

The Way of Suffering

A Reasoning of the Heart

Jerome A. Miller

IT IS IMPORTANT TO MAKE CLEAR at the beginning the perspective from which I will be trying to explore the question of God's existence. I think we approach this question most appropriately when we understand that it has to do with the least accessible regions of the human heart. The French philosopher Pascal claimed that "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know," but perhaps he underestimated the capacity of reason to take the heart seriously and reflect on the insights that might lie concealed in our most heartfelt realizations. The word *heart*, as it comes to us from the Hebraic tradition,¹ does not refer exclusively to our emotions but rather to the very core of the self, that mysterious center of our being that is so inexplicably opaque and distant from ourselves.

When the very center of the self is deeply affected, as happens for instance to a young person when he or she falls deeply in love for the first time, one's whole way of thinking about the world, as well as one's whole way of feeling it, is profoundly and

permanently altered. No part of the self is exempt from such an experience. One is touched in depths one did not know one had but whose reality one cannot possibly doubt. That is why falling in love can be so devastating to us in our youth and why the upheaval it causes has always been symbolized by a wound. The person one was before has, to some degree, ceased to exist—and so has the world one used to live in.

Any experience that affects one in the core of one's being, like being in love or being in intimate proximity to death, enables one to realize things one had never truly recognized before. For example, the youthful longing to be with the beloved (described so well by Plato)² simply makes it impossible for the person experiencing it to take very seriously many matters that up till then seemed to be of paramount importance. When you are being affected in the core by something, you realize that your whole life is at stake and that in some very profound sense nothing else matters. Such an experience enables you to see the superficiality and unimportance of your ordinary worries. This is why Plato considered being in love a profoundly religious experience (see Pieper 1964). He thought it could help transport a young person to a new level of being from which she could begin

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to realize that selling a lot of insurance premiums is not the most important thing in life.

But if this is true, it means that such an experience, precisely because it affects the whole of the self, should not be treated as if it were nothing more than an emotional episode. To *realize* that the person one loves is much more, infinitely more important than insurance premiums requires an *insight*, a recognition of a profound truth that might very well lead to a radical change in one's whole way of living. I do not think it is preposterous to suggest that human beings can learn something from their deepest wounds and exultations if they take the time to reflect deeply on them.

It seems to me that suffering of the kind undergone in a profound experience of love or death is full of intimations. Is it not possible for reason to follow these intimations rather than to silence them? If such experiences enable us to realize things in our heart of hearts, are not these the lessons we should study long and hard in the hope that they might begin to make us wise? The core of the self in the Hebraic sense is only capable of weeping and rejoicing because it harbors the deepest realizations we come to in this mortal life. Perhaps, contrary to Pascal's epigram, one of the great tasks of reason is precisely to mine this precious ore, not leave it buried. The heart has its reasons which reason can begin to plumb, even if it can never finish fathoming them.

The question of God's existence is, I think, a matter that is capable of affecting us in our heart of hearts. It is one of those ultimate matters, like love and death, that can come to matter ultimately to us in the center of our selves. This is because what we mean by the word *God* is a being that deserves to be worshipped, and the one thing worship cannot be is

half-hearted. Worship has to be extravagant (see Pieper 1963:58-59). In the end, the martyrs and mystics are right at least about this: To love God, if God exists, requires one to spend one's self completely and without reservation. This is why the philosopher Bernard Lonergan (1972:104-7) describes religion as falling in love with God. One

cannot worship and hold the core of one's being in reserve. It is true, of course, that apparent acts of worship are performed all the time that do not in fact represent such a complete donation of self on the part of the worshipper. But in such acts there is a double-heartedness that is contrary to the very essence of what is being vowed. In bowing down before something, one is trying to convey that even the gift of one's whole self is insignificant compared to

what the object of one's worship deserves. Seen from this perspective, the question of whether God exists can be translated to read: Is there a reality that deserves to be loved with such extravagance?

Let me say first as frankly and delicately as I can that for most of us, in our heart of hearts, God does not exist. Or, if God does exist there, it has little effect on us: we keep our hearts as buried as we can so that they will not interfere with the ordinary business of living. In the one case, God has never become real for us, has never ceased to be an abstraction; God is something we talk about because we have learned the word. In the other case, something has happened to us at some point that broke through the surface and penetrated the most secret, intimate part of the self. Some agony, some joy, some terrible suffering, or some transporting ecstasy made us think, at least while it was happening, that we were in the presence of something of absolutely transcendent importance. We may not remember with any

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clarity what brought on this experience. We may not know how to retrieve it or repeat it. It may have left no discernible effect on our lives precisely because it happened at so deep a level, and we do not ordinarily live at the depth of our selves. We do not know our own hearts.

And now, perhaps, we begin to glimpse the real issue. We hide our hearts from ourselves. We do not want to know the wisdom we could learn from the heart; we would like to mind our own business and have nothing to do with it. The wounds love has inflicted are too deep, the dread the heart harbors is too perilous, for us to want to think about what it might teach us. We know just enough about the heart's core to keep as much distance from it as possible. Its joy, just as much as its weeping, is too overwhelming for us to bear. That is why we do not often talk to each other in the deepest way. Perhaps twice or three times in our lives we break through and acknowledge to one another the truths we have kept hidden from even ourselves. Sometimes this happens on one's deathbed, sometimes not even there. One might conclude that the heart must be a profoundly fragile thing if we take such pains to keep it concealed from even our own awareness. But in fact it is not its fragility that terrifies us but its power—the piercing truth of its deepest wounds, the unbearable weight of its regrets and longings, the terrible import of its darknesses and silences. It is all of this we want to be ignorant of, at almost any cost. We do not want the deepest truths within us known to us.

But, try as we might, we cannot help being haunted by them. In the darkest, truest hours of our lives, the things we keep secret from ourselves catch up with us. One of the implacable laws of the universe is that the deepest things are our masters. We try to protect our hearts from them, but we would have to cut our hearts out to free ourselves from their haunting intimations. We want, more than anything else, to be in control of our lives, but being in control requires that there be nothing deeper in us than what we can cope with. And what, in the end, does this will to control accomplish—

except to make those most obsessed by it the most deeply haunted of all souls?

Suffering, Aeschylus says in *Agamemnon*, is the greatest spiritual teacher. It is through suffering that one learns whether God exists. It is no academic matter. I do not mean that one can learn nothing from the philosophical arguments, but that to do so one has to find, deep in the heart's core, the terrible realizations of which these arguments are a faint and not always reliable echo.

I

THE WAY TO FIND OUR HEART IS TO RETURN TO our most haunting moments, those times when all the things we have kept hidden from ourselves seem on the verge of breaking through our long, laborious avoidance of them. How close we come then to a moment of truth—and how quickly we usually recoil from it.

What would one have to do to cross that borderline instead of moving away from it? Shrouded as these matters are, the answer is all too concrete and obvious. One must allow oneself to be alone, even to the point of being physically solitary. But it is precisely when what haunts us presses in on us most intimately that we flee solitude most quickly. We do so with a special desperation whenever something happens in our lives that makes death real to us.³ I am not thinking here only of the physical death of someone we have deeply loved, but of what happens to us when something we have centered our lives on, something infinitely precious to us, is irremediably lost.

In many cases, this infinitely precious thing is a relationship with another person. But it can also be the failure of a project that had become one's life work. In any of these cases, one is losing something that meant more to one than the whole world. When someone or something becomes the center of one's life—the reality in relation to which everything else is viewed and evaluated—then, in one's heart of hearts, nothing else matters. One would rather lose

everything than this reality that is not just one being among others in one's world but something like the radiating center that makes one's whole world possible. Romantic love of the type Plato described is not the only kind of affection that causes such a profound attachment. It can also exist between parent and child, as is made clear when the child who sees her parents as the center of her world does something terribly wrong and so feels she has forfeited forever the love that made all her confidence in herself possible. It is also clear from the kind of unspeakable grief parents suffer when the child in whom they see the perfect reflection of their love for each other dies before their eyes without having even reached the age when she could put her suffering into words.

There are those of us to whom none of those things have happened—the child who is the light of our lives has not died, the person we first gave our hearts to in our youth remains beside us even now. Our worlds are still intact; the thing at their center that all else depends on still gives off its life-sustaining radiance. We have never been brought face to face with the utter emptiness that would be left by its absence. Yet however reluctant we might be to acknowledge it, none of us in the end will be able to find a way around this emptiness. Whatever the object of our love, we will have to suffer the mortal wound of its loss. That is why death is not just one example among others of what it means to suffer. For suffering, as distinguished from simple physical pain, means the convulsion of grief the heart undergoes when it is bereft of everything. And what does it mean to lose the thing that meant more than everything and made the world possible, if it does not mean to undergo a death?

We are accustomed to thinking that death, which we identify with physical extinction, is completely inaccessible to us, since we have not literally undergone it yet. We are, we think, too far this side of it to know anything of what death is really like. And yet even those who have not yet suffered deeply the irreparable loss of what we most love have been close enough to the experience of death to be

haunted by it. What keeps us from knowing more of it is not the impossibility of being acquainted with it until literal death comes to us but rather our recoiling from the intimations we already have of its dreadfulness. Death is all too real to us—right underneath the surface of all the avoidances we use to keep from realizing it.

To see that this is so, I would not have you think of the kind of radical rupture I have been discussing, the kind that tears your heart right out of you. I would have you think of those moments that only you can pinpoint, the moments that catch you unaware as you brush your teeth or wait to make a left-hand turn, the moment you pause on the landing on your way to bed, or when you read the last scene of a tragic story, when perhaps for no discernible reason you have an irrefutable intimation of your own nothingness. Such intimations come to us unexpectedly and inexplicably.

Nothingness, it seems, does not need a crisis to make itself felt. It takes advantage of the smallest, least noticed openings in our everyday lives. What could be more innocuous, more serenely refreshing, than a brief walk down one's own tree-lined street in the evening twilight? And then, as if from nowhere, one feels a speechless dread rubbing itself against one's heart—and it seems then that it somehow comes *from* the heart, like the deeply buried secret that is at the root of everything. For a moment one knows that one's whole life is not what it seems and that underneath it all is a deeper truth too devastating to know. And so we come home sooner than we intended from our evening walks and resume our domestic routines without even realizing we have had a disquieting inkling of our own deaths.

The desire to recoil from proximity to death and to resume our ordinary habits becomes, of course, much more compelling when one has undergone the kind of radical disruption that causes the end of one's world. We know how eager friends are in such situations to relieve the terrible sense of being bereft, of being left with nothing, which must follow upon the loss of what one had loved more than everything. Friends fear most the dangers of a long, despairing



Too Late. Oil on canvas by Charles Arthur Fries, 1896.

Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mrs. Alice Fries King in memory of her father.

withdrawal from the ordinary routines that up to now gave order and purpose to the bereft person's everyday life. Their solicitude is understandable. By virtue of their own intimations of it, they have an inkling of how harrowing an ordeal it would be to be utterly alone with one's own nothingness. And who could be more horrified than the bereft person himself who knows, as his friends do not, that the experience of nothingness comes not from the outside like a trespassing stranger but from the fissure in his own heart?

It is possible to seal that fissure and consider it healed. One can resume ordinary life even after the

terrible loss of what had up to then been its center. Something else can take its place fairly quickly. There are, after all, other people to be in love with, other children one can bear and nurture to fill the gap left by one who is lost. But must we not admit that this way of healing the heart is also a betrayal of it? For what does it mean to make something the radiating center of one's life if it does not mean experiencing the unrelieved darkness caused by the loss of it? The only way to avoid that darkness is to suppress the anguish that is finally inseparable from love (see Lewis 1960:167-70). Love always asks in the end that you be willing to let it turn to sorrow

and that you let that sorrow bear you all the way down to the very bottom of its poverty. To lose what meant more than everything, to allow that loss to devastate you in the very center of your being, is to become destitute. To have nothing. To have nothingness itself as the sole companion of your solitude.

Because it removes one from the distractions and diversions of everydayness, some degree of physical solitude constitutes a precondition for this companionship with nothingness. But a more essential condition is the willingness to be devastated, to let the mortal wounds penetrate one's heart so deeply that it is broken completely open. The deepest lessons the heart has to deliver to us become accessible only when it is ruptured. These are terrible lessons, the kind that fill one with nausea. We like to think our lives would be happier if we could find a way to avoid learning them; but the only way to do that is to close one's heart and keep it closed, so that nothing gets in or out of it. It is terrible to put into words the one real alternative to this avoidance. But I see no way to get around what seems to be the harshest, most merciless truth about the human heart—the fact that, to keep it open, once it has been pierced, one must allow it to remain an open wound.

II

DEPRESSION IS THE WORD WE HAVE COME TO USE for the kind of withdrawal into oneself that grief can cause. It is symptomatic of our culture's attitude toward suffering in general that it tends to view this deepest, most intimate suffering as a psychological disorder. From a therapeutic point of view, at least as it is popularly conceived,⁴ no reaction in the face of crisis is more harmful than an introspective self-

absorption that detaches one further and further from the routines that the crisis interrupted. On this account, the longer one sits brooding about one's loss, the more paralyzed one becomes. The alternative is to get on with one's life.

But what does real living consist of? Evidently, to really live, one must learn to treat the most radical rupture of one's life as no more than an interruption. Our therapeutic culture has taught us the ideal response to even the most intimately personal crisis: one must be strong enough to "handle" it, to "manage" it, to "come to grips" with it, to "deal" with it. Being able to "deal with death," for instance, is now supposed to be part of our repertoire of techniques for "coping" with life.⁵ And

to cope with death—someone else's or even my own—means precisely not to be devastated by it.

The underlying motive for therapy as so conceived is to seal the fissure in the heart so that it can return to normal life intact. And this means that, though it tries its best to unravel the knots that paralyze the heart, it does so to prevent the unraveling of normal life itself. Such recoveries can be achieved, of course—but only by again closing up the heart that, in the time of crisis, lies open to its deepest truths. If we are hopeful of such recoveries, and drawn to those who promise them, it is because we want, more than anything else, to be in control of our lives, and never more urgently than when the very center that makes them whole is lost.

The anguish lies within, not without. It wells up in us without words, without hope of solace or remedy, without being able to give us any clear reasons or explanations for itself, as if it were the terrible cry of nothingness itself. We have seen it reflected perhaps once or twice in each other's eyes. It is the most terrible thing in human life to look at because we know in our heart of hearts it is the echo

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of what we have heard in ourselves. As long as that cry lasts and our ears are open to it, we know we have broken through the artifices and pretensions of our even-keeled lives to something that is not of this world and has to do with our own deaths. These are the most real moments of our lives.

To remain real, the full length and breadth and depth of anguish they reveal has to be suffered. And suffering is the exact opposite of being in control. It means opening oneself to what is horrifying, instead of recoiling from it. In trying to manage grief, or suffering in general, one is trying to get rid of the very thing that makes grief grievous—its capacity to upset one in the core of one's being. To be stricken by grief means precisely to have one's managerial control over one's life incapacitated by it. The therapeutic effort to bring grief into the open, to talk about death without our old hesitations and reluctances, is often motivated by a desire so to transform the experience of death that we can undergo it without being ultimately upset by it. But the sufferer may be close to discovering a truth that the therapeutic way of thinking never leads us to suspect—that our whole ordinary way of life, with all its evasions and avoidances, is in some profound sense unreal. Suffering has a way of turning everything upside down. And from that overturned perspective, it makes no sense to resume one's ordinary life—because one knows now the truths it was designed to keep hidden. In that sense, someone who truly encounters death can never recover, for she cannot resume the way of life that sheltered her from every intimation of it.

If my criticism of the therapeutic attitude toward the experience of death seems harsh, I would mitigate it by emphasizing its terrible irony. This attitude wishes, more almost than anything else, to take the reasons of the heart seriously and to mend its deepest wounds. But more than anything else, it wishes there were no wounds. And so it fails to uncover the truth we now suspect—that our deepest wounds are not the problem but the answer, that they can teach us things not to be learned through any easier pedagogy, and that the key to wisdom is

not at all to recover from them but to let them speak even if at first they do so in the inarticulate tongue of anguish.

III

IT IS IN ANGUISH THAT THE WORD *GOD* CEASES TO be an abstraction. Few if any of us come to God completely firsthand, through the untutored promptings of the heart or the unaided exercise of the mind. From sermons half-heard, from clichés repeated too often, from Christmas melodies and good-night prayers, from radio preachers passed by while we search for a music station, but most of all from the brief words we hear even as children over the bodies of the dead, we glean a picture of this provident Father figure who will not fail us because he protects every falling sparrow. He will be there, we are told, in the center of whatever crisis the future holds in store, to prevent it from devastating us.

The promise of that presence is the promise that our world will never be broken, that the garden of our innocence will be guarded and tended even in the worst of weathers. For some this is the deepest, most cherished of all beliefs. For many of us, it is something we believe halfheartedly, absorb almost unconsciously; we give it, as we get older, hardly a second thought. It does not become real to us until something happens that renders us as helpless, as incompetent as children.

It is then, I think, that the child in us begins to realize for the first time that this God of our childhood does not exist, though we clutch desperately to any uplifting hope or saving belief. As Freud (1961:15–24) has pointed out, the belief in a paternal God who will protect us from upsetting events seems to have been especially designed for healing the deepest hemorrhages in our lives. We reach for God when we know all our own therapies are of no avail. Although this is no argument against God's existence, it does unravel the logic in our hearts that gives rise to a therapeutic belief in him.

God is the last thing we can grasp to shield us from an experience of nothingness.

Those who have suffered a mortal loss, those who have allowed it to shatter them, know that God does not prevent it from happening. Our lives do not turn out as we hope and expect them to, in our innocence. Our deepest loves are shattered; the things we love most of all are taken away from us. And the deeper our belief in God before this happens, the more shattered that belief is afterward. The God we would like to have, the God who would prevent our undergoing the deepest anguishes, does not exist.

One who has suffered such anguish may still believe in the God of her childhood who was expected to protect her from being devastated. But she believes in him bitterly, as the God who failed. And what smolders in most of us, to the degree that we are no longer children and yet believe in our childhood God, is an unspoken accusation of this God who has allowed us to be mortally wounded by allowing our world, in one way or another, to be shattered. Every once in a while, when our tenderest spot is rubbed the wrong way, this resentment surfaces in a brief, unguarded outburst. One feels guilty for allowing it to escape; one knows one ought not feel contempt for God. In this secret resentment, however, we take the God of our childhood seriously for the last time.

But deeper than any belief in that God, deeper than the bitter resentment such belief turns into, is the shivering horror of nothingness itself which undermines our whole world, God and all. Underneath our therapeutic beliefs, however fondly we hold onto them, lies concealed the dreadful intimation that nothingness really is the final word and all else just an avoidance of it. It is despair that has the deepest ring of truth. Ordinarily we allow ourselves to hear only its faintest echoes. But it waits there inside us like an unanswerable retort, like a feeling of nausea we keep down. The God we would like to believe in does not make it go away. The protecting promises God is said to have made have turned, each one of them, into a betrayal. The very void he was supposed to fill swallows him up.

When God is taken away, one has nothing left. One assumed one's life made sense, that it held together as an intelligible whole, like a garden watched over by a reliable overseer. Now one knows it is not like that at all. For at the bottom of it all is my nothingness, my terminal incompetence, my humiliating inability, on my deathbed, to control even my own bowels. We who ought to be superior to nothingness are never more than sufferers of it.

I do not think such despair is something we should be ashamed of. Perhaps what we should be ashamed of is our attempts to deny its presence in us, in that silence that we use our radios, our Walkmen, our televisions, but most of all our own chatter, to block out. We do not know, until such silence falls, how much we have lied to ourselves. How can we spend our lives avoiding nothingness unless we secretly know it is there, silent, unanswerable, impossible to expunge, like an inoperable tumor in the heart of being itself? We try our best to pretend, when it catches us unaware, that we do not recognize it. But during the long, long silence of our dying, nothingness will perhaps wring from us the horrifying admission that it has been our intimate all along. And then the humiliating emptiness of our ordinary world will finally be too obvious to deny and too upsetting to ignore. That, and not our literal death, is what we live in horror of.

To give up in despair all one's attempts to avoid nothingness is not, as we ordinarily suppose, a cowardly surrender. It is rather the courageous act that facing our nothingness requires of us. Does this mean despair is the deepest human experience? Is there nothing beyond it—or is there, perhaps, a deeper experience of nothingness which despair itself does not enable us to reach?

IV

DESPAIR IS NECESSARY, I HAVE ARGUED, IF WE ARE not to backtrack from the void in ourselves. But even though it makes one give up all hope in the ordinary world, despair still remains bound in a paradoxical

way to that world and wedded to its presuppositions. It brings one to the edge of a final precipice, but it does not allow one to fall over.

It is true that, in despairing, I give up all the sustaining hopes and uplifting beliefs that up to now have given me control of my life. But despair also counsels that without these hopes and beliefs, life must be absurd. It brings me to the edge of an abyss and makes me look straight down at my own nothingness. But if I despair because of this nothingness, it is because I am still viewing it from the vantage point of my ordinary life which is shattered by it. And this means that I have still not opened myself fully to it, or to the possibility that a real acceptance of it might alter my whole understanding of my life. In despairing because my ordinary world has been irreparably shattered, I am still paradoxically holding onto this world—and avoiding nothingness. My moments of despair teach me that my life, as I have conceived it, is absurd. But what is beyond despair's ken is the possibility that it is not life itself but my whole ordinary way of living it that is absurd.

What if the answers to our deepest questions, the mysteries at the bottom of all our most heartfelt intimations, are to be found only *down there*, where we have never thought to look for them, *down there*, in the very nothingness from which even despair pulls back in horror? Haven't we known all along that this ordinary world of ours, with its loves and anxieties, its amusements and worries, however whole it ever was, was never all there is? And the things we loved most deeply, the loss of which has brought us to this precipice of despair, did we not love them precisely because they gave us such infinitely precious intimations of something we could

not see or name and yet were beckoned by?

Where else do we have to look, now that we have lost those intimations, in all their preciousness, except as deeply as we can into our very loss of them? We loved them so because we felt, when we were in the presence of the child who is now gone from us, the beloved who is now numbered among the dead, that we were as close as we could ever come in this

life to what is truly, fully, unmistakably *real*. We felt, when in their presence, that nothing else mattered except their reality. How can we now get closer to what is ultimately and finally real except by opening ourselves as deeply as we can to whatever truth is hidden in their loss? If nothingness is the final reality, this is the time to find it out and to be faithful in that way to what we have loved, if that is the only fidelity left us. Our hearts have never truly belonged to the world we

ordinarily live in. They belong to another universe, which becomes real in our ultimate moments.

So the question must be broached—what does one realize when one removes even the final guardrail, the barrier of despair, that protects one from fully experiencing one's own nothingness? Simply that this nothingness which has haunted me at the most unexpected moments, and broken through to me in moments of crisis, this nothingness which I have done my best to keep hidden and separate from me—this nothingness is I myself.⁶ I have always wanted to treat nothingness as a trespasser sneaking up on me unfairly or to look down on it from a position superior to it. I have never wanted to see in it the mirror image of my own poverty and destitution. But, in and of myself, I have never been anything but this simple nothingness lacking all worth and importance. And into this

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poverty, our utter
unworthiness to be at all, our
nothingness, in and of
ourselves, before God
created us.**



Before the Black Sun of Melancholy. Lithograph by Odilon Redon (French, 1840–1916), 1882.

Stickney Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1920.1571. ©1991 The Art Institute of Chicago; all rights reserved.

nothingness that I have always been and am now and will always be, into this abyss that is my original and permanent condition, has been poured the gift of existing which I did nothing to earn or deserve. What can this mean, then, but that this nothingness which I have spent my life avoiding is the most priceless of gems because, when I finally accept my identity with it, it enables me to experience existence itself as an unspeakable grace.

I hope the metaphysical language in which I have cast this realization does not obscure the profound simplicity of its import: it is the realization that God creates us and that this is the most unimaginable act of generosity because it is directed toward us in our nothingness. In traditional philosophical descriptions of the creative act it is explained that God creates from *nothing*. But only in a personal realization of the kind I have tried to describe does that philosophical abstraction acquire its mortal and mortifying impact. It is not that we find God and then realize that God created us from nothing. Rather, it is only in finding our own nothingness and embracing it that we realize God exists. For only an encounter with nothingness takes us far enough outside our world for us to realize that there is a giver of being who does not belong to it.

One finds God by dying. And what dies last and most reluctantly is our longing to be important, to be *beings in our own right*, our not wanting to have the mortally embarrassing realization that we are nothing and have done nothing to be worthy of existence (see Burke 1969:68). But only someone suffering that sense of unworthiness, of not deserving to exist, is in a position to know what it means to be loved into being by God. For it is precisely in our nothingness, and nowhere else, that God loves us. To be loved, we said, is to be wounded, and no love hurts more, pierces more deeply, than the kind we are completely undeserving to receive.

Understood in this light, the avoidances of our ordinary lives take on what I think is their true meaning. What we cannot bear, what we want most to undo, if only we could, is the fact that God created us from nothing—because that makes us, however

great the radiance he gives us, nothing more, in and of ourselves, than the undeserving recipients of divine generosity. We would like to be in a position to *look down* at nothingness as if we were superior to it; but, in fact, we have to *look up* from nothingness to the God who embarrasses us because he sees us naked in all our poverty. It is our nakedness we try to cover up. Everything in our ordinary life makes us want to avoid the embarrassment of it—and yet is there not something deeper in us that longs to confess it? Every once in a while, in our most intimate talks with each other, we come close to the most embarrassing revelation—and then pull back from it in terror. It is our deepest weaknesses we don't want known, and the deepest of all our weaknesses is our poverty before God, our having to be nothing, our having to be nothingness itself in God's presence. But this nothingness we have so dreaded to face or have seen is our only self. Because of our avoiding it, we have never been at home, have never known, even with all our comforts, the kind of serenity that comes only by being completely at peace with oneself.

It is, I think, God's love we have dreaded to find because it wrests from the deepest part of the self a confession of our poverty, our utter unworthiness to be at all, our nothingness, in and of ourselves, before God created us. The God who was supposed to save us from having to acknowledge our nothingness does not exist because the real God is found only by experiencing it. It is the very grievousness of our griefs that brings us to God, not because God relieves us of them but because, if we allow them to, they can teach us that our whole world is not as truly, fully, unmistakably real as our own nothingness, nor as real as the God who, knowing us in our nothingness, loves us into being. The real God, the God who evokes such extravagant gestures of worship from the martyrs and mystics, is not to be found in any way except through suffering. For worship, whatever its outward form, always requires one to say, in one's heart of hearts, "Thou art all, I am nothing."

From this perspective, which suffering makes possible, one realizes the truth of what the argu-

ments for God can only abstractly affirm—that the universe as a whole, and everything in it, is capable of not existing, that the possibility of not existing lies concealed, like an unnameable dread, at the heart of its being. As long as we resent the fact or find it nauseating, we stop one step short of being fully devastated by it. One's heart is only fully broken open when one realizes that this vulnerability in the heart of the universe testifies to its utter poverty, its utter dependence on a being who so loves the universe in its nothingness that he beckons it into existence.

And this brings us, I think, to the final twist in the bend of our reflections. The experience of nothingness is, as we have seen, an excruciating ordeal which we ordinarily spend our lives avoiding. But for someone who undergoes it, a miracle does happen, although it is not at all the miracle we have wanted and hoped for. The moment in which a human being accepts fully and without evasion the dreadful poverty of his own nothingness, and, with it, the horrifying poverty of everything that exists, that very moment is like the birth of a new universe. It is something like being present at creation. It is hard for us who live most of our lives on this side of suffering to have any more than an inkling of how it could possibly turn not just into joy but into ecstasy. But we love the things we love most deeply because they give us an intimation of something absolutely radiant, something infinitely lovable, infinitely precious, infinitely beyond our poetry to praise, something that we sense could satisfy that deep unnameable longing that even the most lovable things in the universe ignite but do not satisfy. When we lose the thing that gives us so clear, so perfect an intimation of something infinitely precious, the loss seems the most deadly of wounds, dashing everything we have longed for. But what we

never suspect, what we never in a million years would have thought to anticipate, is the simple truth that the only way we can ever find that infinitely lovable reality we have always looked for is by losing the very thing that has given us the most perfect intimation of it. It is *in* the very loss of one's child, in the very death of one's beloved, that one finds the God they were a reflection of. For only in suffering fully its loss do I let go of the intimation

and so allow it to reveal for the first time the God of whom it was an intimation.

We may want here an image of someone who does not just have an inkling of this God but lives every day in that upended universe, so different from our own, where nothingness is more real than the things we use to avoid it, and God more real than our intimations of God. It is the saints we understand least of all. We

think, from our perspective, only of how close they are to God. But what makes them different from us is how close they are to their own nothingness. That is why in most stories, in most religious traditions, the saints are drawn to beggars, to homeless derelicts, to lepers, to AIDS victims, to the dying who are too incompetent to control their own bowels. The leper, like the AIDS victim, suffers from a highly communicable and mortal disease. If the saint dares to come close to him, dares to embrace him, it is because she is not afraid of catching nothingness. It is already her own. We should not imagine kissing the AIDS victim as a sign of her willingness to risk her own life. It is, from her perspective, more like participating in the only life that really matters.

By reflecting on that image one can begin to appreciate what T. S. Eliot means in *The Four Quartets* when he says "humility is endless" (1952). It runs infinitely deeper, and so requires infinitely more

**This nothingness which I have
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most priceless of gems
because, when I finally accept
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courage, than the most unflinching despair. Despair goes far beyond the kind of therapeutic belief that uses God as a shield against the experience of nothingness. Such despair brings one to the edge of an abyss. It takes only one short step to fall from that position into the abyss itself, but taking it costs not less than everything (Eliot 1952:145). We cannot get to the bottom of our nothingness. But one can become intimate enough with it to recognize it as one's self and so look up from its bottomless depths to recognize the radiance of one who does not belong to our universe but is the Creator of it. From that recognition issues an inarticulate cry of praise that to our unaccustomed ears might sound indistinguishable from the cry of anguish. What we do not realize is that a mortal wound can become an endless fountain.

However well we hide it from ourselves, I think we all have in our heart of hearts an inkling of this humility, an intimation of this cry of anguish and praise. It is the part of us that is capable of embracing lepers. I have suggested that such humility is the deepest part of ourselves, the part that harbors the deepest truths. But it is only our griefs, our wounds, that can bring us to listen to them. A saying attributed to the poet Claudel captures this paradox: God writes straight with crooked lines. The most crooked path conceivable is the one that leads us up to God by inviting us to follow the intimations that lead us straight down into our own nothingness. That is the last place we would have ever thought to look for God. But it is there, and nowhere in our ordinary world, that we will know we have found our way home. ☉

NOTES

1. See *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "heart." I am grateful to Stephanie Fridie for this reference.
2. I am thinking, of course, of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.
3. Here and throughout, I am influenced by Martin Heidegger's discussion of the encounter with death in *Being and Time* (1962).
4. There is, of course, a kind of therapy which *helps* one address one's most upsetting experiences and questions, instead of avoiding them. Therapy in *this* sense moves in the opposite direction from the kind I am describing here.
5. I am thinking here of the vast new literature on death for which Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969) served as the catalyst.
6. See the fourteenth-century mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Johnstone 1973) and also Maritain 1954:18–20.

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