

Redemptive Suffering

By Juliana Cooper-Goldenburg

I remember a conversation years ago that I had with a woman in her eighties, who was to become one of my spiritual “mothers.” She is a woman of great depth and compassion; a woman who has aged gracefully. She is a woman who has faced loss, limitation, and the storms of life. As I often do, I wanted a simple answer to a complex question: “Mary, what’s your secret? What does it take to age with such grace and wisdom?” With little hesitation, she replied, “My entire life has been an exercise in finding the Yes’s in God’s No’s to me.”

I have reflected on that profoundly simple reply for years now. I find it to have greater meaning as I live in to the journey of midlife and as I face my own aging.

The No’s are real. The limits are real. The lost dreams are real. The losses hurt. The roads not taken leave us with a sense of poignancy. The broken relationships call to us to make sense of them. Prayers are, seemingly, unanswered. We bash up against our limitations and they serve as reminders of our own finitude and mortality. It is not a question of if we will suffer, but when and what we will suffer.

Finding the Yes’s is the work of redemptive suffering, of finding the presence of God in the midst of our suffering. My friend’s statement to me implied that this work is both intentional and an on-going process; a journey that unfolds as we live into our relationship with a loving Creator.

One of the most difficult issues for professionals and family caregivers to face are the questions regarding the meaning of suffering. In the midst of the physical changes that almost certainly happen to all of us as we age, deaths of spouses and friends and the grief of that leaving, and role and status changes, not to mention the bittersweet quality of the process of our taking stock of our lives and the grappling with our own mortality, how can we find or make meaning. Suffering is a mystery when you profess to believe in a loving, merciful God.

Secular society tends to either trivialize or pathologize suffering. I believe we are called as people of faith to “theologize” suffering, to reframe it within a context of faith. What limited answers I have to suffering have been taught to me by elder friends and clients who have struggled to view suffering with lenses provided to them by their faith that sees strength in weakness, power in powerlessness, and life in death.

What these elders have taught me is that all I can hope to do in the midst of suffering is to find comfort in God’s steadfast presence in my life over time and God’s tangible presence in the rituals and spiritual practices that sustain me. I can look for reminders of resurrection in my life in the past and in the lives of those around me. I can remind myself that I walk every day on the edge of an abyss, as we all do, but I believe in a God who has gone before me and now walks lovingly with me. I

can reframe my essential question about suffering from “Why am I suffering?” to “How will I suffer?” and “Who will be with me on this journey?”

This question of “Who will be with me on this journey?” speaks to the central role of community in facing suffering within a faith framework. In the Christian Scriptures, when Jesus sends the apostles into the world, he gives advice to them that I find to be essential to us on the journey of aging. He tells them to go with a companion, not to go alone. Facing our woundedness, our brokenness, and our suffering requires the presence of community. Interdependence is an essential mark of the person of faith.

How can we be present to those who are suffering? The moments when I have been more clearly able to help another suffer redemptively have been the times of my most simple interventions: lending presence to pain, the listening to another that goes beyond words, and offering my own humanness and my own woundedness. It has been in the times I have allowed others to tell their stories, to embrace the totality of their feelings, to do what I call (using a good Southern term) therapeutic wallowing, while still inviting them to see God’s hand in their lives.

Story is an important component of redemptive suffering. Through coming to grips with their own stories and through conscious and intentional sharing of my own story, we can create hope for the journey. Patrick Conroy writes of hope in his novel, *Beach Music*, “Life wounds me in places only hope can reach.” The call to suffer redemptively is a call to hope - the kind of hope expressed by the mystic, Julian of Norwich:

“I know that at times I will be troubled,
I know that at times I will be belaboured,
I know that at times I will be disquieted,
but I believe that I will not be overcome.”

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