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DARK NIGHT: SUFFERING

The Dark Night of the Soul is a secular human experience. This experience has to do with humiliation, with weakness, with resentment, and, finally, with suffering.

When I was asked to give a lecture on suffering, I congratulated my colleagues on the appropriateness of their choice, for I am well-known as one with special problems in that area. When they laughed derisively at my comment, they only proved my point. The last time I was talking to a group, I asked for its sympathy. Now, I am hoping I will not get it from you, for that again would only prove my point.

Actually, while I was thinking over what we mean by suffering in the Dark Night, the painful realization emerged that thinking about suffering in this way is exactly the opposite of what suffering really is. Considering oneself to be singled out by this and that unpleasant or painful happening, and then to point to that singling out as what a man of faith and a man of love means by suffering, is way off the mark. As a matter of fact, when we are talking about the Dark Night, suffering is not a fourth category in that list of experiences. There is humiliation, weakness, and resentment. And those three are all experienced as suffering.

First of all, let us consider the question: What is the Dark Night? What are we pointing to in real, everyday life with that category that comes to us out of medieval theology? It is the experience of every single human being who was ever born, minus none. It is also the uninterrupted experience of every human being, minus none. Some of you will remember that Ortega, in his paper "The Structure of Life", talks about how men always show up in a world where things are already planned out and images are already waiting for us. As you can see, this is a singularly unfair way for life to be. As one philosopher said, you show up with a tabula rasa, a blank slate, but immediately, images that other people have manufactured bombard you. By the time you reach the age of self-consciousness, you have already been programmed in a very clear direction, with a very clear set of images. Those images provide the roadmap by which you can confidently make your way through the trials and tribulations of life.

Then one day, into this comfortable set of images, which have been up to this point unquestioned, there comes an utterly alien image that calls every single one of them into question. In a given time only one image might be called into question, but finally every single one of the accepted images is challenged. This alien image wipes your comfortable images away and leaves you with nothing but thick darkness.

Our age lost its ability to speak authentically in the realm of theology and turned to psychology. We decided that this attack of the alien image is a personal problem based on one's particular situations. Thus, we go around thinking that this loss of images, this sudden not knowing where we are, not being able to believe in anything, unable even to affirm our own existence, is some personal disease that needs to be treated medically or by counselling.

Actually it is simply the experience of every single human being, an experience which leaves one blind, deaf and dumb, facing the final impartiality of reality itself. We sense, in the midst of experiencing this Dark Night reality, that God, if you wish to call it that, does not care especially about us. Many of us have been taught that if you believe in God he will spare you the Dark Night of the Soul. This is clearly not true.

On the other side of the coming of this impenetrable darkness, you can light all the candles you wish, rather than cursing it, but no candle will dispel the darkness. In that darkness, it becomes terribly, painfully clear that everything has the naught inside of it. Every single thing, whether it be an idea, an experience, or a piece of material has written across it, "This will self-destruct sooner or later." It self-destructs of its own accord, for it participates in the coming of the Mystery itself, which does not tolerate anything else raised to the level of the Ultimate.

You can see why it requires an extremely lucid process of planning where the candles will be lighted in the future. You planned to sow your wild oats when you were young, to make your fortune when you were in middle age, and to retire when you were old. Such a scheme is supposed to somehow dispel the darkness. These candles are supposed to give you enough light to see by in the Dark Night, but it does not work. For suffering is life. Any attempts to deny that fact are always, ultimately, unsuccessful.

Nobody escapes forever the experience of coming upon innocent suffering. In a sense, all suffering is innocent, except for the moralist who decides this or that action is the cause. Real suffering comes when one realizes that suffering is life, and that fact will not change.

I remember, not long ago, buying a newspaper and settling myself down to enjoy reading it from cover to cover. I opened it up and right

on the back page was a picture of a little boy, about nine years old, in an old coat that obviously had been picked out of some garbage pile. The coat was about three inches too long in the sleeves and all patched up. The boy was standing there trying to look proud. I do not know how to describe the arrow that was in my heart or in my being. I sat there looking at the picture knowing that he probably would never have a coat that would really fit, and that many would never have coats at all. And there was nothing I could especially do about it. I realized, as I reflected on this moment and similar moments in the past, that I did not really want to do anything about it, nor did I intend to do anything. That realization is suffering.

I used to think suffering was like the pain that causes animals to squeal when their bodies are afflicted. That is pain, not suffering. Then, I used to think that suffering was agony. To know you are suffering, and to know that somehow that fact does not seem right or understandable, is not suffering. That is agony.

Only after those two experiences so you get to suffering. Suffering is knowing that I have rebelled against my rebellion against life. To be conscious or to be conscious that one is conscious is one thing. But to be conscious of one's consciousness of consciousness is suffering.

The experience of humiliation, for instance, is not a problem. Humiliation is life. There is nothing but humiliation. When one faces his finitudinal existence honestly one just suffers. But even that experience is not really suffering. Suffering is knowing that one has, thus far, lived a shameful, shame-filled, life. For all my days, as I look back, I have been refusing to be forgiven. Though that forgiveness is always there, I always show up turned-in, defending myself. My energy goes into trying to see that humiliation does not happen again, and trying to find some way to justify my existence, other than living as a forgiven man.

Weakness is also not a problem. Weakness is the way life is, if one means incidents of incompetence here and inadequacy there. Such incidents can be pointed out with no trouble in the life of any man. We all have a neurotic interest in our own, and other people's, moral progress. Our journeys here are easy to talk about. But weakness is what you do not know about in me. When I am refusing my own life, you probably think that I am affirming it to the hilt. You can not see when I am deciding that, because of certain qualities, I am not weak, and because of others, I am weak. You can not see where I exercise that veto power over God's forgiveness, but I know where it is. Knowing that use of my veto is suffering. Suffering is my continual rebellion against my resistance of being weak. It is my refusal to embrace the weakness that I am and the forgiveness that life offers everyman.

Resentment is not a problem either. Resentment is just the way life is. If it were only the people who were out to hurt us that hurt us, we would be in pretty good shape. It is the unintentional that hurts: the things people say and do with no idea that they are going to bring

pain. The unrestrainable reaction to that experience is suffering. Suffering is the insistence on constantly pouting because life is the way it is. It is going around asking, with proper histrionics, "Why does life have to be this way?" There is no answer to that question except, "It just is."

Suffering is not necessarily self-induced. There is a fellow in Guatemala who has himself nailed to a cross every Good Friday. However fine his intentions are, his experience is not what I mean by suffering. If the struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane means anything, it would appear that the crucifixion came to Jesus; he did not go to it. Suffering will find you in everyday life. It does not have to be whopped up.

This is why counselling never works. When somebody comes to you with a special problem, complaining about life having dealt with him in a special way, he is lying. Nothing you can say to him is going to make any difference or solve anything.

I remember, as if it were yesterday, a Christmas party in the Community House at the church where I grew up. I was about eight years old at the time and as you might imagine, I had been for some years the champion scripture reciter. My sister was responsible for that achievement. We were a very poor, unknown family and she decided the only possibility we probably had of getting ourselves known was to produce ourselves a clergyman. She had me memorize not verses, but pages, out of the New Testament. Of course, I considered myself sort of important.

At this Christmas party we drew names. The person who drew your name bought you a gift. All the kids were having a good time, singing Christmas carols and so on. I was afraid to open my gift, because some other kid whispered in my ear the name of the boy who had bought the gift. I knew his mother and she was not quite right. Sure enough, here I was, eight years old, and my gift turned out to be appropriate for a two-year old. It was a little puzzle. Just as soon as I got the wraps off, I put the puzzle on the bench and sat on it. For the rest of that party, although my friends beckoned me to do this and that, I would not move. I sat, if you will, on my life.

This incident illuminates suffering in humiliation. Humiliation turns to suffering when one will not have his life of humiliation. He finds a way to cover it and say, "This should not have been. Whoever is in charge of things in the universe doesn't know what he is doing. I have been delivered the wrong piece of goods." That cry was my secret. Most of the kids did not even know I was sitting on my life. They knew in the sense that they knew there was something wrong with me, but they did not really know the particulars at all. But they did know I was not participating.

Do you see what I mean about suffering? That incident happened over thirty years ago and it is still suffering now, in this moment. I had

the opportunity, not to be the champion scripture quoter of the Sunday School, but to participate in a party and live that fantastic moment of my life. Instead I sat on it. That fact can never be changed, no matter what. It is done. The moment is lost.

Needless to say, after that I was out to destroy that poor, mindless woman who embarrassed me at the Christmas party. The funny thing is, I am still that way, still forever out to destroy the agents of my humiliation. I keep thinking life will get better. I keep thinking, "Aha! I have taught RS-I so many times I will anticipate such intrusions and call them the Christ happening. If you decide in advance to call something as pious a name as the Christ happening then pain should be removed. It never works. I keep thinking that I am going to become, out of this lucidity, a fine fellow who would never be out to destroy the agents of my salvation. I believe in salvation. Yet I find myself still trying to destroy those agents. Being aware of that is suffering. Not to have lived my life is suffering. Or, to put it theologically, not to go to heaven is suffering.

Sometimes it gets so rough I find myself thinking, "If it's not going to get better, maybe it will get worse." And then, by God, I can handle it if it gets bad enough. But that does not happen either. All that keeps coming is life just the way it is. Day after day after day. And mind you, I believe the man of faith and love is called upon not to accept suffering as something good and something great, and something that enables him to be a fine person. What he is called upon to do is to accept, not the suffering, but the forgiveness or the humanness in the midst of that suffering. Or, in the moment of greatest suffering is the clearest word which says, "Thou art my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

I am even beginning to be able to identify a little with John Wesley, who talked about "My sins, even Mine," which is a way of saying, I suppose, that I once thought my sins were so special that they were bracketed relative to forgiveness, until forgiveness could get stronger. But even Mine does not mean something special. It means, even Mine, as part of the way life is for everyman.

I never could figure out why Paul always wanted to let you know that he was the chief of sinners. It seemed to me if you were the chief of sinners you would keep quiet about it. But he kept saying that. To know, indeed, that you are the chief of sinners is where the transparency in suffering is. That is to say, the chief of sinners is forgiven.

The transparency in suffering is like the plain girl who has spent her whole life moping over her homeliness. Then somehow she receives the grace to "come out." Our society has celebrated that event through a coming-out party. She has her party not to proclaim that she looks like Miss America, but to proclaim that her being, as it is, is what is given and forgiven. I think one discovers that the party, the celebration, is the decision to dance -- with who I am and with the way life is.

