**Editorial**

2 Editor

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**Publisher**

18 Publisher

Washington Province of Discalced Carmelite Friars,

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www.spiritual-life.co

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By Veronica Ward
In our search for inner and outer peace, many countries and individuals go to great lengths to avoid conflict and live peaceful lives. An organization in Washington, DC—United States Institute of Peace—seeks to minimize and resolve conflicts in the various warring countries of the world. Also, individuals are trained in conflict resolution to head off disasters in corporations and in personal lives.

As Christians, we are challenged by Jesus in the Gospel to be instruments of his peace to the world. Caring for our brothers and sisters in need is the foundational value of the Christian life. The dilemma we face is practicing Christian love in the face of conflict and, at the same time, maintaining an inner peace so necessary for living a prayerful life. We need to be peaceful persons, rooted in the peace that Jesus gives us: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you” (Jn 14:27).

The peace Jesus gives to us is not a temporary cessation of personal or global hostilities, but an inner peace, deeply rooted in his love for each of us. If we are personally united to Christ, we can be ambassadors of his peace to the world—not a tenuous peace easily fractured by jealousy or hatred, but a peace founded on respect and love for each human person.

We all struggle with the search for inner peace—the search for a deep inner relationship with God—and we struggle to find ways to bring peace to our families, communities, and the people around us. Small acts of kindness are like the mustard seeds of peace—small when planted but with great potential for growth.

Edward O’Donnell
This morning the birds are singing their wake-up song. The trees shine with the glow of yesterday’s rain; the air is humid and filled with the promise of more rain to come today. The earth has been so thirsty that this rain is such a gift. Yet, as I look within my soul this morning, I cannot fully join in the birds’ song or the earth’s joy. My heart feels like the parched earth must have felt during the past months. There is a deep longing within me, filling me, a longing I can recognize but have difficulty naming. As I sit, the words of a song come to me and I sing them softly:

My soul longs for you, Lord,
Like a desert thirsts for rain.
It is your face I long for,
you alone are life to me. (Dan Schutte)

As I sing, I let the longing stir within me. I am present to the longing, letting it fill me and allowing it to reveal itself to me in its own time.

My Experience

I have often wondered about this ache. It comes so strongly at times, filling my soul with a deep yearning that is hard to describe. I have days when I can’t even
move because this feeling takes hold of me. I experience it differently at different times. My eyes may fill with tears as my heart swells with gratitude for God’s presence in my life—for the call, for the wanting, and for the yearning. My soul is suffused with an exhilarating fullness that knows no bounds, a joy so abundant it overflows into everything I see or touch or do. In these moments I relish the gift of being alive, the promise of another day, and the dream of tomorrow.

There are also times when this ache can be deeply painful, as if my heart was squeezed tight and was struggling for air. Or it may feel as a great void longing to be filled or a dark night yearning for dawn. Am I naming the same thing? Aren’t these feelings somewhat contradictory? I am not sure. Yet, all of the above experiences have the taste and feel of an inner ache that I can hardly describe. Macrina Wiederkehr, in the introduction to her book *A Tree Full of Angels*, speaks of “an ache for God searching to be named.” The first time I read these words I felt a deep “yes” within me. “Of course,” I said “that’s what this is, and that is why I have not been able to describe it.” It is the ache for God still waiting to be named within my soul.

I have often reflected on this “ache,” especially in those days when I am filled with it. Slowly, I have come to realize that it comes unbidden into my life and that, most of the time, I cannot figure out exactly what it is or the reason for it. In this process, I have discovered that even if I cannot explain it, there is no way out but
An Ache for God

to enter it. When I do, when I allow it to penetrate my heart, to pierce it so that the longings and the questions it utters may help me name what it is all about, the result is extraordinary. Very slowly, different parts of this ache begin to reveal themselves to me, and soon I begin to name my own unique “ache for God.”

An Ache for Relationship

Loneliness is part of this yearning of mine. My head may tell me that loneliness is part and parcel of human life and that no one can escape it. Yet, how difficult it is for me to accept this reality. There is a painful silence in loneliness, a naked need for someone to fill the emptiness, to hear the cries, and to wipe the tears. At times it takes the form of a longing for friendship and intimacy, a hunger for a soulmate who can read my deepest thoughts, for a heart to be one with mine, or for a friend to be there sharing the darkness and helping bring in the light. Often, while deep into this experience, verses from St. John of the Cross’s Spiritual Canticle, learned so many years ago, come back to me:

Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
after wounding me;
I went out calling you, but you were gone.
(Spiritual Canticle)

I know that this ache, this loneliness, is a gift of grace for it helps me realize that I am not sufficient unto myself. Created in the image of a God who is Relation-
An Ache for God

ship, I cannot live without intimacy. My loneliness is often the grace that helps me embrace my need and humbly extend my hand to God and to others. Touching my loneliness helps me to reach that still point within myself where my union with God, myself, and others meet. Only at that center can I experience the riches that love and life and friends give me. T.S. Elliot describes this so well.

At the still point of the turning world
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards;
at the still point, there the dance is,...

(“Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*)

An Ache for Wholeness

My ache can also be the result of a new encounter with my brokenness, that humbling moment when I come face to face with my impatience or lack of compassion, with a rash judgment or an unkind word. At times such as these, I feel a mixture of embarrassment and humility, with some frustration mixed in: “Here I go again.” There is, as well, an inner knowing that this is what the human/spiritual journey is all about. “The path is made by walking,” my heart seems to say to me. Yet, while I walk, the awareness of my brokenness and my incompleteness is still very sharp and the longing for wholeness very intense. I yearn for the grace of gentleness and patience, compassion, and humility. I long for a calmer and more peaceful spirit. Oh, yes, I know that imperfection is part and parcel of life and
that it is only through the naming and owning of my brokenness that I will become more whole. In these aching and humbling moments, however, those truths seem to fade and only the aching remains.

God’s grace, though, reminds me again and again that this is a life-long process. It reminds me also that to become whole I will need great doses of love and generosity, of humility and courage. It will take all of that and more to grow into the person that my “unnamed ache” cries for: the woman created in the image and likeness of the Creator. I will need humility to name, own, and embrace the broken parts of me that yearn for wholeness and the lonely parts of me that cry for intimacy and love. It will take generosity to let go of self-centeredness and selfishness so I can respond to the needs and aches of others. It will take courage to take the steps and face the risks that embarking on a new journey will involve. And it will take love, lots of it: love for myself and for my dream of being whole, love for others and their own life-dreams, and love for God who continues to call me to wholeness.

One of the gifts I have received as I struggle to live this call to wholeness is a deeper and sharper insight into the meaning of the Incarnation. God becomes flesh in us, in all of us—not just in the good and beautiful and whole, but in the messy and broken as well. In the end, it all comes down to learning how to surrender and

An Ache for God

It will take generosity to let go of self-centeredness
let go of my illusions of perfection in order to embrace the simple truth that wholeness begins with emptiness and that beauty can be found in brokenness and imperfection. Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, has a gift for seeing deeply into the beauty that is found in the midst of life’s flaws. In *The Ponds*, she describes how the beauty of water lilies shines through because of their imperfections:

Every year
the lilies are so perfect...
their lapped light crowding
the black,
midsummer ponds...
I bend closer and see
how this one
is clearly lopsided—
and that one wears an orange blight—
and this one is a glossy cheek
half nibbled away...
Still what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazed...
I want to believe I am looking
into the white fire of a great mystery.
I want to want to believe that the imperfections
are nothing—
that the light is everything—
that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and fading.
And I do.

Her poetry reminds me that the grace to surrender and to see the beauty held by imperfection is not beyond my reach.
A Dis-ease with Life As It Is—A Longing for More

There is yet another face to this ache. I experience it as a discontent with life as it is, as an urgent call that does not go away. It is a desire for more life, more light, more love, and more joy. It is there as I read the daily Scriptures, or it jumps at me out of the pages of a book or the news reports on the radio as I drive to work. I experience it filling my whole being as I listen to music or watch a sunset. It is the part of me that always seems to want more. There is a good side to this discontent: it prevents me from being complacent, from remaining static or idle in my spiritual journey. This restlessness and unease, though, can also be an impediment to growth by preventing my noticing the small gifts that lay hidden within the folds of the routine and the ordinary.

Some years ago during a summer retreat that followed a stressful and painful year, I had one of those profound experiences that has been and continues to be a source of grace and growth in my life. Sitting in the garden and feeling tired and disconnected, I heard a voice within me that said, “Life is a gift, don’t let it pass you by.” I was awestruck for this was the last thing I expected to hear from God at that moment. I wanted answers to difficult questions, not poetry. Yet, deep down I knew that these words were no mere platitudes. God was calling me to the awareness that all is gift, that it is here in the routine moments of daily life that the gift is to be found. It is here that God’s grace
and love touch me, bless me, and call me to grow. In the years since that summer, I have come to realize that life is truly a gift but that this gift is subtle, needing my attention or I will miss it.

How do I miss this grace, though, this ever-present gift? I miss it when I get stuck in the restlessness, the loneliness, and the wanting—when I allow it to take hold of me and bring me down into myself. Some may call my experience having “the blues.” Others may call it depression. I am not a psychologist, but would it be wrong to describe depression as the overwhelming feeling that comes at the realization that the response to this ache is too big for me, or that the loneliness and the unfairness of life is for many too awesome to surmount? Here the temptation for me is to remain in this negative spot, analyzing and reanalyzing the situation, becoming increasingly disappointed and discouraged. Amazingly enough, it is here that grace finds me.

Like the paralyzed man in the Gospel who sat by the healing pool for thirty-eight years, I also need to hear Jesus’ words, calling me back to life: “Do you want to be healed? Do you want this situation to be healed? Then pick up your mat and walk.” This is the challenge that staying with the ache and walking through it gives me. It is the challenge to get up and continue my journey even though the path may not be well marked. It is the challenge to continue to walk the path of my own life, with its joyful and exhilarating moments, and with the
hurtful and boring ones as well. Yes, this is the only life I can live and the only life I can change. This is where God’s grace meets me and gifts me.

The God of My Longing

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1)

Who is this God for whom my heart is restless? Who is the God of my longing? To me, God is Infinite Possibility and Infinite Potential, a God who will never finish revealing to me all that God is and God embraces. The words of Karl Rahner in *Encounters with Silence* express so well my own inner longing:

What else is there that I can tell You about Yourself, except that You are the One without whom I cannot exist, the Eternal God from whom alone I, a creature of time, can draw the strength to live, the Infinity who gives meaning to finiteness? And when I tell You all this, then I have given myself my true name, the name I ever repeat when I pray in David’s Psalter, “Tuus sum ego” [I am yours]. I am the one who belongs not to himself, but to you. I know no more than this about myself, nor about You, O God of my life, Infinity of my finiteness.

I believe that I have this unquenchable “thirst for the infinite” because I was created in the image and likeness of this God whose self I will never fully know or understand. It is my soul’s call to continue discovering this wonderful God, to continue developing that *imago Dei* (image of God) that is at the core of my being. I can
An Ache for God

find no better and more fulfilling way to spend my life. And the wonder of it all is that I do not need to go too far to find out how to continue discovering God and nurturing the God-image in myself. It is right here in my own humanity with all its messiness and brokenness. This is the Holy Ground where God meets me, the Holy Ground where the image of God will continue to be born in me, the Holy Ground where my longings and my ache will continue to be filled by God’s amazing grace.

The question that continues to surface for me is, “How do I learn to integrate into my life all of these longings”? They are all components of this ache that is so much a part of me and that spurs me to keep searching, to find new paths and learn new ways. This ache continues to call me from darkness and death and impels me to risk the unknown in search for the gift of life. That’s the wonder and the miracle of this ache, this ongoing desire that would not let me rest with easy answers or comfortable and secure beliefs. It needs to keep on searching and, as I do, I keep discovering the God beyond all names, the God found everywhere. Then the ache within me becomes transformed into this fullness, this overwhelming joy at the miracle that is life, my heart bursting with gratitude for the God who is Gift beyond all gifts, Life beyond all life.

Images of Darkness and Water

Today, as I sat on the porch—looking out at the garden as it lay suffused with the hazy light of dawn—an
image began to take shape within me. I am in the middle of a field, dry and parched, thirsty for the rain that has not come. As I walk, I find a well in the middle of the field. It has a bucket with a long rope attached to it. Unseen hands lower the bucket into the well, bringing it up filled with water that is emptied on the parched ground. Again and again the bucket is lowered, filled, and emptied—lowered, filled, and emptied. Suddenly I am the parched earth longing for water, watching longingly as the bucket comes up again and again, refreshing me with its rich burden.

The image shifts, and I am the empty bucket that again and again is lowered into the darkness of the well. As I am let down by the rope, lower and lower—the well becoming darker and darker—I become aware of a paralyzing fear, a fear of the dark unknown down below, and I want to stop the rope and come up, the promise of water forgotten. Still the rope, deaf to my cries, continues its journey down, down until I feel the coolness. Water begins to fill the emptiness of my soul, filling me and overflowing. At that moment, I know something I did not know before. There is a treasure within the dark well and that treasure fills my bucket now. It is rich enough to quench my thirst, rich enough to share with the thirsty fields around me.

My soul longs for you, Lord,  
Like a desert thirsts for rain.  
It is your face I long for,  
you alone are life to me.  
(“My Soul Thirsts”)
As I stay with this image—with tears in my eyes and gratitude filling my heart—I know what the image means. There is only one way to soak the thirsty soil of my soul. I need to risk lowering my empty bucket into the darkness of the well. I need to risk the darkness in the hope that there is water down there. I need to trust that the dark and lonely moments, the aching and the thirst are all part of the rhythm of my life and that it is only through living them that I will satisfy this ache, this thirst within my soul. It is there, within the darkness of the well, that I will find the One for whom my soul yearns.

There is a temptation, however, that I need to avoid. This sadness, this melancholy, this inner yearning that can at times take hold of me, could keep me down in the darkness longer than I need to be. I cannot allow myself to give into the temptation to stay there—feeling sorry for myself, over analyzing and replaying those inner tapes that keep me in the darkness. I need to keep the rhythm of the bucket. I do not need to stay there longer than needed as the bucket does not linger down the well. It goes down in order to be filled and then comes up to be emptied, sharing its treasure. It is so with me: I need to go down into the darkness to name and own my need so as to be filled with the life-giving water of my inner well.

Then, I need to come up and look around. I need to open my eyes and see the sun shining over the parched field even if at times it may only be a sliver of light between dark clouds. I need to open my ears and hear
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the birds singing and the children playing. I need to hold the earth in my hands and feel the promise of life within its dryness, a promise of water that my bucket can help bring up from the well.

Continuing the Journey

I must continue the journey, letting this ache spur me on to keep searching, questioning, and opening my heart to God’s presence in the little gifts of everyday. I need to allow this ache to open my ears to God’s voice in the sounds around me, my eyes to the beauty of colors and smiles, and my heart to the tears, pain, and sorrow. There will be times, I know, when I will feel tired and will want to stop, days when it will take an effort to smile. There will be moments when being compassionate and forgiving will not be easy or when resentment may threaten to take hold of my heart. It is then that I will need to let my bucket go down the well to be filled with God’s living water. It is then that my soul needs to cry out its need to God:

My soul thirsts for you, Lord, as the desert thirsts for rain.
It is your face I long for, You alone are life to me.
(“My Soul Thirsts”)

What a wonderful journey this can be. As I continue listening to the ache of my heart and begin to give it a name, I will walk the path God is placing before me. In the process, I become the person I deeply long to become, the woman formed in God’s own image and
An Ache for God

likeness. As I go along, I need to remember the gift that lies within the dry and parched field. I need to recall the wonderful coolness of the water that lies deep within the darkness of the well. As the well carries a gift within, so does my own inner ache. It is the richness found in the complex mix of my poverty and my riches, my light and my darkness, my clarities and my doubts. As I continue my journey, I need to name and own this gift so that it may never stop enriching my life and the life of those around me.

Prayer

O God of infinite possibility and infinite potential, you are Truth beyond my limited truths and Life beyond all life. I will never understand your Truth or possess your Life in all its fullness. Today, as I pray before you, this thought fills me with such joy. I am energized by my not being able to understand you or this ache that often fills my soul. This means that I will spend all my life and all my eternity learning more and more about you and about life. What a great joy this is, knowing that our relationship will continue to grow, deepen, and be strengthened throughout the eons of time and eternity.

Oh, Amazing Grace. Oh, Amazing Ache. Oh, my loving and gracious God, how could I give up this longing for a security that comes so short of this? I want to keep searching, I want to keep learning, I want to keep living. I want my eyes to keep seeing you and my ears to keep hearing your voice anew in every moment and every person. I want to see your love and gracious gift in
An Ache for God

every blade of grass and every sunset, in every drop of rain and in every human face. I want to feel your heart in every tear, in every human hunger, in every broken heart. I do not want this ache within my heart to stop hurting, to stop calling, to stop challenging me, to stop wanting for more. I want to live! I want to live! Amen.

Mercedes Rojo, OSF, a Glen Riddle Franciscan, is a spiritual director and retreat facilitator.

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Whenever we think of Christ, we should recall the love that led Him to bestow on us so many graces and favors, and also the great love God showed in giving us in Christ a pledge of His love.
Failure: An Invitation to Contemplative Living

Mea culpa, Mea culpa, Mea maxima Culpa

I have failed. / Shards lie around me, / tiny, sharp and piercing.  
No jigsaw puzzle / this to reassemble, / no glue can hold together.  
But they are mine / to be gathered, stored, treasured, /  
pondered upon and reverenced.  
Held sacred and holy / until they give birth /  
to a deep sense of well-being.  
I am not a failure.  
*Veronica Ward*

FULLNESS AND FAILURE MAY APPEAR to be opposites, but in life’s rich pattern can one experience fullness without being aware of failure? Until I failed, I took my successes for granted, rarely paused for thought, was busy about many things, and, although prayer was an important part of my life, my understanding of it was about to change. It was only when life fell apart that I discovered some of its deeper meanings and found a need to be what I now call “contemplative.” I had received much information about “God,” but I had not met the Holy One.

When I did come face to face with my own “burning bush,” it became natural to spend time quietly in God’s presence. Since my life may be the only bible some peo-
Failure: An Invitation to Contemplative Living

people read, I hope I can be present to others in a way that points to someone greater than I as being the source of the strength, peace, or faithfulness that I show.

Monika Hellwig describes the contemplative attitude in the following words:

The essence of a contemplative attitude seems to be vulnerability—allowing persons, things and events to be, to happen, allowing them their full resonance in one’s experience, looking at them without blinking, touching them and allowing them to touch us without flinching. It is a matter of engaging in action, allowing it to talk back to us and listening to what is said. It is a constant willingness to be taken by surprise.

How one reaches this position will vary. For some it may be the gradual growth in prayer described by the great Carmelite saints. However, I know people who have run, walked, spent time with nature, sat zazen, or prayed in many different ways. Whatever one does, it is not to avoid facing reality but in order to find it:

Wholeness does not consist in removing a present source of travail; it demands a complete transformation of the person’s attitude to life, which in turn is an outward sign of a transfigured personality. (The Pain the Heals)

We all have struggled with personal failure. Some we can easily chalk up to experience and put behind us. But when we fail in relationships, particularly in marriage, the effect can be “life threatening.” Recovering from this injury to our personhood may take many years. As I have tried to come to terms with the breakdown of my marriage, articulating the experience has taken time. The trite solutions that were offered to me
did nothing to assuage my guilt or restore my broken spirit. Instead, they forced me to move towards the center of my being to find there a rock, a solid foundation on which to rebuild. I needed to find peace in the midst of chaos and strength to meet unexpected challenges, and to learn to live again under circumstances that were once unbearable. In the early days, a friend asked me if I wanted to be bitter or better. To be better, I turned to prayer, to meditation, and to quietly pondering the situation. From hesitant beginnings has come a way “to be.” Although I write from the perspective of failure in marriage, my observations tell me that those who lose their jobs or fail in other ways can identify with my experience.

**Moving into Failure and Not Around It**

Western society has a very low tolerance of failure, and the remedies it offers are largely unsatisfactory. The damaged marriage is ended and a new relationship begun as a balm for the dejected spirit, as father or mother for the fatherless and motherless. Only a few seem willing to confront the feelings, the meanings, and the possibilities that come with failure. For myself, coming to terms with failure was only partly a matter of intellectual understanding. Exploring it and touching it in the deepest way has been the very source of restoration. I was offered much advice in an effort to make things better, and, while some of it must have been useful, I now remember very little of it. What has helped me most has been a consistent and patient
“sitting with” the situation, without struggling in my mind with ideas but just allowing myself to be in the presence of the Holy One. What began as a short-term goal—to get through the day—has become a way of living in the present, letting go of the past, and leaving the future where it belongs—in the hands of the Holy One.

Dietmar Mieth says that human beings have three nonphysical needs: the need for successful personal relationships, the need for social recognition, and the need for meaning in life. The situation of wife and mother met all three needs for me. When my marriage broke down, my whole world of reference, my way of meaningful existence, was lost. Society tends to define us by what we “do,” and, although not all our “doing” may collapse at the same time, failure in a major area of life destroys more than that part of it. If “this area” has gone wrong, then maybe everything else is wrong, and I have just not realized it yet. This is not a question of the ego or about self-confidence; it strikes at the very essence of being.

**The Existential Nature of Failure**

Dietmar Mieth states:

Failure is irreversible. The characteristics of failure are irreversibility and irrevocability. Crises can be surmounted, problems can be solved. But when we speak of failure, we mean something that is irrevocable, even if we know that not everything fails with the failure of personal relationships or a failure of social recognition or a failure to find an answer to the question of meaning.
Failure: An Invitation to Contemplative Living

Behind the word failure are hidden many emotions that do not yield easily to rational thinking. Feelings of anger, resentment, fear, and rejection are mixed with lethargy and distaste for living, along with so many new things to cope with and so much less time to do it all in. Contrast this with Thomas Merton’s view of contemplation:

Fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacred-ness of life, of being.

The disturbance of my equilibrium was at times so frightening that I knew I had to find other ways to “be” in the situation. I became unafraid to look outside my Catholic Christian tradition for assistance and wished I had found sooner what Thich Nhat Hanh had to say about anger:

The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don’t suppress it. We don’t run away from it. We just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. Becoming angry at your anger only doubles it and makes you suffer more…. The Buddhist practice is to go back to breathing and recognize your anger as anger.

Each of the emotions that threaten to swamp one in the middle of great pain or suffering is addressed partly by thinking things out, asking advice, and getting help. When the house finally goes quiet at night, however, will one choose to fill it with the noise of TV or radio, or find a way to embrace the silence?

A strong notion of rejection may exist for both the one who is left and the one who does the leaving for she or
he may have felt rejected long before walking out of the door. Rejection within the relationship may be followed by rejection outside it as other people find it too difficult to support one in the throes of failure. This disease may be catching. They may feel torn loyalties, and so the lesser experiences of failure, which like the aftershocks of an earthquake, increase the initial devastation.

For the Catholic facing separation and divorce, the fear may be that the Church and thus the Holy One will also reject one. Although I personally have encountered only compassion, the teaching of the Church that marriage is until death compounded my feeling of failure. I had not lived in the U.S.A. for very long. Coming from Ireland where there was no divorce at the time, I kept my situation secret for several months through fear of losing my position in ministry,

Is God Merciful?

Does the Holy One also reject? Jewish and Christian teaching says “No.” David is still favored despite committing murder and adultery; Peter is the foundation of the Church in spite of denying Jesus three times. Reading in scripture about still being chosen will not be enough to reassure one that he or she is still acceptable. One needs to hear it from another person and from the gentle voice of the Holy One heard in the depths of one’s being. The wisdom of the Church also offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the process of annulment to bring healing to those who have failed. I believe it, however, to be the process of quietly staying attentive
to one’s feelings, being honest about them no matter how terrible and destructive they may seem, that ultimately makes the sacrament or annulment healing in actuality.

If a broken marriage is a failure, then is a successful one simply one that lasts? Brokenness must awaken us to the real needs within marriage. Do the many individual experiences of failure teach the Church something about the need for better marriage preparation and for support along the way? It will be argued that good preparation and support are available but too many people do not find what they want or need in time to prevent disaster. We have not taught people that asking for help is not failure but possibly the beginning of real success. The more aware I have become of the pain involved in failure, the more I feel a need to speak out, to challenge the Church to listen to the pain and help define good marriage and nurture it. What is the nature of marriage as intended by the Holy One? The answers will not come simply from academic exercises but from a deep listening to the Spirit within people’s experiences.

From our earliest years we hear “you should” and “you ought,” and to these we add “if only.” These oft repeated phrases place a burden of guilt on our shoulders that can compound the sense of failure. What the contemplative being brings to bear on the situation is a dose of honesty and reality. Hindsight will not alter things but accepting responsibility for what is mine in the situation, allowing that circumstances played their
part and that I did not fail alone, can help to free me from guilt. At long last I can say that I was the best wife that I could be given the situation and have hope that new relationships need not be subject to the same pit-falls. I may never receive forgiveness from my marriage partner, and I may never be aware of the full extent of my responsibility, but I can be content to leave the apportioning of guilt and blame to the realm of mystery. The wisdom of the serenity prayer says,

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.

Failure causes us pain and suffering, and we have to deal with it in some way. Western society urges us to get as far away from suffering as possible, while some suggest that we see it as God’s testing ground, which helps us to become better people. There is ample evidence that not everyone survives the test. Mental breakdown and suicide are common and may be the ultimate failure from which there is no recovery. Suffering is not good in and of itself, but the contemplative person may put suffering to good use. To bear it as a burden that weighs one down or to try to get rid of it by ignoring it or stuffing it inside will cause harm. The alternative is to integrate it and learn to accept it as part of life, but not to seek it or reject it when it occurs. Acceptance of what is happening in a positive way is both a grace and freedom. It doesn’t happen quickly; it cannot be acquired by willing it to be so. It is the fruit
Failure: An Invitation to Contemplative Living

of quiet time spent in the presence of the Holy One.

“Why”—The Question That Won’t Go Away

When one sits on the dung heap of failure, the biggest question faced is “Why”? It will not matter how many times one asks it, nor in how many different ways it is phrased, because ultimately there will be no satisfactory answer that will enable one to pack the failure away in a box and be done with it. Even the partial solutions that help one to come to terms with the situation come more from compassionate listening to one’s heart than from repeatedly going over and over the events of the past. If one can lovingly bring the past into focus without assigning blame to oneself or the other, there is hope and possibility of befriending both for both hurt. In doing this for myself, the goal was merely to survive. However, coming to a place where I can hold the broken pieces reverently and treasure them in gratitude is a more wholesome and holy place to be.

The contemplative is not freed from the path of action. It is the person who develops the capacity to be patient with “what is” who gains the insight to see what needs to be changed and receives the courage to work for liberation. After living apart for three years, I filed for divorce because to describe myself as “married” had become a lie. I value marriage as a sacred union and “divorced” at that time was an honest statement about my marriage. In the years since, there has been an ongoing challenge to forgive the difficulties encountered
in the process. Also, when children are involved, the relationship with a former spouse is rarely completely severed. Action without contemplation would have been more an angry, vengeful reaction than an attempt to enable both to live with the reality that a spiritual bond had not happened between us.

**Conclusion**

I am not the person I was. Failure was an invitation to live a more contemplative life. Prayer that reveals God’s love for me and for each person continues to provide the foundation for ministry and all of my life. What I have learned has become important as I try to share faith with parishioners and catechumens, and remain faithful to my vocation to become the clearest image of the Holy One that I can. After all, the name Veronica means “true image.”

**Veronica Ward, MA**, a British native, earned a Master’s degree in Theology at St. Michael’s College, Colchester, Vermont.
ROMULUS AND REMUS ARGUED OVER a trivial matter. They decided to settle their quarrel by seeking divine intervention. By reading the auguries, the flight pattern of birds, they would know whose claim the gods favored. Each sat on his own hill, the Palatine and the Aventine, respectively, and waited. Remus first saw six birds in flight, and even as he was announcing his victory, his brother Romulus saw twelve.

The supporters of Remus argued the gods favored him because he had received his omen first, and the friends of Romulus thought he had been favored because he had seen more. Unable to come to agreement, they struggled, and Remus fell, a fratricide. Thus, according to the ancient historian Livy, did Romulus gain the right to found and name after himself the city of Rome.
Lord, Lord, What Would You Have Me Do?

How God Speaks

We translated this passage in our Latin Literature class, and I commented on how frequently in classical stories the gods communicate ambiguously with humankind, usually with disastrous results. It is a small class where we know each other well, so I made the additional observation to a Jewish student that this was different from her tradition in which God spoke so clearly to his chosen ones. Abraham may not want to leave his native land, the land of his birthplace and go where Yahweh will show him. This directive may not make any sense, but there is no doubt that that is what God has asked him to do.

How God lets his will be known to his people is a particularly compelling issue to me at the moment, because quite frankly, I would like to know what God would have me do. I am about to enter the last year of my fifth decade, and I’m still worrying about “what I should do with my life,” or at least the final third of it. I am no doubt in a garden-variety, mid-life crisis, but I’m assuming God wants to be part of the solution. He certainly has seemed part of the problem.

Synchronicity was at work. On the same day we did the Romulus and Remus passage, I got a professional opportunity that five years ago would have had me dancing in the street. Now I felt ambivalent. Pursuing this option would be an enormous time commitment. Although it is what I thought I wanted, now, with it at hand, I recognized it would mean curtailing other activ-
itics, many of them of a religious and a spiritual nature, which were coming to feel more and more “right,” more and more “what I should be doing.” However, who could say where taking this opportunity would lead? Maybe I was giving in to the laziness and fear that a new challenge activated.

**Discerning a Call**

When in doubt, turn to your faith. I did. In what way can my Catholic faith help me discern? Jesus, the person of Jesus Christ, is the revelation of God. What does Jesus say? “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Well, yes. There is that. What else? The two greatest commandments: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Yes, there is certainly this, the central Christian challenge, but I want more specific advice about how to act right now.

I recently heard a Vocation Director describe his interaction with men who wanted to become priests. He would ask how they knew of their vocation, and invariably they would say that they had received their calling from God. “How nice for you,” he would respond, and then go on to challenge them further. They may have received a special invitation from God to enter the priesthood, but he was in no position to know the
truth of that statement. What was critical to his own understanding of vocation and what he considered the Catholic Church’s understanding is that a true vocation had to be corroborated by a call from the community. Like Matthias, the one chosen to replace Judas, we are chosen for particular ministries by God through the church. The early church community prayed and then cast lots to choose Matthias over Barsabbas. I suspect this particular method of discernment has lost favor in the church, but the principle of God mediating his call through community remains intact.

Was my new opportunity a call from the community, albeit secular? Was it a good thing to pursue? Or should I be bolder in excluding things that did not deeply resonate as part of my spiritual journey? Should I start saying “no” to even appealing requests? Should my life reflect more the priority I had chosen in my heart, in my prayers, to put Jesus first?

**Looking for Signs**

I thought a lot that day. At the final reckoning, I wanted to be called a good and faithful servant, one who had used her talents well. But how to do so? I really thought Jesus should give me an answer: I was seeking, therefore, I should find. Before going to bed, I prayed and read the Bible, asking God to guide me to a passage that would shed some light on my quandary. It was not the first time I had done this, and frequently I have received wisdom and direction in the
process. This practice is a Christian appropriation of the ancient *sortes Virgilianes*, by which one would open Virgil’s work and choose a line at random as a guide to the future. I figured I was entitled to likewise appropriate such a verse. That night, while I read beautiful passages, none of them seemed germane.

Before I went to sleep, I vented my frustration directly to God. I said that I was really serious, that I wanted him to send me a sign. I told him that while I wanted to do his will, I didn’t want to make too big an issue of something that maybe was immaterial in the scheme of things. If this were silly, he could maintain his silence. But if he had an opinion, he should speak now or forever hold his peace. I told him I would accept a dream, even though I infrequently dream, or I would heed any words that were in my heart when I woke up. That night was his Big Chance.

About 4 o’clock in the morning, three long nails in a piece of wooden molding in our bedroom, which had shown no sign of loosening for at least the twenty years I had lived in the house, simultaneously let go and the molding crashed to the floor. “What was that?” I asked my husband. I thought the ceiling had fallen. He answered that it was just the molding.

What should I make of this: my own bolt of lightning; my personal burning bush; on a quiet street, in the dead of night? Yes, I can believe that, but still no call to move to Egypt, still no answer to the question I had posed.
Lord, Lord, What Would You Have Me Do?

In Faith and Freedom

My God is a God of mystery. His oracles, like those I study of pre-Christian times, are frequently ambiguous. But my God is with me always. That is the important thing. He is ever-present, there in the silence, there through it all. My choices need be my own. This God sustains his people in and with freedom, however painful such a gift may sometimes be.

Maryanne Hannan has published poems and essays in several publications, including America, Forefront, Review for Religious, and Sisters Today. Visit her at: http://www.mhannan.com/
In this fresh creative approach to theology, Elizabeth Johnson asks how we can understand cosmic redemption in a time of advancing ecological devastation. In effect, how can we extend the core Christian belief in salvation to include all created beings? Immediately this question runs into a formidable obstacle: the idea that Jesus’s death on the cross was required as atonement for human sin—a theology laid out by the eleventh-century theologian St. Anselm.

Constructing her argument (like Anselm) in the form of a dialogue, Johnson lays out the foundations in scripture, the teachings of Jesus, and the early Church for an understanding that emphasizes the love and mercy of God, showing how this approach can help us respond to a planet in peril.

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, is Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University. A former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, she is the author of many books, including She Who Is, Quest for the Living God, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love.
God has been very good to me, for I never dwell upon anything wrong which a person has done, so as to remember it afterwards. If I do remember it, I always see some other virtue in that person.

Saint Teresa of Avila
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