



MYSTERY AND MEANING IN UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

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Everyone you will ever encounter has a story, and it is through these stories that we construct meaning. However, when an unexpected disruption meddles with the plot line, it is quite possible that the meaning of our life will be meddled with as well. As painful as disruptions may be, they can also be an opportunity for something new and welcomed. Disruption—often experienced as suffering—comes in different forms, perhaps as a rejection letter, a cancelled flight, a lost pregnancy, a death, a divorce or an illness. We grieve

losses of life, relationships and experiences, and we can grieve change and loneliness. We may become curious and get caught up in asking ourselves the origin of suffering or why God lets it exist, but these impossible questions distract us from healing. Instead, it is better to direct our focus on how we as Orthodox Christians respond to suffering, both our own and that of our neighbor, sincerely and without judgment.

There is no emotion we can feel that has not been felt before. The Psalms, through prayers of thanksgiving, praise, lament and petition, teach us how to pray in the midst of these emotions. A great challenge in our suffering is to connect the polarity of lament and praise, offering our sorrow and frustration *as well as* thanksgiving for God's abundant mercy. Even a prayer of lament reveals a fundamental trust in God through hope that He will somehow restore order out of chaos. The Psalms remind us that not having what we want or think we hope for does not mean that God has rejected us, even if it leaves our hearts utterly broken. In times of suffering, will I remember the fullness of my prayer?

Suffering is not always easily recognized. Sometimes it is easier to downplay the suffering of others by telling them, "I understand how you feel," or fail to recognize our own suffering by telling ourselves, "I should be stronger than this," because that way we do not need to do much more about it. Recognition of suffering requires vulnerability, often accompanied by unanswerable questions. Anyone who has been present with a child in a time of loss has heard these difficult questions. As parents, grandparents, youth workers, teachers, clergy, aunts and uncles, etc., we need to invite these questions.

Early in my involvement in ministry, I realized age does not give us all the answers we hope to find. During a lecture a few years ago, a man in his seventies stood up and asked, "Will I see my dad in heaven?" It was a question to which I had no answer. I could have said yes and the man might have smiled contentedly and sat down. But I did not, because I *could* not. The questions of suffering and death require that we experience and reflect upon mystery and the idea of not knowing. This reflection may bring an array of thoughts and emotions, including discomfort, frustration, sadness, longing and even relief. Whether it is a seventy-year-old man or a seven-year-old child posing the question, the quality of our response is not in the facts we provide but in the love, compassion and vulnerability we offer.

Regardless of our age, we experience grief, and in grief it is natural to ask difficult, often unanswerable questions. This

is a challenging reality to accept because we have been conditioned to have every answer at our fingertips. We have all the tools we need to observe everything from stars to cytoplasm. In humility, we are reminded of our limited human wisdom when we ask unanswerable questions. In wisdom, we know that not having the answer to a question does not mean that it is false or flawed. I ask you to not become discouraged if you come to a time in your life when these impossible questions arise, regardless of how faithful and wise you may grow to become. It was not a sign of little faith that Christ wailed to His Father from the cross, but a sign of His humanity.

Suffering can arise as a physical, psychological or spiritual affliction that is rarely, if ever, exclusive to a single aspect of our being. We try to relieve suffering by treating symptoms—we have an analgesic for almost everything. In most cases, easing the pain of others is a remarkable accomplishment of humanity and an example of stewardship. From an Orthodox perspective (and mine is just one of many), suffering is an inevitable part of this life. It is a reality of the fallen world we have inherited. But it is not the only reality. Pain and suffering are transfigured into the joy of the resurrection through relationship with humanity and with God. Instead of focusing on how to avoid suffering, we can focus on how to respond to it. Instead of asking why, ask, what now? Even certain schools of psychology emphasize taking action to move toward what is good, true and beautiful as an important part of the grieving and healing process.

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The life of the Church offers constant reminders of our mortality, as well as the experience of God's love, mercy and compassion. As shown in the Orthodox funeral and memorial services, the Church deeply understands the grieving process. Though a difficult task, bringing a child to a funeral should not be understood as exposure therapy to death but as a part of the healing process that exists within the sacramental life of the Church. The hymns, Scripture and prayers invite us to develop a profound understanding of life and hope in salvation



and eternal life, and they encourage the expression of emotion over time. The prayers of these services involve communication between the living and God, the fallen asleep and God, and the fallen asleep and the living, reminding us that relationships with our loved ones persist beyond death. Similar to the kiss of peace offered during the Divine Liturgy, the funeral service invites us to offer another kiss of peace, the last kiss, as we say our earthly farewell. Yet there is no denying how difficult it is to transition from praying for the healing of our loved one to praying for their repose!

I often hear people say they cannot bear to go to Liturgy because they will cry, painfully thinking of their loved ones who have passed, and others who prefer to not offer a memorial service because it brings up emotions they do not wish to revisit. Memorial services are opportunities to invite members

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of the Church to remember those who have fallen asleep and honor the grieving process of others. We are not expected to “get over” loss at any point. In the funeral service, we do not say, “Weep, and with tears lament only within the acceptable forty-day period of time,” but we chant, “Weep, and with tears lament when with understanding I think on death.” There is no shame in weeping five months, five years or fifty years after a loss. We continue to pray for the souls of our loved ones just as we pray for the saints, that their souls rest “where there is no pain, no sorrow, no sighing, but life everlasting.” Four times a year, on the Saturdays of Souls, we commemorate all those who have *ever* fallen asleep.

In times of suffering, the Church encourages us to fully experience our story and, as my good friend and teacher Dr. Albert Rossi would say, become a healing presence for others. Deepening our understanding of our faith relinquishes our need to tell each other empty words like “God won’t give you more than you can handle” and “He/she is in a better place.” Instead, it allows us to offer prayer, presence and understanding that strengthen our relationship to God and each other. If we put aside the pressure to speak, we recognize silence is not awkward; it is prayerful stillness, and we find words that are honest, loving and compassionate. We can honor and express gratitude for the joys, sorrows, fears and tears experienced in vulnerability while embracing hope in the resurrection and a will that is greater than our own. We each have a story of joys and sorrows and it is a holy gift to share it with others.

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