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Re-reading Job: Entertaining Spiritualities of Suffering

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“Entertainment” and “entertaining” suffering, at first glance or first hearing, may seem and sound, well, a little odd. But from time to time in this essay I will turn to “entertainment” as a way to keep the exploration of suffering not just an academic enterprise but, as it were, a spiritual practice. The “entertainment” provided is from Job and from other writers and poets. What do I mean by “entertaining suffering”?

As a verb, “entertaining” means holding something attentively in a pleasant, agreeable, diverting or amusing way. “Entertaining” suffering means holding, maintaining, and keeping suffering as a guest with a certain amount of hospitality; it means admitting suffering into the mind and body and soul, harboring it, even cherishing it. As a gerundive adjective “entertaining” suffering suggests not a species of masochism but rather a way of giving suffering its due, which is in part, I believe, the capacity to invert and inflict mayhem upon any of the above verbal meanings of “entertaining.” Etymologically, “entertaining” is from the Latin *inter*, which connotes variously in the midst of, in between, betwixt, among, amid, or surrounded by, and *tenere* meaning to hold, to keep, to have, to maintain. “Entertaining suffering,” then, is being in the midst of, in between, betwixt, among, amid, or surrounded by suffering; to hold, to keep, to have, to maintain suffering, or, with an accessory idea of firmness or persistence, to hold fast to, to occupy, to watch, to guard, to defend suffering. But since remaining “in the midst of holding fast to suffering” is difficult, uncomfortable, and intuitively not an unalienable right, I will thus from time to time turn to “entertainment” as a means of helping us remain “in the midst of holding fast to suffering.”

Entertainment: This first “entertainment” is from Job himself.

If I look for Sheol as my house,
 if I spread my couch in darkness,
 if I say to the Pit, ‘You are my father,’
 and to the worm, ‘My mother,’ my ‘My sister,’
 where then is my hope?

Who will see my hope?
Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
Shall we descend together into the dust?¹

Job 17:13-16

A CONFERENCE ON HAPPINESS

What is the opposite of illusion? Or, if illusion is on one side of a coin, what is stamped on the other side?

This fall, as I returned to the Collegeville Institute at St. John's University and St. John's Monastery ready to give suffering and Job another good year of my life, the first thing I noticed as I arrived was their large brown sign in white lettering that says simply, year-round, "Welcome to St. John's." The second thing I noticed was the smaller "event sign" beneath the "welcome sign." The event sign read simply: "A Conference on Happiness."

Checking the Conference out, I found that papers, discussions, and lectures sounded good and were to be given by scholars and scientists in a range of fields, from biochemistry to philosophy. Neither theologians, nor, as I noticed, teachers of spirituality, were represented: no doubt these are already known for having set the happiness bar just a bit too low.

"Happiness" is a hot topic—much hotter than "suffering" for instance. And why shouldn't it be. Is it not the case that, as our own Declaration of Independence reassuringly tells us, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [persons] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of . . . Happiness." And for real evidence of the current "hotness" of happiness, we can go to any local bookstore. We can look at the self-help, psychology, new-age, spirituality, and religion sections; we can glance over the business, cooking, travel, pets and language section: all of these will testify that "happiness" is indeed very much in vogue. Only a few musty, dusty poets still practice the art of the curmudgeon or bore us with that most unhappy of subjects, death. Oh yes, and the nature section, beside the field guides, not much happiness to report there either. But overall, the conference on happiness did not disappoint: I learned a lot about suffering at the happiness conference.

And I was given a focus for this essay though I didn't realize it at the time. One of the sessions I attended ended with a fairly good give-and-take discussion, only to be hijacked towards the end by a philosophy professor who only had one point: everything is an illusion. Happiness, he said sadly, is the biggest illusion of all. Others tried to get the discussion back on track but with no luck. To an attempt to locate happiness within narrative, the philosopher responded that narratives are "fictions" and are therefore "illusions." And so it went. He really was an unpleasant person. "Not a happy guy," I thought. After



a time I raised my hand and asked, very sincerely, “so what is the opposite of illusion?” But by now the session was lost and, of course, our philosopher friend immediately piped up, “the opposite of illusion is an illusion.” I felt like we were in some horror movie about the eternal return of the sophomore class.

But thinking about the happiness conference over the next few days, I felt I had a pretty good question: what is the opposite of illusion? Flip a coin. On one side is illusion, if the other side comes up, what do you see?

Entertainment: A Poem by Emily Dickinson

The Heart asks Pleasure—first—
And then—Excuse from Pain—
And then—those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering—

And then—to go to sleep—
And then—if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die—²

Flip a coin. On one side is illusion, if the other side comes up, what do you see?

SUFFERING QUESTIONS

In her book on the history of exegesis of the book of Job, Susan E. Schreiner writes:

A pawn in a contest about which he knew nothing, the beneficiary of “friendly” advice he refused to accept, the target of suffering he could not understand, and a victim in a universe that threatened to overwhelm him, Job has been a man for all ages. Ever since the biblical era, the legend of Job has been part of the collective memory of the West and one of the defining myths of our civilization. The man on the dung heap repeatedly raised questions that would haunt the ages that followed him . . . [Job’s] story has forced its readers to wrestle with the most painful realities of human existence.³

Job’s endless “questions” are the substance of Job’s response to “the painful realities of human existence.” Using an image from nature—as Yahweh will later likewise do to excess—Job has, for instance, many questions about hope. He asks at one point:

For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,

and that its shoots will not cease.
 Though its root grows old in the earth,
 and its stump dies in the ground,
 yet at the scent of water it will bud
 and put forth branches like a young plant.
 But mortals die and are laid low;
 humans expire, and where are they? Job 14:7-10

Job's seven days of silence are also seven days of silent questioning. Then, the first time Job opens his mouth after his seven-day, silent question he says, "God damn the day of my birth" (3:3).⁴ This seems not to be a very helpful *answer*. "God damn the day of my birth" is a pretty emphatic declaration. Yet, as so often happens in Job, an opening declaration actually contains the seeds of what will become a whole new garden of questions. And so after a few lines of damning and turning creation on its ear, Job lets rip with a doozy of a question, a righteous question, a turning away from evil and fearing God kind of question:

Why is light given to one in misery,
 and life to the bitter in soul who long for death,
 but it does not come,
 and who dig for it more than for hidden treasures;
 who rejoice exceedingly,
 and are glad when they find the grave? Job 3:20-22.

"I dig for death like another digs for treasure," Job implies; I find my treasure in the earth as a treasure-seeker finds gold in a mine; I find my treasure in the soil of a grave. Why?

The most influential writer on the book of Job in the Christian spiritual traditions is St. Gregory the Great. According to St. Gregory, however, one may ask questions in order to learn, but one does not ask questions about God; asking questions about God only displays one's ignorance. Of course asking such questions about divine power and righteousness is exactly what Job *does*; but for St. Gregory such inquisitiveness is ignorance. Still, Gregory's book, *Morals on the Book of Job*, is for me an astonishing, serpentine and endlessly fascinating piece of work. I've grown to love it. But it is also a demon of a book from which St. Gregory himself seems never quite able to escape. For instance, about questions, St. Gregory writes:

And because a person asks a *question* in order to be able to learn that of which that person is ignorant, for a person to *question God*, is for that person to acknowledge that he or she is ignorant in God's sight.⁵

In his elephantine book, St. Gregory wrote a lot of astonishing and endlessly fascinating things. But this is not one of them. The God of Job could care less whether the divine omniscience spies an ignorant man or woman. Job asks questions precisely because Job is ignorant *of God*. And Job asks questions because *God* seems to be *ignorant* about God's own creation, especially about his human creation, Job. *Morals on the Book of Job* is a book to love and reverence. But it is not a place to engage those "questions that would haunt the ages that followed," nor a place to "wrestle with the most painful realities of human existence," as Susan Schreiner calls them. As a book of answers, it is not particularly adept itself at entertaining suffering.

Entertainment: From a poem by Randall Jarrell:

I see at last that all the knowledge

I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—
Is worthless as ignorance: nothing comes from nothing,
The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness
And we call it wisdom. It is pain.⁶

SUFFERING ANSWERS

Still, those who try to pose an answer to that "why?" of suffering are legion. Here are four perspectives that propose an "answer" to suffering, each of which in their own way is applicable to Job.

First, the Buddhists' answer to suffering seems straightforward and honest: they recognize the infinite, phenomenological "why?" of suffering and through various metaphysical reasonings and spiritual techniques and practices, try to transcend it. Indeed, according to The Fourfold Noble Truths, 1) all is suffering (*dukkha*); 2) suffering is caused by desire/attachment; 3) if one can eliminate desire/attachment, one can eliminate suffering; and 4) the Noble Eight-fold Path can eliminate desire. Buddhists, then, seek to eliminate suffering through the elimination of desire. There may be some wisdom in this, but the book of Job itself is altogether on another spiritual path: Job experiences nothing in suffering that allows him to transcend suffering. As Randall Jarrell implies, only suffering comes from the darkness. Others may call it wisdom, but it is suffering, it is pain.

A second perspective on answering suffering that has its roots in St. Gregory the Great and, from within the Christian tradition, tries to answer "Job's dilemma" in terms of divine pedagogy. According to this perspective, God has arranged suffering in such a way that, though it may seem otherwise at the

time, suffering makes us strong, wiser, more faithful, more hopeful, and/or more loving. Peter Kreeft, for instance, is confident enough to entitle a recent book, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*.⁷

A third response is that of Karl Jung who does not try to make sense out of suffering, but does have the audacity to entitle a book-length essay, “Answer to Job.” Jung’s formula for finding an “answer to Job” is itself formulated according to the internal logic of a question, namely, “What is the real reason for the Incarnation as an historical event?” His answer in part is:

Yahweh evidently has a disinclination to take his absolute knowledge into account as a counter balance to the dynamism of omnipotence. The most instructive example of this is his relation to Satan [in Job]: it always looks as if Yahweh were completely uninformed about his son’s intentions. That is because he never consults his omniscience. We can only explain this on the assumption that Yahweh is so fascinated by his successive acts of creation, so taken up by them, that he forgot about his omniscience altogether.⁸

For Jung this failure of divine omniscience results in a confrontation with Job in which Yahweh moves from a state of blissful unconsciousness to one of very concerned consciousness. For Jung, the knowledge of Job’s moral superiority to Yahweh touches off Yahweh’s transition from a state of unconsciousness to one of conscious awareness and response. Yahweh’s response is also a response to Jung’s original question about the real reason for the incarnation to which Jung can now give his “answer”:

The life of Christ is just what it had to be if it is the life of a god and a man at the same time. It is a bringing together of heterogeneous natures, rather as if Job and Yahweh were combined in a single personality. Yahweh’s intention to become man, which resulted from his collision with Job, is fulfilled in Christ’s life and suffering.⁹

A fourth philosophical approach aimed at answering the problem of suffering, is theodicy. Theodicy is a modern, post-enlightenment endeavor which proposes a “solution” to the “problem of evil.” The term was introduced into philosophy by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who, in 1710, published an essay the purpose of which was to show philosophically that the evil in the world does not conflict with the goodness of God. Many theodicians in fact have called the book of Job itself a theodicy. This, the book of Job, definitely is not. The book is anything but a solution to the problem of evil; Job’s friends are budding theodicians, but neither Job himself nor the book in total is anything like a theodicy. Job does *not* answer, he *only* questions.

Entertainment: William Styron, from *Darkness Visible*, writes:

The pain is unrelenting, and what makes the condition intolerable is the foreknowledge that no remedy will come—not in a day, an hour, a month, or a minute. If there is mild relief, one knows that it is only temporary; more pain will follow. It is hopelessness even more than pain that crushes the soul.¹⁰

SUFFERING DIVINE PEDAGOGY

In the allegorical tradition, of which St. Gregory the Great is a part, the book of Job is an occasion for discussing divine providence working to effect beneficial results by means of suffering. Writing two centuries before St. Gregory, St. Ambrose, in his four sermons *On the Prayer of Job and David*, used two themes to explain the suffering endured by Job. One theme, reminiscent of St. Paul, is that suffering achieves beneficial results to the extent that it builds strength and athleticism. Job, for St. Jerome, is like an “athlete of Christ” whose “strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9) and for whom suffering enables one to gain spiritual fortitude so that, “when Job was suffering weakness, then he had the greater strength.”¹¹

St. Ambrose’s second theme is also picked up by St. Gregory and thus handed on in the Latin west well into the medieval period and to Calvin and beyond. This theme has to do simply with the salutary nature of adversity and suffering which leads, in time, to the wisdom of freedom from worldly things. St. Gregory calls clinging or acquiescence to worldly things “fatal tranquility.”¹² Job, however, never experiences the supposedly curative powers of suffering which themselves might insure against “tranquility” becoming “fatal.” God has insured that holy Job has no temporal goods to which Job might cling. He has no temporal goods, no peace of soul, no health of body or spirit, no meaningful ministry, no rest from constant, inner turmoil (cf. Job 30).

Carol Straw has also argued that St. Gregory considers the *constantia mentis* (steadiness, constancy, stillness of mind) to be the ideal state in both adversity and prosperity.¹³ This is an aspect of acquiescence as detachment, as *apatheia*, which begins, I know, to set St. Gregory and his interpretation of Job on familiar ground for many of us. In this sense, “suffering well” is the ability to have suffering enlarge and transform the soul. In particular, suffering well is thought to create three spiritual realities: self-knowledge, freedom, and perception. Or, to put it in even more familiar terms in the literature of spirituality, suffering is transformative; it leads to illumination, promotes *apatheia* or detachment. This is wonderful stuff. But it is not found in the book of Job. On the contrary Job entertains nothing like *constantia mentis*: Job is rather inconstant, unstill, even, in fact, terrified. Suffering has made him so.

Entertainment: Job, inconstant and unstill, but not silenced:

Today also my complaint is bitter,

Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.

God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;

If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face. Job 23:2a; 15-17

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SUFFERING METHOD

Method is something about which students of Christian spirituality are rightfully serious. As students of Christian spirituality we have tried a variety of methodological strategies including, “spiritual anthropology,”¹⁴ “the spiritual life as experience,”¹⁵ “the real or existential level,”¹⁶ “the multi-faceted living of faith,”¹⁷ “spirituality as discipline and practice,”¹⁸ and the “role of metaphor and the symbol making process.”¹⁹ But suffering has a nasty habit of dismantling method. In fact, borrowing a title from Arthur Rimbaud and a reference to a false cure from Emily Dickinson, students of Christian spirituality can ask: how do we spend “A Season In Hell” without recourse to the Dickensonian “Anodynes” of methodology?

Philosophical hermeneutics provides just one example of how suffering can dismantle method. Even within the title of his *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer hints that the ability of method to circumscribe suffering is limited. For Gadamer, “truth” and “method” are, hermeneutically, at odds with each other. Or to put it another way that addresses our opening question about illusion, we could say that for Gadamer “illusion” and “method” are synonymous. And to put it yet another way, since “truth” is at odds with “illusion,” we can assume that Gadamer is saying that “illusion” and “method” are *not* at odds, but somehow equivalent. Method, for Gadamer, only succeeds in revealing illusion; illusion is the only phenomenon that method effectively perceives. Hermeneutics at least dislodges the conceit that suffering and method might somehow be compatible.

Having suggested that suffering makes method problematic, I would like to back-track and offer one newly configured method that has not as yet, to my knowledge, been applied to the discipline of spirituality. This method *may* open the possibility of “sitting” with the Joban questions of suffering in a less equivocal way.

In his William James lectures given at Harvard in 1955, J. L. Austin first publically proposed his idea that speech itself is a form of action, a “performative utterance” that in itself can generate and direct action. Austin claimed that whenever we say something, we perform a number of actions. For instance, we perform a “locutionary act” simply by saying a sentence. We perform an “illocutionary act” in speaking a sentence that in turn achieves effects in others. We participate in a “perlocutionary act” that affects the speech of an addressee. For instance, depending on the context in which I say, “Oh, God,” I may be performing any number of locutionary acts: “praying, expostulating, naming a new-found deity or Hollywood film, blaspheming, or concluding an argument, etc.” The act may then have the illocutionary or perlocutionary results, “of ingratiating, upsetting, damning myself, informing others, persuading others, etc.”²⁰ Writing in 1983, John R. Searle noted that there are five things one can do with language and the acts embedded in language. These include, “telling people how things are (assertive); telling them to do things (directives); committing yourself to doing things (commissives); expressing your feelings and attitudes (expressives); and bringing about changes in the world through your utterance (declarations).”²¹

Whether speech act theory is a passing fad or in the early stages of at least a minor revolution in linguistic and interpretive method, I cannot say. But I do believe that the first creation story in Genesis is the mother of all speech acts. Today, this assertive, commissive speech act is still speaking, still acting, still creating. Extending the metaphor, the second creation story in Genesis is our mother in stillbirth: this second, directive speech act is the after-birth of all speech acts. The later Augustine, unfortunately, gave shape to this stillbirth in the form of doctrine, specifically that of original sin with this doctrine’s consequent denial of innocent suffering. As the new mother of all baptism for the stillborn, the gospel of St. John actually affirms Job’s innocent suffering. We find no “answer” to Joban suffering in John’s gospel; we find instead this strange, expressive, declarative, incarnate speech act baptizing all those already once born dead. Thus in Job we do not find an “answer” to suffering: in his book, *Evils of Theodicy*, Terrence Tilley writes that, “The book of Job offers no solutions to problems of suffering. Job is not a book of answers, but a text of warning, perhaps even a text of terror.”²²

If not answers, perhaps we can ask that in the context of suffering, our methods offer at least something like guidance. I believe speech act theory holds possibility because it is at least linked to an ancient culture of guidance already present within the Christian spiritual tradition. Douglas Burton-Christie, in turning for inspiration for method to the *Sayings* of the fourth century desert fathers and mothers, uncovers both the cost (suffering) and the shaping knife (love) of the desert formation traditions. In the process, Burton-

Christie finds early speech act as a form of desert spiritual guidance. He writes, for instance, “For the monks, the parameters of the interpretive quest were set by their two primary questions, ‘Speak to me a word’ [speech], and ‘What should I do?’ [act] These questions determined the participative shape of the search for God, and the demanding cost of fulfilling that quest.”²³ “Speak to me a word,” is speech in search of active wisdom; “What should I do?” is the quest for moral directive. The “word” of guidance and the “act” that guides—whether uttered and enacted by ancients of the desert or from the desert-like postmodern landscape of contemporary thought—may be our best methods for entertaining the illusion-shattering capacity of suffering.

But beyond the possibility of guidance, we can hope for little from suffering beyond what it is again, as William Styron describes it, soul-crushing pain. It is no coincidence that Job too, from his own desert of dust and ash, asks both his friends and his God to “speak to me a word” and “what should I do?” The “answers” he receives based on these questions seem to be more about loss, grief, and pain than about direction, more about ever-new ways of expressing suffering than about discernment, guidance, or illumination. As scholars we need the guidance of method. Method is our Comforter. But suffering—a major object of our study—comforts little. In fact, as scholars, truly entertaining suffering we are as hollow as a bone, desperately constructing agencies of method, groping for the simple charity of guidance. This is harsh to be sure, but suffering, as Robert Burns writes, is a desolate brother of comfort.

Entertainment: Robert Burns, the Scottish poet and lyricist, in a letter writes:

Lord, what is Man! Day follows night, and night comes after day, only to curse him with life which gives him no pleasure. Today, in the luxuriance of health, exulting in the enjoyment of existence; In a few days, perhaps in a few hours, loaded with conscious painful being, counting the tardy pace of the lingering moments and refusing or denied a Comforter.²⁴

SUFFERING SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

Suffering is and has always been a part of Christian spirituality. It has always been “entertained” as a natural part of the spiritual journey. As Robert Ellsberg has written, “the saints do not teach us how to avoid suffering; they teach us how to suffer.”²⁵

Apatheia, in its most positive sense, is the mark of a healthy soul; it is life lived at the *center* of Fortune’s wheel. Boethius, in his *Consolations of Philosophy* written in prison, writes of living on the edge of Fortune’s wheel, clinging to *things*. This clinging can give us the illusion of rising or the illusion of falling, depending not on our own ability to grasp hold of the wheel but depend-

ing only on where we find ourselves in the wheel's cycle.²⁶

Philosophically, Boethius is a stoic. Job is not a stoic. The stoic philosopher, Seneca, for instance writes that:

Pain is trivial if opinion has added nothing to it; . . . by thinking it trivial, you will make it so. Everything depends on our opinion; ambition, luxury, and avarice are regulated by opinion. It is according to opinion that we suffer.²⁷

For Seneca, *apatheia* is that state in which we add nothing of opinion to suffering; that is, the ability to live at the center of the wheel. This is not Job. For Job, to suffer *is* to have an opinion; suffering is not suffering, for Job, lest it have an opinion. Job has an opinion of his friends: "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes" (13:12). He has an opinion of his God:

You put my feet in the stocks,
and wrath in all my paths;
you set a bond to the soles of my feet.
One wastes away like a rotten thing,
like a garment that is moth-eaten.

Job 13: 27-28

But another tradition in Christian spirituality also takes suffering very seriously. This is the tradition perhaps most famously exemplified by St. John of the Cross and now perhaps also by St. Thérèse of Lisieux. I will look for a moment to St. John's imagery and teaching and his depiction of suffering as a "dark night."

Not unlike the tradition of St. Gregory the Great, St. John of the Cross is convinced that the dark nights of the soul, both active and passive, somehow purify and illuminate the human person and unite the soul to divine providence. His word for the process of unity is "love": "a soul journeys toward perfect union with God," St. John writes, "through love."²⁸

Job's own dark night strips him and renders incomprehensible his life, his death, and his God. This happens also to St. John of the Cross of course—"nada, nada, nada, nada," he says as he pictures it in the Ascent of Mt. Carmel—but, whereas St. John's experience of darkness leads to a "perfect union with God . . . through love," Job knows nothing of the path of love. Job knows nothing of seraphim—the *angels* of love—and their path of "holy, holy, holy" (Isaiah 6), a path that has potential to add positive content to "nada, nada, nada." But who, given Gethsemane and Golgotha, is in a position to judge the relative merit of suffering and love, to judge the merit of the blessing to be found within the holy or within the hopeless?:

I was at ease, and God broke me in two;
 God seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;
 set me up as his target;
 God's archers surround me.
 God slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy;
 pours out my gall on the ground. . . .
 My spirit is broken, my days are extinct,
 the grave is ready for me. . . .
 My eye has grown dim from grief
 and all my members are like a shadow. . . .
 My days are past, my plans are broken off. Job 6: 12-13; 17:1; 7; 11

This lament of Job's is, of course, very like many of the Psalms. But unlike the vast majority of the Psalms, Job experiences no mercy, no relief, no redemptive or divine retribution. The mercy of love, the comfort of retribution simply do not inform Job's encounter with the experience of suffering or with the "archers" that surround him. Or, in Christological terms, Job encounters a cross with no redemptive capacity.

An analogy to Job's dark night is today's dark night of the planet. In his novel, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy writes of the darkening night of the planet in this way:

He'd [the unnamed father, or "Job"] had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.²⁹

Does Cormac McCarthy write of illusion? Does Job speak of illusion? Flannery O'Connor knows of McCarthy's "drawing down like something trying to preserve heat." Diagnosed with lupus, the same degenerative disease that killed her father, O'Connor died in Georgia, the state where she was born, at the age of thirty-nine. Suffering was what she called her "true country," and as she wrote in a letter to a friend:

I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow.³⁰

Of Course—I prayed—
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird—had stamped her foot—
And cried “Give Me”—
My Reason—Life—
I had not had—but for Yourself—
‘Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Adam’s Tomb—
Merry, and Naught and gay and numb—
Than this smart Misery.³¹

SUFFERING FAITH, SUFFERING HOPE, SUFFERING LOVE

I ran across this wonderful quotation from Cyril of Jerusalem, instructing catechumens: “The dragon is at the side of the road watching those who pass. Take care lest he devour you! You are going to the Father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.”³² The opposite of illusion has, I believe, something to do with that dragon, necessary to pass. It is necessary because our journey to the Father of Souls takes us just there where the dragon is watching; to get there we *must* pass.

Job is set on a journey. That path, his journey, is suffering. “Love” is not mentioned in the poem of Job: the poem is not about love, it is about dragons. The book of Job is not structured according to the transformative capacities of love. The example of St. Thésèse of Lisieux comes to mind. As many suggest, St. Thésèse is a saint of transformative love. St. Thésèse is graced with the internal logic of love in a way that Job is not. This eternally young and preternaturally sage woman from France walked her own road. She did so, however, in a still very medieval culture in which suffering itself was valued as a sign of holiness. This is not so in the culture and story of Job. In fact, just the opposite is the case. For the friends, Job’s suffering is a sure and certain sign of the lack of holiness, the lack of righteousness: for the friends, Job’s suffering is only sin and unrighteousness. Job’s friends try to convince him that *he* is the dragon. Job of course will not accept this. St. Thésèse of Lisieux is on the road to the Mother of Souls where she discovers that point on the cross where suffering and love converge. It takes a saint, I suppose, to find, accept and live into this convergence. But it takes holy Job to set-up the psychic, somatic, and spiritual *necessity* for the cross in the first place; the necessity for love to converge with suffering. But for Job himself, suffering does not converge with love. In Job,

love is not illusion's opposite. Though we can say that Job points to where love *might* be, love is simply not on the road Job travels.

This may seem odd to us today. But it is only so because we insist on throwing love into the face of this dragon of suffering. But the options? For many, love is not available in the time of dragons.

What of hope? Job shows us the internal logic whereby hope is actually destroyed by this dragon and any renewal of hope becomes, ironically, simply a child of the dragon itself. As with love, we may have a hard time accepting this today. When "happiness" is a "certain unalienable right," hope, we tend to believe, is at the very least a reasonable unalienable expectation. Again, this is not the case with Job. Holy Job, upon entering the dwelling place of God and finding the dwelling place filled with suffering, must abandon hope.

What of faith, that little step-child to the "most perfect of these," Flannery O'Connor again, in her no-nonsense way, helps us into the infernal night-vision of Jobean faith. She writes:

Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment; Camus' hero cannot accept the divinity of Christ, because of the massacre of the innocents. In this popular piety, we mark our aim in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, faith. In the absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness. [But] it is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror.³³

Is faith then our best aim at illusion? Perhaps it is. But I would most be inclined to trust Job's aim because Job found that the dragon of sorrow is also a chameleon. Faith is blind, in the best sense. Faith of the kind O'Connor describes, nonetheless, still sees or senses the dragon. But faith cannot always detect the dragon's changing, chameleon colors, which in effect render it invisible even to the eye of faith. We can say however that while Job's faith detects illusion, it is only his suffering that most truly opposes illusion. Nothing compromises the illusion that everything is illusion like suffering. Nothing compromises Stoic opinion like suffering. Nothing compromises method opposed to truth like suffering. Nothing compromises a distant God like suffering.

NOTES

1. Translation by Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (New York & London: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Translations of book of Job, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, #536, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 262.

3. Susan E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?: Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11.
4. This and following citation from Job 3 in *The Book of Job*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1987).
5. S. Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, Vol. III.2, 35.3.4, trans. J. Bliss (Oxford: John Henry Parker; F. and J. Rivington, London, 1850), 664.
6. Randall Jarrell, "90 North," lines 29-33 in *Randall Jarrell: The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 113-4.
7. Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986). Cf. 141-54.
8. C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, from *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. II, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 40.
9. Jung, *Answer to Job*, 45.
10. William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (New York: W. W., Norton, 1983), 62.
11. St. Ambrose, "The Prayer of Job and David," Book Two, 1.2, 2.3 in *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*, trans. Michael P. McHugh (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 353, 354.
12. St. Gregory, *Morals*, gives numerous warnings against an "inactive soul" I, 6.23.40 and "fatal tranquility," cf. III.1, 23.24.47-48; III.1, 24..9.23; III.1, 26.34.62 while God is performing "the Divine medicine", III.2, 33.19.35.
13. Carol Straw, *Gregory the Great* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 236-56.
14. The "anthropological approach" enjoys a checkered history in the on-going development of methodologies for the study of Christian spirituality: Sandra Schneiders points out the advantages of the approach in "Spirituality in the Academy." *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 684; Bernard McGinn surveys and calls the anthropological approach into question in "The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline," in Elizabeth A Dreyer & Mark S. Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 32-33; while Schneiders pulls back from "anthropology" in favor of "hermeneutics" as methodological approaches in "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality," *Minding the Spirit*, 49-60.
15. Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach," 50.
16. Walter Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Sciences Religieuses* 12 (1983), 135-6.
17. Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," in *Minding the Spirit*, 11.
18. Cf. Mary Frohlich, R.S.C.J., "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline and Spirituality, Revisiting Questions of Spirituality and Method," in *Minding the Spirit*, 65-78; Elizabeth Liebert, "The Role of Practice in the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *Minding the Spirit*, 79-99.
19. Belden C. Lane, "Spider as Metaphor: Attending to the Symbol-Making Process in the Academic Study of Christian Spirituality," in *Minding the Spirit*, 100-17.
20. Terrence W. Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 9-10.
21. John R. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 44. Cf. W. P. Alston.
22. Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy*, 110.
23. Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Cost of Interpretation: Sacred Texts and Ascetic Practice in Desert Spirituality," 106 in *Minding the Spirit*, 100-7.
24. Robert Burns, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, vol. 1, 1780-1789 (letter 374, December 3, 1789), 2nd edition, ed. G. Ross Roy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 457.

25. Robert Ellsberg, *The Saint's Guide to Happiness* (New York: North Point Press, 2003), 104.
26. Cf. Boethius, *Consolations of Philosophy*, III.7ff. Jon Whitman notes that Boethius uses the allegory of Fortune's turning wheel as "the starting point for his own compositional design" (*Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], 112). Cited in Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).
27. Seneca, *L. Annaei Senecae ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales [Moral Epistles]*, Lib IX, Epistle 78.13-14, ed. Achilles Beltrami (Romae: Typis Publicae Officinae Polygraphicae, 1949), 331-2. My translation.
28. St. John of the Cross, "Prologue," *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* in Keiran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodrigues, O.C.D., trans., *The Collected Works of John of the Cross* (Washington D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 69.
29. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 75.
30. Flannery O'Connor, *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 115.
31. Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, #376, p. 179-80.
32. Flannery O'Connor, "Letter To A," January 1, 1956 in Flannery O'Connor, *Complete Works*, Sally Fitzgerald, ed. (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 979.
33. Flannery O'Connor, "Introduction to a *Memoir of Mary Ann*" in *Complete Works*, 830.