

PRAY Loving God, Giver of life, help us recognize and value who we really are—made in your image, holy in your likeness. Help us see ourselves as you see us—able to give life and love.

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SPiRIT

Life holds surprises. Some are great. You do better than you thought on your biology test. You make the team when you were afraid you wouldn't. Your parents listen and understand the fender bender really wasn't your fault.

Some surprises aren't so good. Half the questions on the test were never covered in class. Your boyfriend dumps you, and you didn't see it coming. Your coach doesn't like you, and it's no longer fun to practice or play, even though you love the sport.

Some events are truly awful. Your parents divorce. A much-loved grandparent dies too soon.

In the face of heartbreak, we often protest, "Why does God allow this? Why doesn't God step in?" Imagine you are a brand new parent. The doctor offers you a new technological advance. Give this child an injection during her first week of life and she will be perfect—she will always smile, always be nice, she will always do her homework.

Few of us would accept the offer, even knowing that without such protection this darling baby girl may grow up and one day drive drunk with tragic results. God faces a similar dilemma. Only by stepping in and taking away free will whenever

someone starts to commit an awful act could God prevent tragedies. In spite of the inevitable consequences, God lets us choose—to create joy and love or heartache and loss.

Five Responses to Pain

People tend to follow one of five paths when coping with pain.

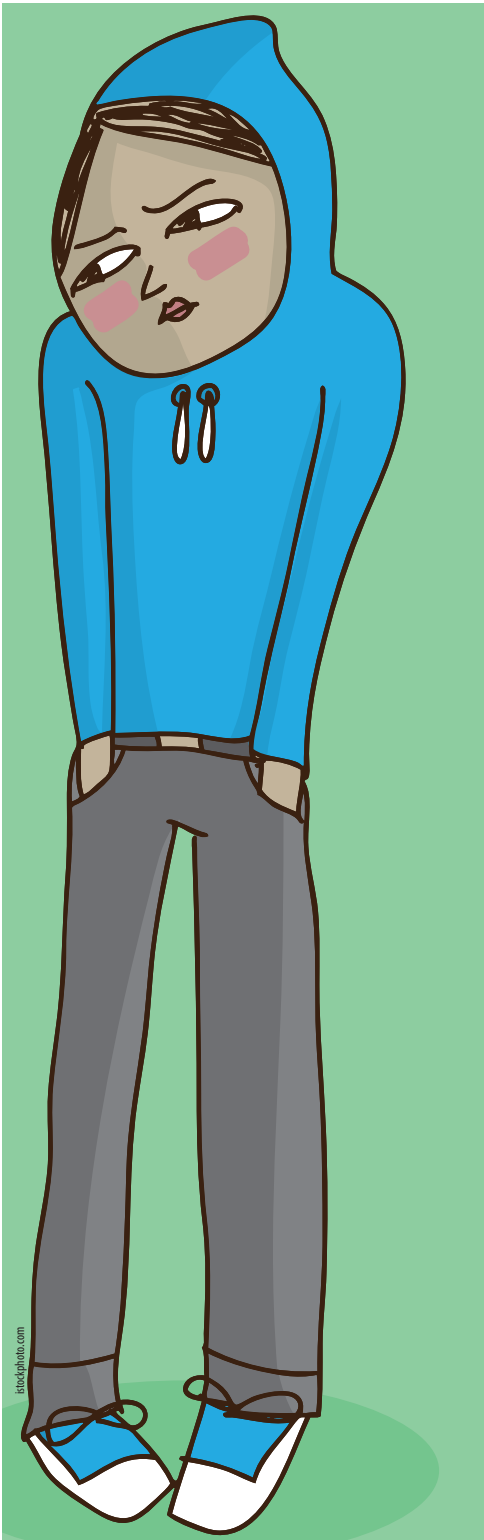
Some run away. Some suck it up and pretend nothing happened, becoming tougher in the process. Some get stuck. Some seem to be drawn to pain and seek it out when it doesn't show up on its own. And some truly work their way through pain, coming out better on the other side.

Some may run away from pain because their temperament is inherently joyful, and they actively rebel against sadness. They possess an amazing ability to distract themselves with fun activities or humor. In the face of a serious conversation, they change the subject or crack a joke. Their goal is to forget pain exists.

Others run away out of fear, convinced they can't handle the hurt. Unfortunately, the memory of the pain pursues them, gaining power as they retreat. Unprocessed painful events accumulate over time.

SUFFERING: Enemy or Friend?

By Connie Fourré



Some stuff the pain and barrel on through. Most cultures teach men to hide their pain. Little boys who cry on the playground face ridicule from other boys and sometimes from adults. As women gain greater equality with men, more women are repeating the pattern. Some athletes sporting “no pain, no gain” T-shirts adopt the slogan as a philosophy of life. Pushing ourselves to the point where it hurts—and then pushing further—is not the only way to grow.

Many men’s brains are designed to stash pain and ignore it, a survival strategy developed when hunting and hand-to-hand combat were a way of life. Brain imaging confirms that men’s brains are more compartmentalized than are women’s. Give a man a math problem and specific areas of his brain light up. Give a woman

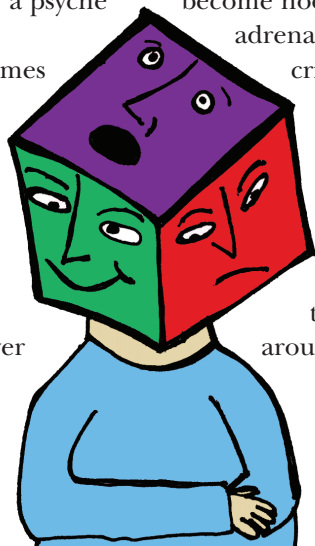
Some get stuck in their pain. We learn coping strategies from others, and without good strategies we can get stuck. Too much pain can sometimes overwhelm even those with good resources and capacity to cope. Endlessly rehearsing what I should have done or sleepless nights convinced I will never find someone new keeps us stuck at the doorway into the future. Too often, this sense of helplessness and despair triggers depression.

For some reason, some people seem to be attracted to pain. For women this shows up as an uncanny ability to pick bad relationships, particularly romantic relationships. Some women mistake intensity for love. A girl will stay too long with someone who ignores or demeans her, convinced she can save her partner or that the insults so obvious to everyone else are

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the same problem and multiple areas of her brain come alive and communicate together to find a solution. Women are less well equipped neurologically to forget pain without paying a price.

Sometimes getting over it and moving on serves us well. But habitually stuffing pain, for men or for women, creates calluses. Calluses on a fingertip or a psyche protect us from pain. A calloused heart also becomes less responsive to joy and compassion. Repressed pain lurking under the surface can show up later as anger, passing the pain on to innocent bystanders—parents, younger siblings, the driver ahead of us.



accidental. Finally, in despair, she leaves, only to find the same heartache in her next relationship.

Some women are addicted to the rush that comes with drama. If there is no drama, they will create it. With friends, at home, at work, on the team—the setting varies, the drama is the same. Their brains and bodies literally become hooked on the surges of adrenaline and cortisol that crisis brings in the same way that others’ brains become hooked on alcohol. Their up-and-down cycles chew up endless time and energy for themselves and those around them.

Finally, some work



SUNDAY GOSPEL

2nd Sunday of Lent

Jesus climbs to pray.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus took Peter, John, and James and went up to a mountain to pray. While he was praying, his face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzling white.

NARRATOR 2: Suddenly two men were talking with him—Moses and Elijah. Appearing in glory, they spoke of Jesus' exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

NARRATOR 1: Peter and those with him had fallen into a deep sleep; but awakening, they saw his

glory and the two men who were standing with him.

PETER: Master, how good it is for us to be here. Let us set up three booths, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

NARRATOR 2: Peter did not really know what he was saying. While he was speaking, a cloud came and overshadowed them. The disciples grew fearful as the others entered it. Then from the cloud came a voice.

VOICE: This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him.

NARRATOR 2: When the voice fell silent, Jesus was there alone. The disciples kept quiet and told no one anything about what they had seen.

Luke 9.28-36

through their pain. Pain becomes our teacher when we do the work, making us wiser and more compassionate. Pain can teach us appreciation, signal that something is wrong, help us learn our own limits, and drive us to search deeper for meaning.

Physical or emotional pain tells us something is wrong that requires our attention. An aching shoulder can warn us to ease up and not push a workout too far. Feeling exhausted and irritable now and then is normal. Driving ourselves for weeks on end comes at a cost. No pain, no gain? Not necessarily.

What about pain that leaves us helpless? When we've done everything we can and disaster strikes? Pain can teach us the limits of our own control. You invest years of your life in a sport and an injury sidelines you senior year. You reach out repeatedly to a brother you desperately love but watch him slip away into addiction. You tried your very best—and lost.

A portion of our stress comes from trying to control everything in our lives when we can't. Pain can teach us to hold life in open hands.

We can learn that some things we thought were vitally important actually are not. Your "fallback" college turns out to be exactly the right place for you. Not getting

*God, grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change
the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.
So much of life is out of our control.*

into the school play frees up time for friends or family. You have time to discover they value you not for what you achieve but who you are.

Catastrophic suffering calls into question our sense of meaning and our place in the universe. Recently at my school, one parent of a senior student died just before the school year began and another during the school year; one senior was diagnosed with cancer and a beloved graduate from the previous year died of cancer. The class of 200 students was in shock, and some still have not recovered.

Moving On

Grieving our losses requires us to hold still and truly feel them. I have to

talk about people I miss even though I cry every time I think about them. I am going to have to live with a stepfather I don't particularly like and didn't choose. My parents will never be a couple again. I hate this reality. I feel sad and alone. This circumstance is not going to change, at least for now.

Then we need to let go. Letting go is different from stuffing. Stuffing shoves loss out of our awareness, where it never moves. Letting go is opening our hands, looking hard at the precious gift we have been holding, and saying goodbye. Letting go can be incredibly difficult. No one else can do it for us.

Sometimes we have to let go over and over again until we begin to notice light creeping over the horizon. Letting go also means saying hello to the future, a future that is different, surely, but sometimes a future that is better, and surely a future where we can be better.

QUESTIONS 1 How has your life surprised you lately? 2 Why not give your child a shot so he or she has a perfect life? 3 In which of the five responses to pain do you see yourself? 4 How do you see suffering—as a friend or enemy? 5 How can dealing with suffering change and even transform us? 6 Why do you think Jesus chooses a mountaintop to pray? 7 What revelation do Peter, James, and John find at the top? 8 What do they bring down with them?

Visions help us discern our futures.

Visions are common forms of spiritual experience today and in biblical times. In Sunday's first reading from Genesis 15, Abram falls into a trance. He is wrestling with God's promise that he and his wife, Sarai, will have many descendants. Should he believe the promise and keep faith with God?

Abram readies a sacrifice of birds and animals for the ritual of sealing a covenant with God. Then, "a deep terrifying darkness enveloped him." Abram sees a flaming torch pass between the halves of the sacrificed animals and recognizes God is affirming the covenant and promise. Read this story in Genesis 15.5-18

In Sunday's gospel Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. What will happen when he goes to Jerusalem where religious leaders oppose him? In his prayer he talks with two earlier leaders in Israel's history, Moses and Elijah, both of whom

risked their lives to do God's work. This gospel vision shows Jesus wrestling in prayer with his mission and its consequences.

We humans have the capacities to remember, know, and transcend ourselves. We can open up to God, the ultimate Being beyond us. To help us, we each have our own histories stored in our memories. We also have our traditions about Jesus and the God of Israel.

The transfiguration gospel offers a model for how to pray and envision God's purpose for us. One of the valuable uses of scripture is for prayer and contemplation. In this gospel Jesus holds an inner conversation with two people from his own religious tradition about a turning point in his life—his decision to go up to Jerusalem. The first two meditations below also appear in *Alive in God*, page 45.



FAITH in ACTION

1 Imagine yourself alone in your own favorite, quiet place. Look around this place. What do you see? Are you outside seeing grass, trees, water, sky, buildings, roads, the horizon? Are you in your room surrounded by trophies and ribbons, old toys and stuffed animals, your favorite music chilling your worries? Where are you or what are you doing?

Imagine the older person whom your family says you are most like. Ask this person to come and talk with you. Say hello and tell the person what he or she has meant to you. Ask another person to join you, someone whom you want to be like. Say hello and introduce this person to the first person; tell the two about each other. Tell your two friends what you have been doing and what decisions loom ahead for you. Lay this out for them.

● Then think or write out a conversation among the three of you. Before you conclude, invite Jesus to join your conversation. Ask Jesus what he sees as your purpose.

2 Another way to use our imaginations to pray a vision is to use a symbol that puts our conscious selves in touch with our unconscious storehouse of memories. The following technique uses a doorway to build a bridge between the conscious and unconscious mind.

Imagine you find a doorway standing mysteriously open in a huge lot or on a road. You go closer, intrigued by such an unusual thing. Undoubtedly, the door to a time warp, you think—to time past, time future. Or, a door to inner space or outer space, to anyplace. Probably locked, you think. You cannot resist; you try the knob; it turns. You push the door open slowly and step inside. What do you see? Describe the place, the people. What purpose does this place, these people hold for you?

● Write down or tell someone your vision. What vision do you discover for yourself?

3 One of the most common religious experiences people have are feelings of wonder and at-oneness with nature, its stillness, its beauty. Nature becomes transparent with God's presence.

A skier stands alone on a moonlit hill; the endless rolling white seems to reach up and enfold her. A sailor merges with sun, wind, and water and loses all sense of self. A young man watches the sun silently sink over a lake and feels one with the quiet beauty. When have you had such experiences? They can happen anywhere—in a cornfield, at the Grand Canyon, under the stars while camping out.

● Write about it. Describe it to a partner.