in a car accident, or some other way. None of that is cause for rejoicing either, but it does show that the comment in question is neither helpful nor necessarily correct.

Furthermore, it doesn't help to remind me or my wife that despite her disease and despite the fact that it takes people when they are relatively young, I might still die before she does. That could also be true, but I don't find it comforting to think that at a time when Pat is least able to function and most in need of my help, I might not be there. That doesn't encourage her either.

"Don't Think About Any Major Changes"

When the doctor first diagnosed Pat's condition, he told her some things that he must have thought would be helpful. After giving the diagnosis, he said, "Well, you better think about it long and hard before having any more children. And you and your husband better not think about changing jobs. If you do, you might not be able to get insurance."

I am confident that her physician meant well and wanted to be helpful. Indeed, we needed to think about these things. However, there is a time to be told such things, and right at the outset is not it. Earlier I described the feelings of abandonment and hopelessness. Along with those feelings is the sense that one is trapped in the situation and helpless to escape. What that doctor said in no way helped to alleviate those feelings. On the contrary, it confirmed our feelings of entrapment. While I love my teaching and where I'm doing it, nobody likes to feel that their life's options are being limited or cut off, especially when they face seemingly insurmountable problems.

Yes, we needed that information, but not at that time. When someone you know gets shocking news, they are in need of some practical advice about their situation. However, timing is crucial. I would encourage you to be ultra-sensitive to their feelings. At the moment when they are feeling totally devastated by the news, don't add to their misery by telling them things that will only add to their feelings of entrapment and abandonment. If you feel you must say something, it would probably be better just to encourage them not to make any major decisions until they have had some time to sort things out. But they probably know that already!

"I Know How You Feel"

One of the most typical things people say is something I have said myself at times when visiting the sick or the bereaved. As we fumble for something to share that will comfort our friend or loved one, somehow it seems appropriate to say "I know how you must feel at a time like this." Through my experiences, I have learned how inappropriate and unhelpful this comment can be. The problem is really twofold. On the one hand, it is not true, and the sufferer knows it. Hence, it sounds phony when you say it. Even if you think you know how I feel, and even if the same thing happened to you, you don't know how I feel and you can't know how I feel. You can't because you are not me with my particular personality and emotions, with my background and experiences, with my family and the relations we share with one another. Nor can I know exactly how you feel when suffering comes your way. Telling me that you know how I feel sounds like an insincere and cheap way to try to comfort me. I know it cannot be true.

If something similar has indeed happened to you, you may tell me this because you think I might be

encouraged hearing that others have suffered greatly and yet have survived. If that is your point, then just say that, rather than saying you know how I feel. What you say may still not comfort me, because I may be in too much pain at the time to think I'll ever make it through the particular crisis at hand. You can say this from the vantage point of looking back at your own crisis and seeing that you survived. But remember that I am still in the midst of my crisis. Your experience is no guarantee that I'll make it.

While your reassurance that you and others have survived tragedy may not comfort me, at least that comment is true. You are not telling me you know how I feel when I know you can't know how I feel. You are simply saying that though these things are hard, others like yourself have experienced tragedy and still survived. Unless I am totally different from everyone else, it is possible for me to make it, too.

The other problem with saying you know how I feel is that it really doesn't matter. For one thing, do you think I would rejoice in knowing that you feel as miserable as I do? I would not wish my feelings of grief on my enemies, let alone my friends. To know that you feel as bad as I do would make me feel worse, not better. Beyond that, the fundamental reason it doesn't matter whether or not you know how I feel is that this information alone will not help me. What helps is not knowing you feel like I do, but knowing that you care!

Look at it this way. Suppose some horrible tragedy happened to you. Suppose I had experienced the same thing, and suppose I know you. Now I tell you, "You know, I know exactly how you feel. I've been there myself. But you know what? While I know how you feel, I don't really care about what's happening to you."

Would that comfort or help you? Of course not! However, if I tell you I don't know how you feel, but I do care, and I want to be of help, that will make a difference. Remember, those who suffer feel helpless, hopeless, and abandoned. They need us to care and to show that care by helping however we can. *They don't need us to share their feelings; they need us to share their burdens!*

It is very important to recognize the difference between "I know how you feel" and "I really feel for you." The former identifies with the sufferer. The latter shows that we care.

"If You'd Just Change Your View of God, Everything Would Be Fine"

As the months wore on after my wife's diagnosis, I longed to have someone to talk to about how I felt. A dear, godly colleague who has been a friend for many years offered to listen. I began to explain how perplexed I was by what had happened. It seemed that God hid information from us about my wife prior to our marriage, and again prior to our having children. I noted that with my Calvinistic conception of

God, where God controls all things, this was especially troublesome. Even if I were more inclined toward an Arminian notion of God, where God takes a less active role in the world in order to leave more room for human freedom, it still seemed to me that God should have intervened in our behalf. After all, hadn't we prayed that the Lord would lead us and keep us from making a wrong decision about whether to marry? My friend replied that I was talking about this concept of God and that model of God. What I really needed to do was stop such talk and recognize that God is bigger than all our conceptions of him.

There is something very right about what my friend said. Surely, we can never hope to understand our majestic and mighty God thoroughly through human thought forms. Yet, I found my friend's comments unhelpful. For one thing, he failed to see that his comment about God being bigger than all our conceptions of him is itself another conception of God.

However, the real problem was that my friend in essence was saying that things would be better for me if I just changed my ideas about God. Now, it is true that sufferers who are atheists need to change their perception of God. A Christian who has little training in theology might also need a better understanding of the nature and attributes of God. In fact, even theology professors could hardly be hurt by adjusting their views to a more accurate picture of God.

But even though this is true, there is still a major problem in thinking that this will resolve the religious problem of evil. What is wrong with telling someone in this situation that all they really need to do is just change their view of God? The problem is that this treats a fundamentally emotional problem as if it were an intellectual problem. Please do not misunderstand this. The afflicted may have a wrong concept of God, and at some point in dealing with them, we must help them get a better picture of what God is like. On the other hand, if the religious problem is, as I suggest, at root an emotional hurt, that must be handled first. You don't handle an emotional problem by telling someone to adjust their idea of God. You can change your view of God and still find that the pain remains!

There are other forms of this error that are just as common among Christians. One is, "You know, if you were a Calvinist, you'd see that God is in control of all of this, and then you could rest in him." Another is, "You know, if you weren't so Calvinistic, you wouldn't think God has his hand so directly in everything, and then you'd stop blaming him for what's happened to you." Perhaps the most common is, "When things like this happen, aren't you glad you're a Calvinist? Isn't it great to know that God is ultimately in control of it all, and that he's already planned the way out of your problem?"

The first two of these comments are really saying that this whole thing will be all right if you just change your view of God. We have already talked about this mistake. The third comment doesn't tell sufferers to get a new concept of God but rather tells them to take comfort in their beliefs about God.

Don't assume, though, that this will in fact comfort everyone. I am a Calvinist, and I found this comment distressing, not helpful. Because of my belief in God's control over all things, and because it appeared that God had misled me, I took no comfort in the fact that I was a Calvinist. In fact, I remember thinking quite frequently that everything that had happened to me and my family would be easier to take if I were an Arminian. At least then I wouldn't see God so actively and directly in control of what had happened.

What was the problem here? Was it that I really needed to discard my Calvinism as inadequate? Not at all. Had I been an Arminian, what had happened would still hurt terribly. The problem was that others who made the comment and I as well thought this deep emotional wound could be salved by simply reflecting on this intellectual concept. Indeed, there is a time for explanation and reflection upon what one knows to be true of God. If one's ideas about God are wrong, there is also a time for changing them. But not when the hurt is so deep and so new!

This is not a problem that first requires philosophical or theological discourse; it requires pastoral care. In any given case, no one can predict how long it will take for the pain to subside to the point where the sufferer is ready to think seriously about concepts of God. You can be sure, however, that until it does, it will not help the afflicted to tell them to change their view of God or simply meditate on what they believe about him.

"You Aren't Spiritually Mature Unless You're Happy About This"

There was one other thing I found unhelpful in the midst of this emotional and spiritual turmoil and upheaval. I was concerned about my response to our situation, and I felt guilty that I was not on top of things. After all, Christians are supposed to rejoice in all things and persevere no matter what. Beyond that, as one in a position of Christian leadership, people would be looking all the more closely at me to see how I handled this. Still, I was finding it hard to cope. I preach quite frequently, but for about six months I was physically, emotionally, and spiritually unable to do so. I felt that anything I would say would be hypocritical because I was not living whatever I might preach.

All of this was disturbing enough, but my uneasiness increased. One day I was listening to a Christian radio program. A husband and wife who had lost a daughter in her twenties in an automobile accident were giving their testimony. They recounted what had happened to their daughter and how, as a result of these events, various people had come to know the Lord. They concluded that even though the loss of their daughter was hard, it was all for the best. It was good that this had happened.

I heard that and felt more guilty. It seemed the height of Christian maturity to take life's harshest blow and say that it was good that this had happened. If that is what it means to be victorious in the midst

of affliction, I knew I was far from that. I could not rejoice over the evil that had befallen and would befall my family. But wasn't I supposed to? After all, doesn't Paul tell us to " give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18)? My sense of inadequacy increased.

What my friend and colleague said on this matter was most helpful. I told him I knew I was supposed to respond Christianly in this situation. Did that mean, though, that I had to like what was happening? Without batting an eyelash he responded, "You do have to learn to live with this, but that doesn't mean you have to like it!"

This may sound like heresy to some. Popular Christian belief reminds us to rejoice in everything and count it all joy when trials come our way. One is not really "with it" spiritually without being able to say that the affliction is a good thing--or so we are told. I beg to differ. Thinking that way will not help us cope with our grief; it will only add to it as we feel guilty about our inability to do what we think we are called to do.

My friend was right, and I came to see why as I reflected on this over the following weeks and months. First Thessalonians 5:18 is often misread. Paul does not say that we are to give thanks *for* everything, but *in* everything (that is, in the midst of everything). The affliction is evil, not good. Why should I thank God for evil? Furthermore, James 1:2-4 does not say that affliction is good or that it is a cause for rejoicing. It says that we are to rejoice when these things happen because God is sufficient in the midst of trials. We are to rejoice when we face trials because we can see what God is accomplishing *in spite of* the trial. Affliction may serve as the occasion for God to do good things in our life, but the suffering is not good. It is still evil.

Because the affliction is evil, I am not required to like it. We live in a fallen world. That is why it is even possible for these things to happen. Scripture is very clear that people die because of sin (Rom. 5:12). If people are going to die, they must die from something, and many will die from diseases that take life. Unless Jesus Christ returns for his church before we die, all of us will die as a consequence of living in a fallen world. If disease and death are ultimately the consequences of living in a sinful, fallen world, how can I applaud it? As a Christian, I am called to resist sin and its consequences in all forms. How, then, can I exult when the consequences of sin befall anyone, let alone a loved one? No, we don't have to like it, and if we properly understand the ultimate cause of disease and death, we had better not like it!

It is wrong in another respect to suggest that the sufferer give thanks for suffering. It is wrong because it ignores our humanness. Grief and sorrow in the face of tragedy are very human emotions. Unless they are admitted and expressed, they will remain inside us and destroy us. Healing cannot come if

we deny what we are feeling and act as though it is good that evil has occurred. Those negative feelings must be admitted and expressed. They must be dealt with, not hidden so that the sufferer acts as though everything is all right. We cannot help the afflicted if we expect them to deny their humanness.

Realizing that I didn't have to like what was happening relieved a great burden. Other things helped me as well. Let me turn from things that didn't help to those that did. The things I shall mention didn't all happen at once, and in some cases it took a while after they occurred for their import to sink in. If you are wrestling with the religious problem, I trust that you will read these comments with that in mind. None of it may help you now, but do not hesitate to come back to part or all of it later.