

The Transformation of Suffering

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This article offers reflections on The Passion of the Lord, edited by James A. Noel and Matthew V. Johnson. The title “The Transformation of Suffering” refers not only to the transformations emerging from the epic suffering endured by Jesus and by peoples of the African diaspora, but to the ways each of us may be spiritually transformed by the crucible of suffering, and to the imperative of discipleship to act with creative agency in transforming the conditions of suffering and injustice that exist in the world.

KEY WORDS: suffering; transformation; spiritual practice; the Passion; Howard Thurman.

Healing begins where the wound was made.

—Alice Walker

In the preface to *The Passion of the Lord* editors James Noel and Matthew Johnson (2005) frame the central question of these assembled essays as, “How does the biblical account of Jesus’ death function in the religious experience of African Americans?” They identify four principal themes emerging from the compilation: passion, trauma and tragedy, love, revelation. This article will consider these subjects, particularly in relation to the experience of suffering.

As an interfaith minister and a woman of multiethnic European heritage, I engage this conversation from a different cultural and theological context than my African American colleagues and community. Although I do not identify as Christian, I gratefully borrow from Howard Thurman the self-description of being a follower of the teachings of Jesus rather than the doctrine about him. Descending

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from post-abolition immigrants to the U.S., including Jews escaping the late 19th and early 20th century Russian pogroms, I might pretend some degree of distance from the atrocities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, as noted by Noel and others, the unabated horrors of white supremacy make the refrain of the Negro Spiritual “*Were you there . . . ?*” a contemporary and largely rhetorical inquiry. Yet it is a question that all of us—especially white folks—must continually ask ourselves as inoculation against the seductive amnesia that perpetuates a status quo of violence and oppression antithetical to anything that Jesus taught. In the question “*Were you there?*” white people in particular must read a deeper inquiry: *How did you respond? And how do we respond every day?*

In the opening essay Johnson describes a “theology of African American Christian consciousness” (p. 8) grounded in the individual and collective traumas endured by Africans under enslavement, and the response to this brutal history as it was and is lived in the evolution of the Black church. The book as a whole explores the unique quality of identification with the Passion of Jesus afforded to those who have undergone epic suffering and degradation, and provides eloquent witness to the creative resilience of the human spirit evidenced in African American Christian faith and culture.

African American religious experience, as several of the book’s contributors note, is rooted in an African cosmology of unity where there is no boundary between sacred and secular, no margin untouched by the pervading essence of the Divine. Distinct from the dualistic paradigm of Eurocentrism, the prevailing ethos of indigenous cultures regards the universe as a sacred and interdependent whole. In this context, one common among mystics of diverse traditions, the world is not a place of dichotomous *either/or*, but of a conjunctive and often paradoxical *both/and*. Thus, as Johnson writes, there is “a dialectic of hope/resignation, joy/sorrow, and suffering/celebration. . .not, however, [as] separate states, but constitutive of one continuous field.” (p. 19) Karen Baker-Fletcher identifies a similar metaphysic in process theology “that emphasizes the integration between spirit and matter, body and Spirit, God and world.” (p. 116) God is present in and beyond the whole of life, and because of this a transformative engagement with the conditions of the world is possible.

Johnson characterizes the Passion as the “founding trauma” of Christianity (p. 7), still it was the precedent ministry of Jesus that both precipitated and informed the events of the Passion. Similarly the *Maafa* is the founding trauma of the predominant history of African Americans, but African spirituality preceded and informed this “protracted crucifixion” (p. 24) and provided the inner resources that permitted a people to withstand and even transcend atrocity. [*Maafa* is a Kiswahili term for “disaster” or “terrible occurrence” used to describe the African Holocaust.] The relative emphasis placed on the Passion of Jesus versus his life and ministry was a subject taken up by several of the authors. Rosetta Ross, for example, elaborates the definitions of “passion” and reflects on Jesus’ “consistent

and passionate honoring of all persons as sacred and his passionate advocating for a positive quality of life for all. . . .” (p. 147) She notes that a “constricted focus on Jesus’ Passion as relating only to his last days leaves Christians off the hook . . . without responsibility to follow Jesus’ model in their ordinary lives.” (p. 149) JoAnne Terrell agrees: “By disconnecting the death from the very full life that preceded it, we are prevented from contemplating a richer, truer meaning of our salvation and the discipleship that follows from it. We are never prompted to live unto God and for others (doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly), as Jesus did, unto death.” (p. 69)

A related discussion threaded through the essays is the question of redemptive suffering, and a concern over the attendant risk of valorizing or sacralizing (and thereby perpetuating) violence—particularly upon the oppressed. Demetrius Williams provides a brief synopsis of the debate and offers his own approach of biblical-critical reinterpretation presenting the crucifixion not as a symbol of passive victimization, but of protest and liberation.

In the daily practice of ministry and pastoral counseling, I find a fruitful and compelling question in a shift of perspective to ask not is suffering redemptive, but *can suffering be redeemed?* Can we find value and meaning in the conditions of suffering we encounter by using them to further personal spiritual development and fuel our commitment to work for a just and compassionate world?

There is hazard in attempting to speak generally of “suffering,” and this is particularly true in the context of the slave trade. As Barbara Holmes (2004) writes, “Slavery does not represent ordinary suffering. It is one of many unique situations that far exceed the limits of human imagination and assessment. Holocausts against one group or another cannot be contained within the bounds of the individual human body.” (Holmes, 2004, p. 71) Holmes offers the term “crisis contemplation” to describe the mystic experience of suffering as a threshold into a deeper intimacy with the Spirit. This connection to a greater whole can be a source of refuge and renewal, healing and strength. Howard Thurman (1973) acknowledges the sustenance found in a recognition that there is “something big enough to contain all violences and violations . . . [that our] life is rooted in a God who cares for [us] and cultivates [our] spirit, whose purpose is to bring to heel all the untutored, recalcitrant expressions of life.” (p. 84)

Thurman talks about suffering as a spiritual discipline. In the meditation “Pain Has a Ministry” he identifies the purpose of life as soul-making: “the development of . . . a sensitiveness, a depth of being, which would put [us] in the fullest possession of all [our] powers; in other words, make [us] whole.” He goes on to say, “The pain of life may teach us to understand life and, in our understanding of life, to love life. To love life truly is to be whole in all one’s parts; and to be whole in all one’s parts is to be free and unafraid.” (1976, pp. 65–66). There is a liberation that can arise from the crucible of suffering. When we realize that all the fire’s raging,

all the blustering of the storm, can only “touch the outer walls of [our] dwelling place” (1973, p. 84) and that the inner sanctum of our truest self remains forever unscathed, we are set free. The knowledge that our essential being is tempered by adversity, but can never be harmed nor destroyed, permits us to fully engage in life.

Suffering is both an intimately personal and isolated experience, and a bond shared with all humankind. It is possible, then, that in the experience of suffering we are afforded a window through which to glimpse our fundamental unity with others. Thurman refers to this “community of suffering” as offering consolation through a sense of companionship, even—I might add—solidarity, in the human condition. Suffering, in a sense, becomes the “common ground” working against feelings of isolation. Thus the fellowship of suffering is not limited to the more familiar connotation of communion with Jesus, but becomes a bridge of relationality between and among all people. I have found through thirty years of chronic and at times life-threatening illness, that suffering provides a humbling and unrelenting reminder of my humanness. However, by approaching suffering with the discipline of spiritual intention, I can reach beyond the limitations of my humanness to touch the transcendent. Thurman (1973) observes that people may be

profoundly changed by their suffering. Into their faces [may] come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way. Such people look out upon life with quiet eyes. Openings are made in a life by suffering that are not made any other way. Serious questions are raised and primary answers come forth. Insights are reached concerning aspects of life that were hidden and obscure before the assault. (p. 76)

We can regard the trials in our life as rites of passage, initiations into unplumbed dimensions of being, opportunities to develop qualities and abilities that would elseways not have been possible. Challenges and tribulation may call forth something greater from us than business-as-usual, forging us into more effective instruments of ministry and service. I suggest not that we require suffering for redemption, but that the experience of suffering may *itself* be redeemed through our choice to use it to reveal a greater good: to stimulate a creative solution, to motivate activism, to cultivate compassion, to expose more of ourselves to God.

In Buddhism there is a practice called “changing poison into medicine.” It affirms that nothing and no one is beyond the possibility of redemption. “[A]ny unfavorable situation can be changed into a source of value” depending on how we choose to engage it. (“Changing Poison,” 2002, para. 4) This is echoed in Islam by the 13th century Sufi philosopher-poet Jelaluddin Rumi who wrote, “Through love all pain will turn to medicine.” (Schimmel, 1991, p.17) Indeed, it was the radical unconditional love of Jesus that turned the pain of the Passion into a spiritual triumph, a medicine still potent after two millennia.

In the final pages of *The Passion of the Lord*, Robert Franklin evokes Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermon, “Transformed Nonconformist.” Although I would have

chosen a different list of individuals to illustrate King's ideal, I do appreciate Franklin's reference to this work. In *Strength to Love* (1981) King describes the transformed nonconformist as one who refuses to worship "false gods of nationalism and materialism"; one who responds creatively to death-dealing paradigms based on the "dangerous passions of pride, hatred, and selfishness." Constructive nonconformity requires spiritual discipline and the willingness to return justice for suffering and compassion for rejection. King affirms that, "Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit." (King, 1981, p. 27) I sometimes think it would be more fitting to talk about "transform-*ing* nonconformists"—to emphasize transformation as an ongoing dynamic activity, and point out that we are simultaneously the subjects of the transformational process (*we are transforming*), *and* we are the agents of the world's transformation.

As transforming nonconformists we must passionately and steadfastly refuse complicity with all forms of brutality, and in an act of spiritual aikido turn the poison of despair into the medicine of hope, turn enmity into reconciliation, trespass into justice, woundedness into wholeness.

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