

Readings

Additional readings

The following list is provided as options for:

- facilitator pre-reading, if desired
- participant reading during *Short Trails*
- a place where participants can be directed for those who wish to engage with more material following the workshop

BLS (2001). Session 7 Pastoral care in the school community, *Theological Orientation Program for Staff (TOPS)* 2nd edition (pp. 5-7). Adelaide: BLS.

Bulman, E. (2005). Faith Story. *SchoolLink*, April 2005 Vol 11 No 1. Adelaide: LEA.

Burger, G. (2005). I walk with a limp. *SchoolLink*, April 2005 Vol 1 No 1. Adelaide: LEA.

Chilcote, P. (2005). *Changed from glory into glory*. Nashville: Upper Room Books. (pp 105-106).

Eiesland, N. (2005) *Disability and the image of God – encountering the disabled God*. Retrieved September 1, 2010,

http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/169/49/disability_and_the_image_of_god_spring_2004_encountering_the_disabled_god/

Hewetson, D. (1992) *Why does a good God allow suffering?* New South Wales: Albatross Books. (pp. 108-109).

Kleinig, J. (2005) Shaken. *SchoolLink*, April 2005 Vol 11 No 1. Adelaide: LEA.

LEA (2005). Key Idea 3 A Christian worldview is shaped by the biblical teaching of sin and grace, *Christian Studies Curriculum Framework Theological Notes* (pp. 13-14). Adelaide: LEA.

LEA (2005). Key Idea 2 Christians are called to love and serve all people, *Christian Studies Curriculum Framework Theological Notes* (pp. 43). Adelaide: LEA.

Lind, J. (2001) He told me that he couldn't do his homework last night ... , *SchoolLink*, August 2001 Vol 7 No 2. Adelaide: LEA.

Veith, G. (1999) *The spirituality of the cross: the way of the first Evangelicals*. St Louise: Concordia Publishing House. (pp. 55-69).

Yancey, P. (1990) *Where is God when it hurts?* Michigan: Zondervan

Faith Story

Our schools are communities where an amazing range of activities take place: they are learning environments, places of service, social networks, administrative agencies for church and state and they are places where staff and students meet Christ, sometimes for the first time.

In the next few issues of *SchoolLink*, we will include stories of such encounters. If readers are aware of such stories in their own schools and believe that they might be shared with the readership of *SchoolLink*, please let us know at the LEA National Office.

Erica Bulman was a student at Cornerstone College at Mount Barker in South Australia. Her story is expressed in two parts: a year 12 devotion and a follow up five years later.

Erica's faith story in 2000:

When I began my life at Cornerstone in Year 8, I'll admit that although I believed in God, my faith was not very strong. I used to dislike going to church and after coming from a public primary school, devotions took a bit of getting used to.

However, during my years at Cornerstone, my faith has changed as I have learnt many valuable lessons through devotions, and through being around so many Christians, students and teachers alike. Lessons as simple as putting myself in someone else's

shoes, treating others the way I would want to be treated, helping and listening to others and being open-minded about other people's views. Such lessons have taught me a great deal as I thought about them and acted on them.

This year has been particularly difficult and there have been many times when I felt as though God couldn't have cared less – it was hard to see the light. Yet I have accepted that when times are tough, God is always there for me and that through these times He can teach me the lessons of life. It was and is a

huge comfort for me to be able to pray.

Whilst I will always have many questions and things to sort out about my faith, the devotions, my friends, the teachers and the special presence of Jesus Christ at Cornerstone has played a large role in helping me find the truth and also peace and comfort within myself.

I believe this valuable knowledge given by God will provide me with stability and support as I take the first steps of my journey into the rest of my life.



Erica Bulman

Erica's faith story in 2005:

It is hard to believe that nearly five years have passed since my testimony at my final Year 12 devotion. On that occasion I spoke of my life at Cornerstone College and how my faith had grown as a result of being a part of a Christian community. I learnt valuable lessons through devotions and through being around so many Christians, students and teachers alike. I neglected to mention in my testimony that my family was and continues to be responsible for helping me learn many valuable lessons in life: putting myself in someone else's shoes, treating others the way I would want to be treated, helping others and listening with an open mind.

At the end of year 12, I was confident that the valuable knowledge given by God, would provide me with stability and support as I took the first steps of the journey into the rest of my life. The lessons that I learnt and my faith have provided me with a quiet confidence and reassurance as I go

about my life now. In 2001, I was fortunate to gain entry into a Bachelor of Speech Pathology at Flinders University SA. I was relieved to feel that my hard work and prayers had paid off.

University life however brought a whole new dimension of experiences and challenges, new friends and independence. With independence came the need for a car, and to have a new car and a social life, one requires money. I started weekend shift work which took up most of my Saturdays and Sundays. I attended University during the week, babysat in the evenings, studied and enjoyed catching up and going out with friends. Although I wanted to, this new life made it difficult to find the time to attend church. It was different from the school environment where we attended everyday devotions and were supported in a Christian community.

Despite this new lifestyle though, I never doubted my faith in God. I may have had periods where I was too busy

or unable to attend church services, but I was always confident that God had a plan for me. I have always found great peace and comfort through prayer.

I believe my faith is evident as I go about everyday life and in providing service to others as a Speech Pathologist. I am not comfortable about preaching my faith, but prefer to act on the values that I have learnt as a Christian and provide service to those in need by living out those values.

I am currently working at a brain injury rehabilitation unit helping clients who have had accidents or strokes. I provide intervention to aid their speech, language, swallowing and cognition rehabilitation. I work with a large team of health professionals and I have involvement with clients and their families. I am always meeting people from all walks of life. I am very passionate about my job. It is satisfying to be of service to people, whether it is to help and provide professional assistance or simply to

understand them and to have empathy for their situation.

I continue to learn more about the world, myself and my faith as I experience life's challenges and I see that as a positive thing. Cornerstone College encouraged lifelong learning in a growing relationship with Christ. I guess I am still learning!

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A full list of references for the articles in this issue is available from the LEA office.

70
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I walk with a limp

I am minimally handicapped – I walk with a slight limp. Does this make me a cripple?

The personal starting point in any discussion of dis-ability is accepting that being human is to have a non-ability to do something or many things. Some non-abilities are more obvious than others; some functional limitations are much more painful and frustrating to a person and to others around him. It's hard to be thankful for them.

But 'disable' is a verb not a noun – an aspect of how I express myself, not the essence of my identity.

The theological starting point is grace. God acts totally in grace – my abilities are not a right, things deserved or earned. All is privilege and gift.

Grace is to be recognised and given the credit for all I am and grace is to be lived by letting you be what you are. Healing always adds to life, but the issue is wholeness not healing. I am imperfect, incomplete, longing for integration, struggling for wholeness. And wholeness cannot happen without being connected to others and contributing.

So Jesus said first to the paralysed man lowered through the roof by his friends, 'My son your sins are forgiven'. Then the second gift of healing was given to underline the first. 'Get up!' (Mark 2:5ff). Jesus' ministry was marked by his disregard of human qualifications to belong to the mainstream of society or Kingdom of God. He had a message of 'good news for the poor, liberty for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed' (Luke 4:18ff).

Jesus exploded the link between disability and moral and spiritual unworthiness. The righteousness needed to stand in the presence of the holy God is by grace through faith. 'The blind, the lame, the disfigured and deformed' who were barred from the Levitical priesthood (Leviticus 21:18) are now in the front row of the priesthood of all believers.

If we want to live out this truth in our communities and classrooms we need

to listen to the experiences of the disabled. And to do this each of us has to first go inwards to our own version of dis-ablement. It sounds pathetic but the hardest thing about walking with a slight limp is dealing with the questions and the solutions offered by well meaning people – this is how you can achieve normality in walking! The medical model is not very helpful. It says that those with dis-abilities are sick and need to spend their whole life becoming well. They are given no responsibility except regaining their health and becoming normal. This leads to sympathy, charity, paternalism, institutionalising, segregation from others.

You are a cripple, you are dyslexic, you are ADD. We will protect you from abuse and exploitation so that you can focus on getting better. This is the charitable view. Segregation and removal from the mainstream is also the way to minimise upset to 'normal' people.

'I just want to be what I am and to be given a place in your life. Focus on who I am not how I am different from you.' This is what I hear people in wheelchairs say along with kids who find it hard to join sounds to letters on a page. What they want is what we each want – to be respected for who

we are – ordinary persons who live ordinary lives.

Nancy Eiesland, author of *The Disabled God*, writes 'The resurrected Christ is a disabled God... he experiences in his embodiment all our vulnerability and flaws. In emptying himself of divinity, Jesus enters the arena of human limitation, even helplessness. Jesus' own body is wounded and scarred, disfigured and distorted.'

So Jesus has a limp. Remember too, that Moses had a speech impediment and Paul a thorn in the flesh.

There is a wonderful story in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 9). Five year old Mephibosheth is crippled when a nurse drops him fleeing in panic after the death in battle of his grandfather King Saul. Years later David takes the throne and asks 'Is there anyone of Saul's family left to whom I can show loyalty and kindness as I promised God I would?' The answer from his servant Ziba is somewhat hesitant. 'There is one of Jonathan's sons – he is crippled'. In other words, he doesn't belong in the King's court with the beautiful and powerful people of the Kingdom. David calls him in and promises to restore his fortunes. 'I am no better than a dead dog sir' are the crippled Mephibosheth's first words

'Why should you be so good to me?' Grace is always a miracle. And the story ends 'Mephibosheth, who was crippled in both feet ... ate all his meals at the king's table.' I wonder what the King received from him!

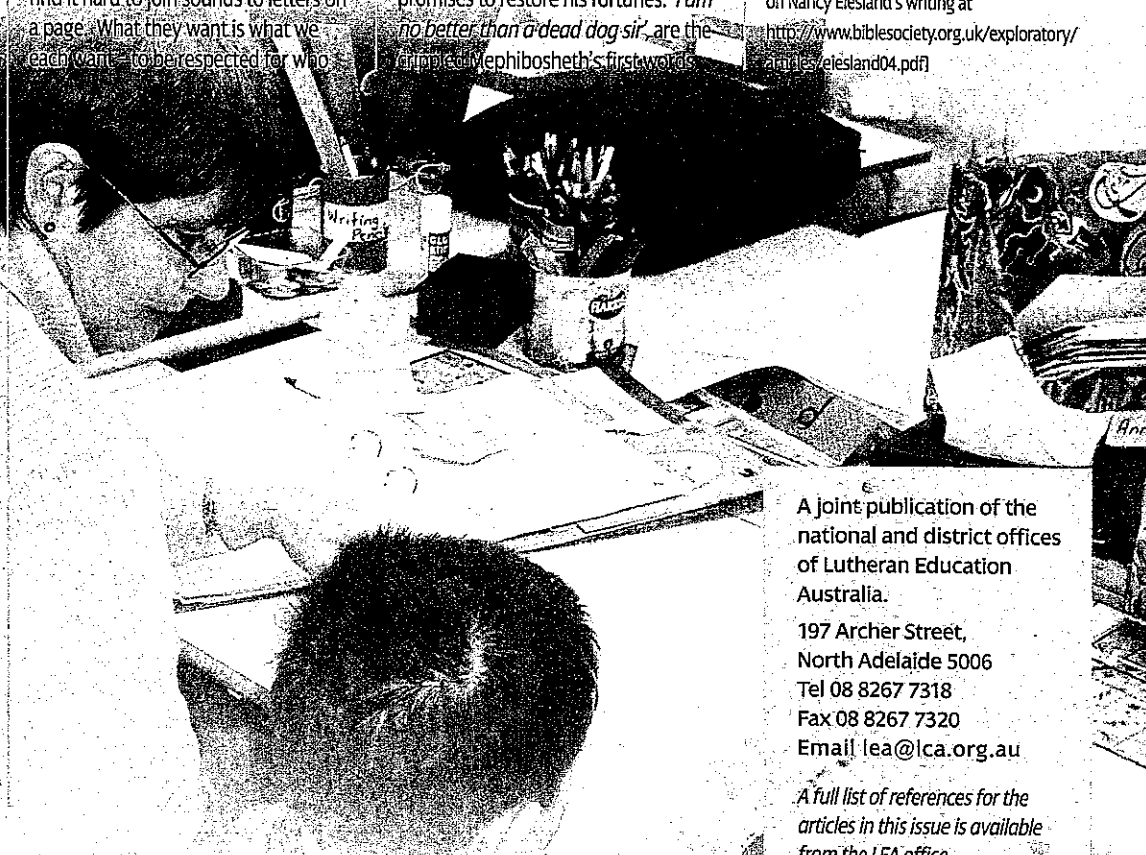
We are each differently abled and differently non-abled. The calling for each of the people of God is to discover what their abling and disabling equips them to be and express as children of God being recreated into the image of Christ.

And this is something we must and can only do together in the body of Christ. I cannot become whole in isolation from the complex interactions and interdependencies of the body. I cannot become whole when I am only together with those abled as I am.

I need to know and increasingly master the arts of love and giving, receiving and tolerance, generosity and trust, sacrifice and patience.

Geoff Burger
President
LCA Western Australia District

Readers can access further information on Nancy Eiesland's writing at <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/exploratory/articles/eiesland04.pdf>



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71
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Chilcote, E. (2005) *Changed from glory into glory*. Upper Room Books: Nashville.

What insight does Jesus' cross and his invitation to a cruciform life provide concerning prayer? How do these central affirmations of the Christian faith mobilize us for action? Earlier we explored the notion that intercession is not *our words*; intercession is *ourselves*. Prayer as solidarity in suffering involves compassion and hospitality. These manifestations of our intercession in and for the world are both dispositions and actions.

Compassion

God in Christ "suffers with" the world. This is the actual meaning of the word *compassion*. I believe nothing expresses the central truth of God's essence more fully than compassion, the outworking of God's self-giving love. We see compassion in the cross. Compassion, as one has written, is "the fertile suffering of love that births a new creation."

Certainly none of Jesus' stories proclaimed this imperative more directly than his parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37). The parable actually begins with the lawyer's question of the Master, "And who is my neighbor?" The question places the lawyer in the center of his world. It asks of Jesus, "Who around me is worthy of my concern?" This self-centered posture triggers Jesus' response in the form of the story. We know it well. As others pass by, only the Samaritan, the despised and suspected outsider, has compassion on his wounded neighbor. The sting of the parable comes in Jesus' reversal of the original question. "Which of these three," Jesus asks, "do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

You see, Jesus teaches us not to define ourselves on the basis of where *we* stand but to redefine who we are by our action, by our relationship to those who surround us in life. "Demonstrate through your life," he says in essence, "what a true neighbor should be like. Have compassion. 'Suffer with' those who lie wounded around you." My friend and spiritual guide Brother Mark titled a chapter in his book *Love and Life's Journey* "Praying with Eyes Open to the World." If we pray in this posture through our action, we practice compassion.

Hospitality

The other active manifestation of prayer as solidarity in suffering is hospitality. Hospitality concretely expresses the love that binds us to Christ and to one another within the human family. It is a profound response to the crucified One who takes in the whole world by his wide embrace upon the cross. Listening and hospitality share much in common. Both are dispositions, what I have called postures, in life. A poignant statement from *Gleanings*, a significant volume among the writings of Douglas Steere, links these two aspects of our spiritual lives closely: "To 'listen' another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another."

Hospitality creates an opportunity for the one who has no voice to speak. It offers space to another person. It provides a safe place to be honest and real and wounded. It acknowledges the presence of the invisible person. Hospitality breaks down the barriers that separate us from one another. It embraces and welcomes the forgotten, the lonely, and the lost. It opens a way for the wounded to be healed. This prayer of hospitality is challenging because it "listens" another soul into love.

Disability and the image of God. Spring 2004 - Encountering the disabled God

http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/169/49/disability_and_the_image_of_god_spring_2004_encountering_the_disabled_god/

Author: Nancy L Eiesland

Seldom is the resurrected Christ recognised as a deity whose hands, feet and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment. The resurrected Christ of Christian tradition is a disabled God.

Edition: Spring 2004

I RECENTLY READ AN ARTICLE ENTITLED “DISABILITY FOR THE RELIGIOUS” IN THE DISABILITY RAG – AN AMERICAN MAGAZINE PRIMARILY FOR DISABILITY RIGHTS ACTIVISTS.

The article implied that religion offers no relevant answers to the query, “What is disability?” According to the author the following answers are available: disability is (a) a punishment; (b) a test of faith; (c) the sins of the fathers visited upon the children; (d) an act of God; or (e) all of the above. If these were the only choices, I would have to agree that religion has no relevant answers.

Christianity has often been cited as the source of destructive stereotypes about people with disabilities.¹ In countering these views, the challenge for people of faith is (i) to acknowledge our complicity with the inhumane views and treatment related to people with disabilities and, (ii) to uncover this hidden history and to make it available for contemporary reflection.

As a person with a disability, I could not accept the traditional answers given to my query, “What is disability?” Since I have a congenital disability, I have had opportunities to hear and experience many of these so-called answers. They included: “You are special in God’s eyes, that’s why you were given this painful disability”, which didn’t seem logical. Or “Don’t worry about your pain and suffering now, in heaven you will be made whole.” Again, having been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God. My disability has taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? I was told that God gave me a disability to develop my character. But at age six or seven, I was convinced that I had enough character now to last a lifetime. My family visited faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience.

However, in my teen years, I became actively involved in the disability rights movement – the worldwide movement that has sought basic human rights for the now approximately 650-million persons with disabilities worldwide. Within the movement I came to understand why we people with disabilities have such depreciated views of ourselves and why so many of us are lacking in genuine convictions of personal worth. I began to see the “problem” not within my body, but with the societies that have made us outcasts, and viewed and treated us in demeaning and exclusionary ways. In America, I was among those who organised sit-ins to

achieve access to public transport, to seek access to public facilities, and to promote human and civil rights legislation. I became passionately committed to the view that society must be changed in order for our full value as human beings to be acknowledged.

While the disability rights movement and activism addressed my experience, it didn't always respond to my more spiritual and theological questions about the meaning of my disability. For a long time, I experienced a significant rift between my participation in the movement and my Christian faith. The movement offered me opportunities to work for change that I thought were unavailable in Christianity, but my faith gave a spiritual fulfilment that I found elusive elsewhere. Within the Church, other people with disabilities were often uninterested in political and activist matters. In the rights movement, fellow participants saw religion as damaging or at least irrelevant to their work.

Although I began to answer my own question of the meaning of my disability by articulating God's call for justice for the marginalised, thus including people with disabilities, I felt spiritually estranged from God. However, the return path towards intimacy with God began to be cleared as I read a passage from the Gospel of Luke, after an encounter with several other people with disabilities. The setting was the Shepard Centre, the local rehabilitation hospital for people with spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries. I had been asked by the facility's chaplain to lead a Bible study with several residents. One afternoon, after a long and frustrating day, I shared with the group my own doubts about God's care for me. I asked them if they could tell me how they would know if God was with them and understood their experience. There was a long silence, then an African-American young man said, "If God was in a sip/puff maybe he would understand."² We talked about the image for a while and concluded.

Several weeks later, I was reading Luke 24.36–39. It is set within the account of Jesus' death and resurrection, but the focus of this passage is really on his followers who are anxious and depressed. The passage reads: "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them ... They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see.' " It wasn't God in a sip/puff, but here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied, as we are – disabled and divine. Reading this passage, I came to realise that here was a part of my hidden history as a Christian. The foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet seldom is the resurrected Christ recognised as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment. The resurrected Christ of Christian tradition is a disabled God. This disabled God understood the experience of those in my Shepard Center Bible study, as well as my own, and called for justice not from the distant reaches of principle but by virtue of God's incarnation and ultimate knowledge of human contingency. Christian theology, insofar as it is an incarnational theology, has a calling to stand by contingency, mortality and the concreteness of creation and suffering.

This encounter with the disabled God was the source of the liberatory theology of disability that I have written about in *The Disabled God*,³ which calls both for justice and the recovery of vital Christian symbols and rituals. In promoting this vision, we also counter the prevailing sentiment that the religious practices and history of the able-bodied constitute the only relevant spiritual pulse and narrative, and that whatever is outside this ambit is of little, if any, significance.

What is the outcome of a life-changing encounter with the disabled God? Such an encounter

highlights the need for justice people with disabilities and the temporarily able-bodied. What is justice? Justice and just action are primarily virtues and practices of full participation, of persons deliberating about particular visions of human flourishing and working together to remove barriers in their institutions and relations so that they embody reciprocity and mutual appreciation of difference.

Justice is first about just listening, listening for the claims for justice made in the process of everyday life. This means attending to the ways in which everyday talk (and sometimes commonly accepted silence) makes claims about justice. They are not theories to be explicated or fully developed agendas to be followed; they are instead calls, pleas, or claims upon some people by others. Personal and social reflection on the demands of justice begins in heeding a call rather than in asserting and mastering a state of affairs. The call to be just is always situated in concrete social and congregational practices. Encounter must begin with listening, hearing the calls for justice expressed by people with disabilities who are among us.

Encountering the disabled God then makes possible thoroughgoing re-analysis of the connection between the myth of bodily perfection and the theological lengths to which we are willing to go in order to protect it. If Christ resurrected still participated fully in the experience of human life – including mysteriously the experience of impairment – we must be scandalised by our theological tendencies to perpetuate the myth of bodily perfection in our defence of heavenly (or, indeed, earthly) perfection. The disabled God nails the lie in our belief in a paradise in which we are “released” from the truth of worldly and bodily existence. That which God has called good, and in which God has participated through the incarnation, cannot be simply viewed as a temporary “evil” which we repudiate in order to participate in the promised fullness of life.

Furthermore, a theology that examines our own complicity in the theological justification of the myth of bodily perfection allows us to interrogate our own rage at mortality. The truth of mortality is threaded in our bones and genes and yet we, who are categorised as “unhealthy”, find it hard to love God and ourselves. We would be a god. We rage within at God or at ourselves. We constantly kick against the limits of being human. We devise inhuman schedules, inhumane expectations of others and ourselves, and inhumane needs of wealth and success. Stress-induced impairment will soon be among the leading causes of disability in the Western world, as we work our bodies beyond God-given limits. Affecting men and women in their thirties to fifties, stress-induced disabilities, like repetitive strain injury, stroke, and heart attack, teach us that we have yet to hear God’s call to be fully human, which means accepting our mortal limits. It is worth noting that our limits are neither constant nor uniform. Yet in the practice of ordinary faithfulness to our call to be human and to be for the others, we must learn to love our mortality as God does.

Finally, we must develop a risky imagination as a result of encountering the disabled God. Being at risk is the fundamental experience of human life. It is our birthright. The theological use we make of this is up to us. We can cultivate a risky imagination which understands that as we seek to address the meaning of disability and chronic illness we may find new ways of being in the world. Moving towards change is risky. But staying where we have been is deadly. Hopelessness takes no risk; it’s what we have been taught. The will to practice hope in the context of our own lives, our spiritual homes and in the world is risky. We have no assurance that our efforts will be repaid, our lamentations heard, our joys celebrated, our pain revered. We do not know that justice will be done and yet we must practice hope and work for justice. This is hope as a spiritual discipline.

Theologically, people with disabilities have tried most, if not all, of the well-trodden theological paths in responding to our queries about the meaning of disability. We have found most treacherous and inaccessible. We are unsatisfied and willing to risk new imaginings, new symbols and renewed efforts to uncover our hidden history. We put the question to others who care: Are you willing to risk understanding God more fully as you move toward full participation of people with disabilities and the chronically ill in your midst and beyond? Will we together develop a risky theological imagination that asks what is God's vision of human flourishing not just for some but for all, not just for able-bodied but the disabled, not just for those in the Western world but for the whole world?

People with disabilities can enable Christian communities to rethink the meaning of difference in our midst. Our presence reminds everyone that the boundaries of group difference are ambiguous and shifting, without clear borders. Individuals who are currently able-bodied have a greater than 50 per cent chance of becoming physically disabled, either temporarily or permanently. Ours is a minority you can join involuntarily, without warning, at any time. This risk can produce creativity and openness to what God will do.

For some, simply encountering the disabled God is risky. But, I believe that this encounter can open the possibility for conceiving the ways that God is already acting in the world, and for developing new and better imaginings. The Church needs to take risks to see justice enacted. I am convinced that if we look carefully and critically at our Christian tradition, we can uncover bits of a hidden history and perhaps more importantly find guide markers that can take us to a further place along the path towards human flourishing. If we risk encountering the disabled God, we may apprehend with greater clarity the fullness of God in the distinctiveness and diversity we see around us.

The time is now for justice and vision for the faith that includes just listening with people with disabilities and with chronic illness. We are called forth to risk the bread of life and eschew the crumbs. Only then can we articulate the implications of a theology of full participation.

Dr Nancy L Eiesland is Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta. She is the author of *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). She also co-edited *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), and has lectured on disabilities worldwide.

1 For example, the introduction to a collection of essays by mostly Canadian women with disabilities includes this statement: "Many people, including the disabled, still believe the traditional myths about the disabled. Some of these negative attitudes have their origins in ancient religious beliefs that regarded the disabled as devil possessed, or as corporeal manifestations of family guilt."

2 A sip/puff is a head mounted accessory used to actuate a two position switch by a simple sip or puff.

3 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994)

Hewetson, D. (1992). *Why does a good God allow suffering?* (pp.108-109) Albatross books: NSW.

HENRI NOUWEN, the contemporary writer on spirituality, in this prayer from his book, *A Cry for Mercy*, shows how in the long run our sufferings are entirely personal. If we seek answers from God, we will inevitably be drawn into prayer:

O Lord, your world – the world you loved so much that you wanted to become part of it and experience it to the fullest – is in pain. Small pains and great pains: the pain of my little niece Frederique, who is in the hospital recuperating from surgery on her face; the pain of my father, who travels for the first time without mother and misses her presence deeply; the pain of a monk who feels lonely; the pain of the students who cannot find work ...

But also the pains of the Indians of Mato Grosso who are oppressed, and the pains of the bishop, priests and sisters who try to be of help; the pains of the many men and women who see the arms race increasing around them and feel discouraged in their attempts to stop it; the pains of the prisoners, the hungry and the many people who seem happy and content, but who feel ripped apart by inner turmoil, guilt feelings, shame, self-doubt and an inability to overcome their own restlessness.

It is your world, O Lord, that is in pain. You are a compassionate God. You came to share our pains. Please give your people hope, courage, strength and faith. Let us not be destroyed by the powers of evil which surround us, pervade us and often inhabit us. Drive from us these evil powers and show us the way to you, who are light, life, truth, goodness and, above all, Love.

Amem.

Shaken

ur world has been shaken.

On December 26 last year planet earth shrugged its great shoulders for one brief moment and set off an earthquake deep in the sea close to the island of Sumatra. A collision of tectonic plates produced a huge tidal wave that spread out and engulfed many seaside communities from Aceh to Somalia. Scientists say that the earth is still wobbling, and it will keep on vibrating for a while yet from the impact of that collision. But that will soon be over. For the present the plates have stopped crashing against each other, the sea has settled down, and the earth will soon stop shivering.

But the shock waves of that tsunami will not end so quickly. Our world has been shaken up far more profoundly than that. Whole communities have been devastated by that tidal wave. Up to 300,000 people, and may be even more, have lost their lives. Families have been torn apart permanently. Societies have lost their entire physical and economic infrastructure. The political order has been changed from the Maldives to Aceh. It will cost billions of dollars and take years of hard work before the social damage of this natural disaster is undone. None of those who have been touched by it will forget it as long as they live.

Yet the impact of that upheaval has spread even further than those communities and gone far deeper than the actual physical and social damage on them. It has hit us here in Australia and shaken us up mentally and spiritually. It has unsettled our view of the world and our place in it. Unlike the tsunami itself, the impact of that aftershock is likely to increase as time passes and its implications begin to register with us.

This natural disaster comes in the wake of two other political events that have already shaken us up. The first was the terrorist attacks on the symbolic heart of the western world on September 11, 2001. On top of that, and closer to home, has come the terrorist attacks in Bali, that symbolic paradise for fun-loving Australians. Both these atrocities have shaken up our understanding of the world and our sense of security in it. Both are, in some way, iconic events that seem to mark the end of an era and usher in a new state of affairs for us.

Despite their iconic significance, these two events differ radically from the tsunami. They are human events that dramatise human evil. Historically

*Most thoughtful
Australians would
agree ... since the
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world differently.*

speaking, they are minor atrocities that come after a century of far greater human atrocities. Unlike them, the tsunami is a natural event that was not carried out by human hands. And that, I think, is why it has shaken us up so severely. Its impact on us is similar to the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that contradicted the teaching of the Enlightenment about the benevolence of the natural world and its conviction that its adherents lived in the best of all possible worlds.

Most thoughtful Australians would agree with Philip Adams, writing in *The Australian*, that since the tsunami they see themselves and their world

differently. I would like to explore why this is so and what this may mean for those of us who are Christians.

The spiritual aftershock of the tsunami

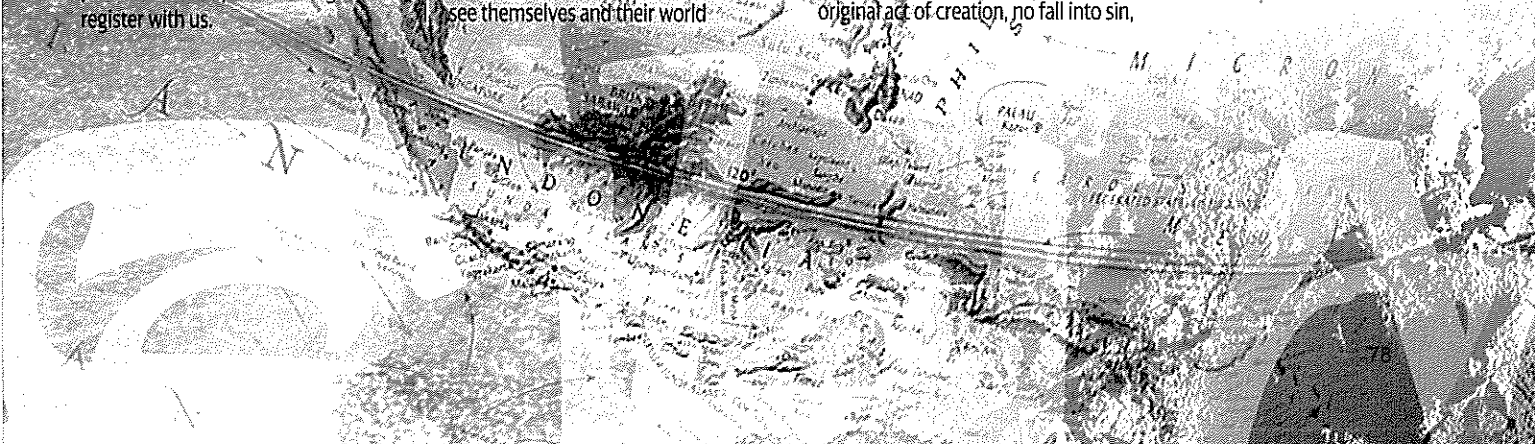
Australians are, I think, much more religious than is commonly acknowledged. Their national religion is a simple kind of hedonistic pantheism. They serve a nameless 'god' who provides this sunburnt land for our enjoyment, a deity whose spirit is manifest in the natural world. Some even regard the earth itself as divine, though only a few would go as far as to speak of it as a goddess, Gaia. This belief in the goodness of the natural world has been reinforced in recent times by the discovery of the intricate order of the biosphere and our growing awareness of the damage that we humans have done to it. The spirit of this 'god,' its life-giving power, is evident in the beauty and harmony of nature. People experience that superhuman wholesome power by living in harmony with their natural habitat. In this view humans are the only source of evil. Their disruption of the ecological balance threatens to unleash an ecocatastrophe upon the face of planet earth.

Aspects of this spirituality have been embraced by some Christians. They see God largely as the creator whose glory is revealed in the natural world. For them Christ is the cosmic ruler who works together with the human family on an ecological rescue mission to restore the natural health of our planet. The traditional Christian teaching of the last things is therefore sidelined, because the world is held to be co-eternal with God. There is no original act of creation, no fall into sin,

and no end of the world, only its ongoing natural and spiritual evolution. The natural world is the main arena for the activity of God.

The tsunami has shaken up this popular spirituality in its various guises and has shown up the element of idolatry in it. Nature is not divine, nor even a manifestation of divinity. It is not as orderly and hospitable to us as we would like to believe. If we look for the face of God in the natural world we will not merely glimpse its benevolence but also its apparent malevolence, or, what is even worse, its indifference to us. We are, in fact, far more likely to hear its lament at the burden of decay that afflicts it since the fall of humanity (Rom 8:20,21) than its song of praise to its divine creator (Ps 148). In it we see both order and chaos. Things are not as they should be. The shadow of death rests upon it as on humanity.

For those who have eyes to see the tsunami is a sign that this world is dying a slow natural death. It is neither eternal nor divine. Like us it will pass away. Christ himself teaches us to see earthquakes as evidence that this world is coming to an end as well as the birth pangs of God's new creation (Matt 24:7,8). They do not foreshadow a final ecocatastrophe, but the shaking up of all created things to make way for God's establishment of an eternal 'world' that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:26,27), his creation of a new heavens and earth where righteousness is at home (2 Pet 3:13).



The moral aftershock of the tsunami

A survey of students in one of our Lutheran colleges showed that many of them believed in karma. The law of karma teaches that acts have inevitable consequences. You get your own back. By your behaviour you forge your own destiny. If you do good you will prosper; if you do evil you will suffer.

This simple philosophy is often given a Christian or Muslim twist by putting God in charge of this system of reward and punishment. God evokes disaster for the purpose of punishing evildoers for what they have done. Disasters are acts of God meant to call sinners to repentance.

Some theologians have used this teaching to make religious sense of the tsunami. Thus some Muslims have claimed that this is an act of Allah to punish Muslims for their moral laxity and Buddhists for their persistent idolatry. Some Christians also maintain that it is God's judgment on Muslims for their rejection of Christ and persecution of Christians. Both parties assume that those who were hit by this disaster were worse evildoers than those who escaped its devastation.

Yet this does not ring true for us. We are quite rightly uneasy about the notion that these people were worse than we are. And that shakes up our moral certainties. It makes us reflect deeply about what we deserve and how God is involved in our lives. Why did this happen to those poor people? Why were we greedy Australians spared? Are we really better than they are? Do we deserve the prosperity that we enjoy? Are we safe because we are Christians, or because we have so many Christians in this land? When will

God throw the book at us?

The only answer that makes any sense to me is given by Jesus in Luke 13:1-9. On that occasion the disciples asked him to help them make sense of Pilate's slaughter of some pious pilgrims from Galilee as they were presenting their offerings to God at the temple. Where was God in this? In his response Jesus recalled another notorious disaster, the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem that led to the death of eighteen people. He asked whether they reckoned that this had

His death throws some theological light on the tsunami and all other natural disasters, for it tells of a God who suffers with us and uses the suffering of his Son to redeem the fallen world.

happened because these people were so bad. He repudiated that conclusion and said: 'No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

Now that word hits us all where it hurts most. We can't divide people into two groups – those who are good like us, and the others who are far worse than us. Morally speaking, we are all in the same boat. We have all fallen out with God. We should all by rights get the chop. The only reason why we enjoy prosperity, and evil does not prevail, is because God is patient and kind and merciful to all of us. If that is so, then that tsunami is a call for us to repent of

our delusions of moral superiority and to rely on God's goodness in everything. It is a call for us Christians to bear the fruits of faith by acknowledging our solidarity with the whole fallen human family, praying for God's mercy on them, and sharing what we have with those in need. It is a challenge for us to take our prosperity as an undeserved gift from our gracious God rather than as evidence of our superior status.

The theological aftershock

Even if they are religious, most modern and post-modern people are infatuated with power. They hold that the world's problems can be best solved by the right use of power. And that's why they have so much trouble making sense of the Triune God. That's why the Christian faith is so alien to them. Perhaps, that too is why they have been so shaken by the tsunami. It seems to contradict their most cherished beliefs about God and his way of working in the world. Why, they ask, did God, if he is almighty and good, not stop this disaster from happening? Why does he not use the immense physical and spiritual power at his disposal to prevent evil and stamp it out once and for all?

The tsunami demolishes this view of God and paves the way for a far more profound and wonderful vision of God, the God of the Old and New Testament. This loving, self-giving God seems to us to be so weak, because he sets out to redeem the world by his suffering, rather than by the use of his power to perform miracles. This God gave us the freedom to hurt him by rejecting him and his love. This God does not wipe out evildoers but continues to care for them. This God does not stamp out evil

but, instead, as is shown by the execution of his Son, brings good out of evil. This God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who joins us in our troubles and suffers the sin of the world, so that he can share all that he has with us. By the death of his Son he gives life to a dying world. That death was marked by an earthquake, because it shook up the old world in order to usher in a new world where the gracious presence of God is most evident where it seems to be most absent, in his crucified and risen Son and our journey with him on the way of the cross. His death throws some theological light on the tsunami and all other natural disasters, for it tells of a God who suffers with us and uses the suffering of his Son to redeem the fallen world.

A rock that cannot be shaken

We have all been shaken by the recent tidal wave in South East Asia. And that's not bad for us, for this upheaval gets us to check the material, moral, and theological foundations of our lives to see how secure they, in fact, are. Have we built on a solid rock, or on sinking sand? Is there a cosmic rock so secure that it can never be shaken?

As Christians we could join the singer of Psalm 46 in saying: 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.'

John W Kleinig
Australian Lutheran College
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He told me that he couldn't do his homework last night . . .

When interviewing a new family for enrolment I always state that the education of the students is a joint undertaking between family and school. No one ever disagrees with me! However this requires a relationship based on mutual trust and respect.

To achieve this our college has chosen to establish a House system. Annually each House hosts a casual family evening which includes a meal and fun activities. More families are attending these functions and believe they are a great way to feel a part of the school. Twice each year parents meet with their child's Home Class teacher and this has proven to be valuable in establishing positive links between home and school. Generally this structure has been quite successful in achieving good relationships with parents and they view us as a caring community.

But is that all? What happens once we establish ourselves as a caring community – the opportunity to be there to love, support and walk with families in their times of need. Our schools are uniquely placed to spread the love of Christ as families come to know and trust us but do not at this stage in their lives identify with mainstream churches or perhaps have had a bad experience in the past . . .

He was waiting outside of my office as I came back from class. He asked if we could talk. My first reaction was to ask him to make an appointment to see me at a more convenient time. I knew how the pile of work on my desk was growing exponentially! He immediately sensed my hesitation. His shoulders dropped even further. I invited him into my office.

'I've been kicked out of home' he muttered. Slowly, the sad story evolved. The family had been celebrating his sixteenth birthday the previous night, when he decided to challenge his stepmother about alleged rumours that she had been spreading about him. An argument ensued, he walked out, and his father and stepmother told him that the rest of his belongings would be packed up and put in the carport for him to collect in the morning.

He was hurting. He admitted that he had not chosen the time nor the place to confront his stepmother and realised what a difficult position he must have put his father in. Silence . . . 'I just want to know if they like me' he managed to say. I could understand where he was coming from. Previously he had lived with his mother interstate. This had not been a good situation for him and he had reacted by constantly truanting from school. He had come to live with his father and stepmother to make a fresh start and now he believed he had blown this too. In his mind, they obviously didn't like him and saw him as a trouble-maker in their home. I quickly established that he was living with someone that I felt created a 'safe' environment for him temporarily and then urged him to go and attend classes even though he protested he would not be able to concentrate.

What do you do in a situation like this? Experience told me that to enter a family argument without invitation was fraught with all kind of dangers. While I was trying to get my mind off the topic and tackle that pile of work on my desk, the phone rang. It was his father. He

wanted to tell me the events of the night before from the parent's point of view. I knew from previous conversations with the father that he had had very little to do with the upbringing of the boy until now. Now he was struggling to work out how to be a father to a teenager and I jokingly said that most of us would say that still remains a mystery!

I offered the services of our college pastor. The father hesitated and I knew why. A pastor was an unfamiliar person to them and he already felt out of his depth with the child-rearing scenario. Would a pastor make the situation more difficult? Sensing his hesitancy I quickly reassured him that our pastor had excellent family counselling skills and he would not make them feel uncomfortable.

It is at least three months and many long nights of counselling since that day that he walked into my office. Today, in class, I asked him

What a privilege it is . . . to minister to our families in times of need and to present to them the love of Christ in a meaningful and relevant way.

why he hadn't done his homework. He told me that he couldn't do it because last night he had been shifting back into home. 'We've pretty much worked things out,' he said with a grin on his face. What a blessing it is to have the opportunity to build relationships between home and the school. What a privilege it is to build on those relationships to minister to our families in times of need and to present to them the love of Christ in a meaningful and relevant way.

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... the education of students is a joint undertaking between family and school.

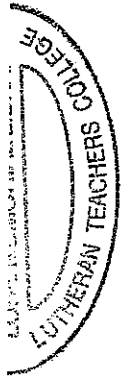
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the theology of the cross

THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

It seems strange to think that Christ is actually present in such a saving way in that little styrofoam-like wafer of bread or in the small sip of astringent wine. Or that God speaks to us in a literal book of ink, paper, and binding. Or that the pastor's sermon is used by the Holy Spirit to create faith in our hearts. These are rather spectacular claims for what goes on in an ordinary church service, with its weakly sung hymns, babies crying in the background, and everyday people fidgeting in their pews. It's hardly credible to think that such a mundane and frequently dull setting could be the scene of such high and holy spiritual presences.

One might say the same thing, of course, about the central event in Christianity. God came down from heaven to live as an



itinerant Jewish carpenter, who ends up getting executed by torture! One would think that He would come as a king, accepting the veneration of His people and conquering His enemies. That He came in weakness, humiliation, rejection, and suffering is, to say the least, unexpected.

People today who seek to be spiritual must confess that God sometimes seems far away. The ordinariness of everyday life, the material burdens that one must live through, the routines, and the practical preoccupations of life often smother any sense of transcendence. And then there is the fact of actual suffering. When we face failure or disease or loss of a loved one or the prospect of our own long and lingering death, we raise the agonizing question, where is God now?

The prophet Isaiah—in the midst of national apostasy, political collapse, and divine judgment concludes, “Truly you are a God who hides himself” (Isaiah 45:15). To say God is hidden, of course, does not mean that He is absent. On the contrary, someone who is hidden is actually present, just not seen. The child who is hiding in the room is certainly there. God conceals Himself, often in things that we would least expect—a crucified criminal, a book, water, bread, wine, a gouty pastor, trials and suffering, human beings working and raising their families.

The hiddenness of God is one of the most profound themes in Lutheran spirituality. It is part of what is termed “the theology of the cross,” which might be better thought of as the spirituality of the cross. It has to do with Christ’s work, His presence, and how we draw closer to Him. The theology of the cross also deals with the difficulties and hardships that Christians must live through in an utterly realistic and honest way.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS VS. THE THEOLOGY OF GLORY

In the “spirituality” section of most bookstores, one will find shelves and shelves of titles offering a whole array of techniques and teachings that will solve all problems and bring us to the pinnacle of success. Meditation, the physical disciplines of yoga, pop psychology, principles of positive thinking—all promise empowerment. Not only will they bring personal peace and happiness, if rightly applied, they promise to improve one’s physical health, from losing weight to conquering cancer. Spiritual disciplines are also put forward as methods for career advancement, to the point that business books often seem indistinguishable from spiritual books (what with their positive-thinking mantras to help score big sales and their fire-walking, “imaging” techniques). Some books speak of actualizing the self to the point that the self is spoken of in terms traditionally reserved for God. The self becomes the Creator (“you create your own reality”) and the Lawgiver (“you determine what’s right for you”), eliminating the need for a Redeemer. New Age spirituality affirms that the *Self* is, in fact, God, and that all things, if we could only realize it, share the same divine unity. In much of today’s pop religions, “spirituality” becomes a means to a more worldly end, or to the end of enhancing the self—acquiring power, pleasure, and in some cases self-deification.

What is true of the New Age racks can also be found in Christian bookstores. Today their shelves too are stocked with ways of using God for one’s own health, happiness, and prosperity. There are Christian diet books, titles on the “Management Techniques of Jesus Christ,” and analyses of Christ as the master salesman. Other books deal with more serious concerns, offering solutions for child-raising problems and improving society. Their covers make vast and excited claims, as if by following certain steps family problems will disappear, our bodies will do what we want, our finan-

cial problems will evaporate, we will solve our nation's problems, grow the church, and live happily ever after.

Certainly, the Bible has much to say about how we should live, and its wisdom can shape our family lives and cultural issues in profound ways. In fact, as the next chapter on *vocation* will show, the Christian faith has implications for the apparently secular work of managers, salesmen, and, above all, parents.

But the problem with the way spirituality merges with self-help is that the various panaceas do not really even do what they claim to do. The best Christian families still experience conflicts, intractable problems, and embarrassing failures. The most devout Christian may go bankrupt, or have a mental breakdown, or contract a heartbreaking disease and not be healed.

The books do not really help then, except to accentuate our sense of failure. Even if their step-by-step spiritual principles are valid, given our inability to keep God's Law, we never consistently follow them. The ideal of the "victorious Christian life" proves impossible to attain, though we have to suppress our failures, keep trying harder (and buying more books), and present a more positive front to the world. We thus resort to dishonesty and phoniness.

Luther called this kind of self-aggrandizing, success-centered, power spirituality "the theology of glory." Of course its attraction is understandable. Naturally we want success, victories, and happiness. We will be attracted to any religion that can promise us such things. We want complete and understandable answers, evidence of tangible spiritual power, all conveyed by an impressive, well-run, and effective institution. Instead, God gives us the cross.

I have heard that missionaries sometimes have a hard time explaining Jesus to followers of tribal faiths. "Our god is a great warrior," they sometimes respond. "He would not let himself be killed like your Jesus." The *theology of the cross* cuts against the

grain of all natural religion, all of what we expect and want in a spiritual system. God manifested Himself not as an abstract principle, but He came down from heaven. Not as sheer energy, but as a baby. He was born, in a rather scandalous way, of a poor virgin, not in a king's palace, but in a stable for animals. To be sure, the angels celebrated His coming, but they announced it not to the king, but to shepherds. Throughout His life, the Son of God emptied Himself of glory (Philippians 2:6-8).

To be sure, this Jesus was powerful, healing the sick and ruling nature itself, but He remained unpopular, scorned, homeless ("foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" [Matthew 8:20]). As prophesied,

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He
was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows,
and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men
hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him
not. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

Strange for the Son of God to come like this. And then this Jesus was arrested, tried, and executed, nailed to a cross. The prophet continues:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

In this chapter of the Old Testament—not the New, as one might expect—Isaiah foresees how Christ's weakness impacts our own weakness. On the cross, He carried not only our transgressions and our iniquity, but "our infirmities" and "our sorrows."

The rest of the story is that Christ rose from the dead. He ascended back into the glory that was His. And, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "He shall come again with glory."¹ And His followers will live in glory. We really will live happily ever after. But in the meantime, while we live on this earth, there is the cross.

"If anyone would come after me," Jesus said, "he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Conversely, "anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). This by no means implies that we have to suffer as Jesus did, much less that suffering is some sort of meritorious act or payment for our sins. Jesus did all of that for us. It does mean that the spiritual life has to do with suffering, defeat, and weakness—not simply with the experience of "glory" as we might like.

It also, however, implies a peculiar way that Jesus relates to us. Coming to faith, as we have seen, involves being broken by the Law, coming to grips with our moral failure. Legalistic religions, in which one saves oneself by one's own efforts, are very specifically *theologies of glory*, optimistically assuming success and glorifying the powers of the successful, virtuous person. But when we realize just how lost we are, then we cling to the cross, trusting Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is saving faith, the *theology of the cross*.

In ordinary life, we still have our problems, but these too are related to Christ. Our crosses are connected to His.

BEARING THE CROSS

One of the best books on the theology of the cross is by Richard Eyer, who for years served as a hospital chaplain, ministering to the sick and the dying. In *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*, Pastor Eyer tells of a patient, Mr. Wittri, who required kidney dialysis and was

in intensive care following open-heart surgery. Whenever Pastor Eyer would pray with him—asking that God's will would be done—Mr. Wittri, following a common Lutheran custom, would make the sign of the cross.

When his daughter visited him, however, she would be all smiles, bubbling over with reassurances, telling her father not to worry, that God would heal him. "But somehow her father doesn't seem comforted by this," Pastor Eyer recalls, "and turns to me to make the sign of the cross." The daughter believes that having enough faith will lead to healing. "There is no place for weakness and suffering in her understanding of the will of God." But while she is busy trying to get God to surrender to her will, her father has surrendered to the will of God. "He knows that it is the cross that lies at the heart of one's confidence in the Lord."²

"As much as parishioners may want to see the hand of God in nature's beautiful sunrises, moving stories of conversion, or success in parish programs," observes Pastor Eyer, "it is in the cross of Christ and in bearing their own crosses that God chooses to reveal his heart to them." With the theology of glory, "we will begin to demand that God justify himself to us in our sufferings by giving us healing and success. We will demand a God who does what we want him to do, and we will reject the way of the cross by which He comes to us. We will become fearful of suffering and preoccupied with its avoidance at the expense of truth and faithfulness."³

In the hospital, patients are helpless. They are dependent—the medical staff, on medication, on machines. Many sick people hate the thought of being dependent on life-support equipment, preferring even death to being "hooked up on some machine." Our culture also draws away from people who are utterly dependent. Those who believe in physician-assisted suicide hold that it is better to die than to suffer or to be dependent. Those who believe in euthanasia maintain that a life of dependence, weakness, and

suffering is not worth living, that at some point it is a kindness for those who are sick to be killed.

Being helpless and utterly dependent, however, is precisely our spiritual condition. We are utterly helpless to save ourselves. We are utterly dependent on God. Saving faith involves giving up on our pretensions of being self-sufficient, strong, and in control. Instead, we are to rest in utter dependence on Jesus Christ. "My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord told St. Paul, "for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

It is natural for us to want to save ourselves, to cultivate a spiritual independence and self-sufficiency, so that we can be in control of our spiritual lives. No wonder we have such a fondness for religions of Law, theologies of glory, which allow us to center on our own achievements, merits, and accomplishments. That we keep failing to achieve, merit, and accomplish what we think we should—however we evade our failures by rationalization or dishonesty—by no means alters the goal of spiritual self-sufficiency. In a truly evangelical spirituality, however, this attitude must be broken, so that we awake to our need and put our trust in Christ rather than in ourselves. In the Gospel, our sense of independence is replaced by a sense of dependence.

It is also natural for us to desire independence, self-sufficiency, and control in our earthly lives, to prefer death to dependence, to judge our own worth and those of others in terms of the capacity to do, as it were, "good works." Such attitudes may have their value, as will be seen, in the secular sphere. Still, even in secular terms, the members of a family are supposed to be dependent on each other, as are the members of a society or of an economic system. The attitude of complete self-sufficiency cannot only undermine faith, it can wreck God's design for human relationships.

Just as such complacency is shattered by the Law, in everyday life such complacency is shattered by bearing the cross—that is, by

failure, frustration, disappointment, difficulties, struggles, and suffering. Both the Law and the cross drive us to an ever-deeper and more-intimate dependence on Jesus Christ, who meets our sin and our sufferings in His cross.

THE HIDDEN LIFE

It has been said that contemporary Christians lack a theology of suffering. We, understandably, want to avoid it at all costs—and yet it comes, but we do not know what to do with it or what it means.

The fact of suffering is often taken as a sign that there cannot be a God. An all-loving, all-powerful God would not allow suffering to take place, people assume, but would make everyone happy. And since the world does contain so much suffering, God must not exist. Even worse, the fact of suffering is sometimes taken to mean that the sufferer has been rejected by God. The assumption is that Christians will not suffer, that if one has enough faith, God will grant healing, prosperity, and success. Such is our penchant for theologies of glory that whole churches are built today around promises of good health and financial success, not only through following biblical principles but from "name it and claim it" acts of faith. The Lutheran evangelical theology of the cross offers a theology of suffering, but more than that, it offers a practical, realistic, and spiritually-dynamic paradigm for the Christian life.

First, it must be emphasized that the theology of the cross, while it speaks of the spiritual significance of suffering, by no means advocates suffering as a means of spiritual enlightenment. The theology of the cross is not asceticism, the purposeful cultivation of unpleasant experiences so as to gain spiritual merit or some salutary mortification of the flesh. The elaborate mortifications practiced by many in the world's religions—fastings, scourges, self-

torment—may involve suffering, but they are still to be classified in the theology of glory, with their heroic acts of self-denial and self-control. Lutherans, though many practice Lenten disciplines, are almost never ascetic. Our cross, Luther taught, is never self-chosen, never self-imposed. Any crosses we choose for ourselves can hardly have much of an effect. Rather, bearing one's cross has to do precisely with the suffering that we do not choose for ourselves, the trials and difficulties that are imposed on us from the outside, that we have no control over whatsoever.⁴

Nor does cross-bearing necessarily involve the dramatic suffering of the cancer patient or the bereft parent, though it may. Bearing the cross often has to do more with the petty, ordinary obstacles and frustrations of everyday life and, as a later chapter will show, with troubles in one's vocation. Boredom, mild depression, and bad moods can be crosses, no less than physical pain and emotional turmoil.

Whether the problems are dramatic or mundane, they are all "trials." However much we, understandably, try to avoid them, trials are an inevitable part of everyone's life. The theology of the cross teaches how they also play an important role in the life of faith.

It must be emphasized that the theology of the cross does not offer some pat answer for suffering, some new theodicy that offers a new explanation for why God allows bad things to happen. For Luther, struggling with the "why" is at the essence of trial. Luther even speaks of trial as struggling with God. Sometimes it may seem that God is contradicting Himself, as when a pastor finds God seemingly thwarting the very ministry to which he has been called. Luther cites Abraham's struggle with God's seemingly contradictory commands when he was told to sacrifice his son, and observes how Jacob literally wrestled with God.⁵

"The most severe trial," says Walther von Loewenich, quoting Luther, "comes upon a person when he believes he has been forsaken and rejected by God. Such a trial comes only to the 'greatest of saints.'"⁶ Ironically, what in many traditions would be a sign of spiritual failure—doubting one's election, feeling God's absence—for Luther is a sign of the greatest sanctity, reserved (thankfully) for the spiritual giants.

"What kind of advice can Luther give in such cases? None other than that one must cling to the Word. And the Word, for Luther, is nothing else than Christ."⁷ Over and over in his writings, Luther tells those who are doubting whether they have been saved, those who question whether God loves them, those who think they have committed a sin that God will not forgive, to read God's promises in the Bible and to hold Him to His Word—to remember the objective fact that they have been baptized—to receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion—to cling to the cross of Jesus Christ.

To believe in God's Word of promise, despite one's feelings, is faith. This is why all trials, both major and small, are occasions for the exercise of faith. "We live by faith, and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). In the darkness, when we cannot see, we can only listen for God's voice, whereupon we can draw closer to the hidden God.

Another reason trials can have a salutary spiritual effect is that they drive us to prayer. In moments of desperation—when we know in a panic that we cannot control what is happening, in a car wreck, in a cancer diagnosis, when a loved one is fighting for her life—we turn instinctively to prayer. Even nonbelievers do. For a Christian, those moments of need bring out our utter dependence upon God, a realization at the heart of faith. When we are in desperate need, we pray with an intensity, a heartfelt passion, that is particularly genuine and authentic. "Prayer like this," says

Gustaf Wingren quoting Luther, "can hardly be made by anyone who is not in deep need and desperation. 'For what sort of prayer would it be if need were not present and pressing upon us?'"⁸ Again, crying out to God in the depths of one's need is an act of faith and an occasion in which the hidden God who answers prayers draws closer.

How this all plays out in ordinary life, how faith and prayer and the hiddenness of God transform day-to-day living, will be the subject of the next chapter. For now, it must be remembered that though God is hidden—that is, He cannot be seen or experienced—in the crosses we bear, He is nevertheless genuinely present, a real presence grasped by faith.

Furthermore, the Christian's spiritual life is itself hidden. "For you died," says St. Paul, "and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:3-4). Having been buried with Christ in Baptism and having been joined with His cross in faith, the Christian's life is "hidden." At the resurrection of the dead and the eternal life in heaven, there will of course be no crosses, God will be clearly manifest in everything, and then will be the time for glory. But for now, the Christian's life is hidden with Christ.

So far we have spoken of justification, but said little about sanctification, the process by which a Christian grows in holiness. The next chapter will speak about good works and action in the world. But the relationship between the human being and God is wholly a matter of faith, not human works, and a large part of sanctification is growing in faith. This comes, again, by trial and the cross, in which the struggles of life force us to grow in our dependence on God and thus cause us to grow in our faith. Good works, as will be seen, are a spontaneous result of faith. Those who

need to do more good works need more faith, a deeper apprehension of the Gospel, in order to produce them.

But sanctification, spiritual growth, is no smooth progress. Whether we consider growth in faith or growth in good works, both of which are implicit in the doctrine of sanctification, the holiness of a Christian is not always evident. Failures, hypocrisies, doubts, lack of love, apathy, phoniness, egotistical pride, and secret sins of the flesh are well-documented in Christian churches.

The church, in fact, often seems like a rather weak and attenuated institution. Christians, or churchgoers, often seem little different from their non-Christian neighbors. Individual Christians usually have to admit these charges in their own lives, and in fact they confess them daily. Their relationship with God often seems to vacillate wildly, from times of ecstatic closeness to God to times when He seems absent, from times of spiritual energy to periods of spiritual dryness. Often, little progress is evident, just one failure, followed by a fresh start, followed by another failure. If God is really at work in the lives of Christians, shouldn't one expect better than this?

Luther speaks much of how our "old man" is in conflict with our "new man." The baptized, converted sinner is given a new spiritual nature, a new life in Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. But the old sinful nature, inherent in our fallen flesh, remains (see Galatians 5:16-26). These are in conflict, so that the Christian may still succumb to his sinful flesh, which in turn must be disciplined and resisted, while the "new man" is to grow in faith and love. Only at death, when the flesh passes away, will this conflict be resolved, with the regenerated nature attaining full perfection when it enters eternal life.

But in the meantime, the new man is hidden. This is not just a matter—much less an excuse—of Christians failing in their calling. Their true identity and status before God is hidden even to

themselves. Again, God sees Christians through the prism of the cross: Our sins and failures are hidden by the blood of Christ; our ordinary lives are hidden, and we are robbed by Christ's righteousness. When God looks at a Christian, He sees Jesus.

As St. Paul says, our lives are hidden "with Christ." Our sins are hidden in the cross. Our righteousness is hidden in His. Our lives are hidden, in effect, from God. They are certainly hidden from ourselves and from the world.

This is the basis for our spiritual security. The Christian's life is safely hidden away. Though Lutherans believe in the Law's message that a Christian refusing to repent of sin and rejecting the faith can fall away, the Gospel banishes all fear.

"The wind blows wherever it pleases," says Jesus Himself. "You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). God's Spirit is at work in the lives of every Christian, mysteriously changing the heart, acting with Word and Sacrament, ministering in trials and tribulations, creating someone who will stand before God in heaven as *holy*. But this process cannot be evident to the naked eye, nor can it be measured and tracked, nor is the Christian himself necessarily conscious of how far he has come.

The average church member may not seem very impressive. His faults are evident. He may lose his temper, be prone to gossip, and have a worldly streak. He may not even seem very spiritual. And yet, his life is hidden with Christ in God. Every Sunday he hears God's Word of judgment and forgiveness. He examines himself and steps up to the altar to receive Christ's body and blood given for him. He may not always be the best husband, but when his wife dies, he cries out in misery to God. Such folks often say little, but then exhibit a startlingly powerful faith when the chips are down.

It is common today to question whether churchgoers are "really Christians" and to dismiss "dead churches" because we expect spir-

itual dynamos. To be sure, church rolls may include nonbelievers, there are churches that no longer preach the Gospel and so are dead (despite their high membership totals), and there are spiritual giants that put the rest of us to shame. Nevertheless, to paraphrase C. S. Lewis, the average man or woman in the pew may, to God, be a blessed saint before whom, if we only knew, we would have the impulse to bow down. We just cannot judge by appearances.

Nor can we judge by appearances when we experience suffering or when God seems distant or rejecting, or not real at all. Nor can we judge by appearances when considering what is happening when water, bread, and wine are used in a church service, or when the pastor reads from a book and proclaims words from a pulpit. If we were to judge from appearances, we would scarcely have thought that this Jewish carpenter is actually God in the flesh. His being tortured to death at Golgotha, judged strictly by appearances, would be repulsive, a meaningless act of cruelty. We would never guess that it was the salvation of the whole world.

NOTES

- 1 In *The Book of Concord*, 18.
- 2 Richard C. Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 26.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 27-28.
- 4 See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1994), 52-53.
- 5 Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 136-37.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 8 Wingren, 189.

Yancey, P. (1990) *Where is God when it hurts?* Michigan: Zondervan

Two Great Errors

Discussions about the problem of pain tend to drift toward the abstract and philosophical. Phrases like "the best of all possible worlds," "the advantages of human freedom," and "vale of soul-making" creep in, and these can deflect attention away from the actual problems of people in pain. Yet I have felt it necessary to explore some of these issues because I believe they have a direct and practical effect on our response to suffering.

In fact, I believe Christians walk a mental tightrope and are in constant danger of falling in one of two directions. On this subject errors in thinking can have tragic results.

The first error comes when we attribute all suffering to God, seeing it as his punishment for human mistakes; the second error does just the opposite, assuming that life with God will never include suffering.

I have already mentioned one unfortunate consequence of the first error. I have interviewed many Christians with life-threatening illnesses, and every one without exception has told me how damaging it can be to have a visitor plant the thought, "You must have done something to deserve this punishment." At the very moment when they most need hope and strength to battle the illness, they get instead a frosty dose of guilt and self-doubt. I'm glad the author of Job took such care to record the rambling conversations of Job's friends: that book serves as a permanent reminder to me that I have no right to stand beside a suffering person and pronounce, "This is the will of God," no matter how I cloak that sentiment in pious phrases.

The error of attributing all suffering to God's punishment has far-reaching consequences, as the history of the church has grievously shown. During the late Middle Ages, women were burned at the stake for the heretical act of taking pain-relieving medicines for childbirth. "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children," priests admonished as they condemned the women to death.⁴ And after Edward Jenner had perfected the smallpox vaccine he faced his strongest opposition from

clergy, who opposed any interference with the will of God. Even today some religious sects reject modern medical treatment.

Secular writers have seized on this weakness. In his novel *The Plague*, Albert Camus portrays a Catholic priest, Father Paneloux, torn by a dilemma. Should he devote his energy to fighting the plague or to teaching his parishioners to accept it as from God? He grapples with this issue in a sermon: "Paneloux assured those present that it was not easy to say what he was about to say—since it was God's will, we, too, should will it. Thus and thus only the Christian could face the problem squarely. . . . The sufferings of children were our bread of affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger." Father Paneloux preaches this, but cannot quite believe it: later in the novel he abandons his faith after watching a small child die horribly of the plague.⁵

If the Bible were not so pronounced in denying that all suffering results from specific sins, if it did not paint Job's predicament in such sweeping terms, if it did not show the Son of God spending his days on earth healing diseases and not inflicting them, then the dilemma that Camus posed would be unresolvable. For, if we accept that suffering comes from God as a lesson to us (as, for example Islam does), the next logical step would be a resigned fatalism. Polio, AIDS, malaria, bubonic plague, cancer, yellow fever—why should a person fight any of these if they are God's agents sent to teach us a lesson?

When the Black Death hit England in the seventeenth century, some street prophets delighted in pronouncing the plague a judgment from God. But other believers, among them doctors and clergy, chose to stay in London to fight the disease. One sacrificial rector gathered the 350 villagers of Eyam around him and got them to agree to a self-imposed quarantine as a health measure to keep the plague among them from spreading to surrounding villages. In all, 259 villagers died, but in the process they ministered to each other in their illness and prevented further contamination.

In his *Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe contrasted the Christians' response with the Mohammedans'. When plague struck the Middle East, the religious fatalists there did not alter their behavior in the least, but continued going out in public at will. A much

higher percentage among them died than among the Londoners who took precautions.⁶

In modern times, some Christians still lean dangerously toward a fatalism that more befits Islam or Hinduism than Christianity. Several years ago researchers studied why Southerners in the U.S. tended to suffer a higher frequency of tornado-related deaths than Midwesterners. After taking into account such factors as differences in building materials, the researchers concluded that some Southerners, being more religious, had developed a fatalistic attitude toward disaster: "If it hits, it hits, and there's nothing I can do to stop it." In contrast, Midwesterners were more likely to listen to weather reports, secure loose equipment, and take shelter.⁷

If the researchers' conclusions are accurate, I take that trend as a dangerous perversion of Christian dogma. Southerners should listen to the weather service and take precautions. Father Paneloux should have been on the front lines, arms linked with doctors, battling the plague. Jesus himself spent his life on earth fighting disease and despair. Not once did he hint at fatalism or a resigned acceptance of suffering.

We the inhabitants of this "groaning" planet have the right, even the obligation, to fight against human suffering. Anyone who thinks otherwise should reread the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, and the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25.

Health and Wealth Theology

In recent times, some parts of the church have tilted in a very different direction, toward the second great error. They teach that life with God will never include suffering. Such a "health and wealth theology" could only spring up in times of affluence, in a society well-stocked with pain-relieving aids.

Christians in Iran, say, or Cambodia could hardly come up with such a smiley-face theology. As one East European Christian observed, "You Western Christians often seem to consider material prosperity to be the only sign of God's blessing. On the other hand, you often seem to perceive poverty, discomfort, and suffering as signs of God's disfavor. In some ways we in the East understand suffering from the

opposite perspective. We believe that suffering may be a sign of God's favor and trust in the Christians to whom the trial is permitted to come."⁸

Nowadays we reserve our shiniest merit badges for those who have been miraculously healed, featuring them in magazine articles and television specials, holding out the unreserved promise that healing is available to everyone if only they would claim it.

In no way do I mean to discount the wonderfulness of physical healing. But obviously miracles do not offer a permanent solution for the problem of suffering because the eventual mortality rate is exactly the same for Christians and non-Christians alike—100 percent. We all have eyes subject to the need for corrective lenses, bones subject to breaking, and soft tissue subject to destruction from auto accidents and terrorist bombs. Christians get cancer too; they fully share the sorrow of this world.

The modern emphasis on miraculous healing has the frequent side effect of causing unhealed ones to feel as though God has passed them by. Recently I watched a televised call-in healing program. The biggest applause came when a caller reported his leg had been healed just one week before he was scheduled for amputation. The audience yelled, and the emcee burred, "This is the best miracle we've had tonight!" I couldn't help wondering how many amputees were watching, forlornly wondering where their faith had failed.

Unlike many television evangelists, the apostle Paul seemed to expect from the Christian life not health and wealth, but a measure of suffering. He told Timothy, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). A sick person is not unspiritual. And Christian faith does not magically equip us with a germ-free, hermetically sealed space suit to protect against the dangers of earth. That would insulate us from complete identification with the world—a luxury God did not allow his own Son.

To hold out the inducement that becoming a Christian will guarantee you health and prosperity—why, that is the very argument advanced by Satan in the book of Job, and decisively refuted.

To restore balance to this issue, we would do well to relearn the lessons about faith taught in the Bible's greatest chapter on the subject, Hebrews 11. The author compiles a list of faithful persons

through the centuries. Most of the saints listed in the first part of the chapter received miraculous deliverance: Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, David. But the latter part of the chapter mentions others who were tortured and chained, stoned, and sawed in two.

Hebrews 11 gives vivid details about the second group: they went about in sheepskins and goatskins, were destitute, wandered in deserts and mountains, and lived in holes in the ground. The chapter offers the blunt assessment, "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised." It adds, though, God's own appraisal of these sojourners on earth who placed their hopes in a better, heavenly country: "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

I thought about this list of "God's favorites" recently as I read through *Fear No Evil*, the last book written by David Watson, a well-known English preacher and writer. Struck down with colon cancer at the height of his career, Watson rallied his Christian friends around him and began a desperate journey of faith. He had gained prominence in the charismatic movement, and Watson and most of his friends were convinced that God would solve the cancer through a miraculous healing.

Over time, as Watson grew sicker and weaker, he had to reach for another kind of faith, the kind cultivated by the saints mentioned in the latter part of Hebrews 11. He needed the faith that sustained Job, barely, in his darkest days, and his book tells how he attained that faith.

David Watson wrote the last words of his book in January, and died in February. Many people received his book with a touch of disappointment; they had hoped rather for an account of supernatural healing. But J. I. Packer, who wrote the foreword after Watson's death, saw it as recovering an ancient tradition of Christian books on the "art of dying." Until recently, a good death was seen as a godly man's crowning achievement, the climax of his good life.

Packer gives this assessment:

The fact that David, right to his last page, hopes for supernatural healing that never comes is not important. In the providence of God, who does not always show his servants the true point of the books he stirs them to write, the theme of *Fear No Evil* is the

conquest of death—not by looking away from it, nor by being shielded from it, but by facing it squarely and going down into it knowing that for a believer it is the vestibule of glory.

David's theology led him to believe, right to the end, that God wanted to heal his body. Mine leads me rather to say that God evidently wanted David home, and healed his whole person by taking him to glory in the way that he will one day heal us all. Health and life, I would say, in the full and final sense of those words, are not what we die *out of*, but what we die *into*.⁹

words flow articulately. Audiences most appreciate Joni's zest for life and her enthusiasm. Her limbs stay motionless, but her eyes and face sparkle with expression.

Joni moved to California some years ago, and has added the spectacular scenery of the American West to her repertoire of paintings. "Though I can no longer splash in a creek and ride horses," she says, "I can sit outside, and my senses are flooded with smells and textures and beautiful sights." She reproduces those scenes, sometimes before an audience, with her remarkable mouth-artistry.

In her talks, Joni sometimes refers to the massive barn that stood just outside her studio in Maryland. It was Joni's favorite building on the farm, for it housed her fondest memories: the sweet-smelling hay, the rustling sounds of restless horses, and the dark corners she explored as a child.

Joni describes its enchantment, its beauty, and her father's pride in its workmanship. But then she describes the nightmarish memory of a fire set by vandals that utterly destroyed the barn. That terrifying scene is etched in her mind: the wild screams of her pet horses, the smell of burning flesh, the frantic efforts of her family and neighbors to contain the fire.

The story does not end there, however. Her father, stooped and twisted from arthritis, began again the arduous task of reconstructing the barn by hand. The foundation remained, and on top of it he fitted new boulders, new beams, and new boards. The second barn, the re-created one, was even grander than the first.

"I am like that barn," Joni says. "I thought my life had been crushed beyond repair. But, with the help of God and my friends, it has been rebuilt. Now can you understand why I'm so happy? I've recovered what I thought would always elude me—life in all its fullness."

Two Who Suffer

Joni Eareckson Tada and Brian Sternberg represent those unfortunate persons for whom pain seems to be in revolt. Quadriplegics, cancer victims, parents of children with birth defects—these people of uncommon suffering may well cringe from a concept like "the gift

of pain." To them, the phrase must sound hollow and sadistic; pain has left its natural cycle and become a Frankenstein.

One gained fame because of her suffering, the other lost fame because of his. After several decades, both are still incapacitated in body. Yet in their individual ways both Brian and Joni have found strength to continue, and even to grow, and their trust in God is an integral part of that process of healing wounded spirits.

Brian squarely faces the question of causation. Is God responsible? He and his parents are convinced that his condition is as abhorrent to God as it is to them. His conclusions run counter to some themes in this book, for he disallows such thoughts as the transforming value of suffering. Although he recognizes that God has providentially used his pain to bring good, he rejects the notion that God might allow such a condition to continue for the rest of his life. He has gambled his faith, and almost his theology, on the hope for healing.

Yet even that position, which seems more and more untenable to the Sternbergs' friends, signifies a turning toward God. Brian has held to a trust and belief in a loving, worthy God despite a level of torment that few will ever experience. In heaven, Brian will surely walk with the confident stride of a Job or a Habakkuk or a Jeremiah, who saw the world at its worst and still believed.

Joni Eareckson Tada's pain, except for brief flashes, has been mostly psychological, the pain of loss. Yet her life has been marked by a dominant grace note of triumph and joy. She wrestled with God, yes, but she did not turn away from him. She emerged with a spiritual depth and maturity that has brought inspiration to millions. I do not imply that every afflicted person can duplicate the success story of Joni Eareckson Tada. They cannot; Joni has unique and multiple gifts and talents. But in the way that she has used them, she has achieved something else: she has "dignified" suffering.

At first Joni received a flood of letters urging her to pray for healing, or berating her for lack of faith. She did pray for healing, of course. In the summer of 1972, after an intimate service of healing with about fifteen people present, she became convinced that in the next few weeks her spinal cord would miraculously regenerate. She

PART 3: HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO SUFFERING

even called friends and warned them, "Watch for me standing on your doorstep soon; I'm going to be healed."

It did not turn out that way. And in her books Joni explains why she was forced to the difficult conclusion that she would not receive physical healing. Joni now calls her accident a "glorious intruder," and claims it was the best thing that ever happened to her. God used it to get her attention and direct her thoughts toward him. Apart from the accident, she says, she probably would have lived a typical middle-class life: aimless, comfortable, with two divorces under her belt by now.

The injury changed all that. Over time God's grace in Joni's life became so evident that she now stands as an emblem strong enough to silence puerile arguments about faith. *Does lack of healing mean lack of faith? But what about Joni Eareckson Tada?* More, Joni became a striking demonstration of transformed or "redeemed" suffering. After succeeding admirably as an author, actress, singing star, and artist, she decided to devote herself instead to her area of greatest expertise: her disability. Today, Joni directs a ministry called "Joni and Friends" that sponsors conferences and seminars, and funds worthy projects for the disabled.

It is Joni's dream to awaken the church to the needs of the disabled, and to equip Christians to perform a healing role in all society. The crowds are smaller now. Far fewer people turn out to hear a seminar on helping the disabled than to hear a personal testimony. But, step by step, Joni is bringing hope to those who are disabled, and enlightenment to those who are not.

Thank God, very few of us will endure the trials of Joni or Brian. But in different ways, they have each lived out the truth of John 9: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Following the pattern of the blind man of Jesus' day, two modern-day quadriplegics, one from Seattle and one from Baltimore, have brightly displayed the work of God.