

Soul Stretching: Struggle

Job 7:1-7; Mark 1:29-39

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A colleague recently shared an e-mail called, "Things I've learned from my Children (Honest and No Kidding)." These are a few of the lessons this parent learned:

- ◆ A king size waterbed holds enough water to fill a 2000 sq. foot house 4 inches deep.
- ◆ If you hook a dog leash over a ceiling fan, the motor is not strong enough to raise a 42 pound boy wearing Batman underwear and a Superman cape. It is strong enough (if tied to a paint can), to spread paint on all four walls of a 20 by 20 foot room.
- ◆ When you hear the toilet flush and the words "Uh-oh," it's already too late.
- ◆ No matter how much Jell-O you put in a swimming pool, you still can't walk on water.
- ◆ VCR's do not eject PB&J sandwiches even though TV commercials show they do.

Ah, the challenges of parenting!

Parenting is not the only vocation with challenges. Life is marked by struggles of one nature or another. Each of us has stories to tell about the struggles that have changed and shaped our lives. Many of us have wounds that are still healing or scars that remind us of life's pain, not only our own but that of others. Our scars and wounds call us to be compassionate of others. The theologian Paul Tillich stated, "Almost every person you meet is fighting a great battle within."

In today's scripture, Job confronts God with the miserable state of his life. Job has lost his possessions, his family, and his physical health. He is struggling to remain faithful in the face of these devastating losses and to maintain some trust in the value of life. The long nights are marked by emptiness, misery, and tossing. It is hard to hold fast to the hope that his suffering will end.

Mark's gospel tells of the crowds of people who seek out Jesus because he heals the sick and casts out demons. The whole city of Capernaum gathers at Simon's door. The next morning the disciples tell Jesus, "Everyone is searching for you." It is testimony to the fact that struggle and suffering of various forms are a fact of life for all of us. We are eager to find some way out or at least through the trials of life.

The struggles we experience are usually significant sources of growth, if we allow them to be.

A man found a cocoon of the Emperor Moth and took it home to watch it emerge. One day a small opening appeared and for several hours the moth struggled but couldn't seem to force its body past a certain point. Deciding that something was wrong, the man then took a pair of scissors and snipped the remaining bit of cocoon. The moth emerged easily, its body large and swollen, the wings small and shriveled.

He expected that in a few hours the wings would spread out in their natural beauty, but they did not. Instead of developing into a creature free to fly, the moth spent its life dragging around a swollen body and shriveled wings.

The constricting cocoon and the struggle necessary to pass through the tiny opening were nature's way of forcing fluid from the body into the wings. The "merciful" snip was, in reality, cruel. Struggle, as it turns out, is an essential ingredient in the full development of the Emperor Moth.

Struggle is not entirely bad. Struggle is frequently a vital source of spiritual and psychological growth. Robert Morris says, "It is the way suffering is faced that makes the difference between whether pain, sorrow, difficulty, deprivation, or challenge become part of our soul's stretching or shrinking."¹ Struggle can stretch our souls or shrink our souls. The choice is usually up to us.

We have all known people who have become hardened and embittered by the challenges faced in life. They tend to be chronic complainers who feel entitled to the sympathy of others, yet their constant cries repel their friends and family. On the other hand are the quietly thankful folk who see life as a series of challenges to be faced. Suffering is something to be dealt with, lived through, learned from, and redeemed. This is a very different perspective than the victims who meet every trial with resistance, resentment, and anger.

"One family is sideswiped by the unexpected birth of a child with a catastrophic handicap, drawing the family closer together in mutual support. Their hearts are stretched: 'It's changed our expectations about what's important in life,' the father says. Another couple greets an infant with a lesser handicap with a resistant bitterness: 'It's like our lives were supposed to end up in southern California and we got hijacked to the Artic Circle!' The couple separates, their marriage relationship too strained to continue."²

No one who undergoes suffering is without moments of resistance, nights of anxiety, days of sorrow, and bursts of anger. Yet somehow those who grow more resilient find inner resources of acceptance, endurance, and

patience to deal with their trials. Acceptance often leads to gratitude, and in some cases, the transformation of adversity into compassion. So much depends on the state of heart and mind that meets, endures, and responds to struggle.

Job and Jesus give us some clues about how to move through struggle. Jesus, Simon and Andrew arrive at Simon's house following their visit to the synagogue. Simon's mother-in-law is a member of a faithful family. They do not meet the challenges of life alone, but they have the companionship of others on the journey of faith. In the midst of our struggles, we often want to withdraw from our support system, whether it be because we are exhausted, embarrassed, or independent. However, the support we receive from others can be life-giving and carry us through the challenges until we are renewed and raised to new strength and life. Allowing others to be caring companions helps us cope with challenges.

Turning to God in prayer is another means of renewing our strength in the midst of struggle. Job gives us permission to pour out our anger, doubt, confusion, and frustration in lament before God. We are free to be honest with God about how it feels to wade through the muck of life. Even Jesus struggles in his last hours, praying in Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me..." (Matt. 26:39). It is okay, encouraged, even healing to bring our doubts, our questions, and our pain before God. Such guthonest conversation is an act of faith.

In the crucible of struggle, we often come to the end of our limits. We hit bottom in terms of strength, of what we know, and sometimes who we are. We reach the limits of our control. In this poverty of spirit, we yield ourselves and our circumstances to God. We let go of our need to control, let go of our fear of the future, let go of the driven-ness that makes us controlling. Letting go is a positive choice. It is an act of faith. Letting go is trusting that our lives are ultimately in God's hands and not merely in our own. With a positive act of self-surrender, we can gain the energy we need to discover the freedom of choice and action available to us.

In surrendering the need to control the struggle, we also surrender to the triumphant power of God. In the Gospels we consistently witness God working through Jesus to alleviate suffering: healing the sick, forgiving troubled sinners, reconciling the outcast, and comforting the sorrowful. Jesus is the enemy of all that causes unnecessary suffering, inwardly or outwardly. There is a goodness that is larger than our suffering.

In prayerful surrender, we find ourselves tapping into the reservoir of God's grace that is far larger than our struggles. Resting in God's presence,

we become “less afraid of being vulnerable to pain, suffering, and death. Less afraid, so we can give up some of our fearful grip on ourselves. Less afraid, so we can live and die in more peace, hope, and trust.”³ Honest prayer to God about our struggle often is answered with courage, strength, peace, and hope to continue through it.

Mark tells us that Jesus is called from his personal retreat and prayer to return to an active ministry of teaching and healing. Although others have gathered in Capernaum to meet Jesus, he chooses not to go back, but to move ahead to neighboring towns and throughout the region of Galilee, for he is meant to proclaim the message to all.

Jesus’ decision to move into the next towns is a challenge for us to move on in our lives and faith. We have a choice. We can stay stuck in our struggles, wallowing in resentment, anger, and bitterness at the difficult blows life has dealt us, giving in to adversity, allowing our souls to shrink. Or we can choose to gratefully receive the growth that comes from suffering, acknowledging life as a series of challenges to be faced, tapping into inner resources to summon the patience, endurance, and acceptance to weather the struggle.

Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is healed of her fever, but she doesn’t stay in bed grasping all the sympathy and good wishes she can garner. She gets up and serves her family and guests with thanksgiving in her heart. She moves on with her life, undoubtedly changed by the illness she has suffered, but choosing to respond with grace, humility, and faith at the power and presence of God in her life.

Marilynne Robinson’s prize-winning novel, titled *Gilead*, is comprised of the reflections of Reverend John Ames near the end of his life. His grandfather was a preacher who came west to Kansas to fight for abolition. He “preached men into the Civil War,” then, at age fifty, became a chaplain in the Union Army, losing his right eye in battle. John Ames writes, “When my father found his father at Mount Pleasant after the war ended, he was shocked at first to see how he had been wounded. In fact, he was speechless. So my grandfather’s first words to his son were ‘I am confident that I will find great blessing in it.’ And that is what he said about everything that happened to him for the rest of his life, all of which tended to be more or less drastic.”⁴ “I am confident that I will find great blessing in it.” That’s the spirit of one who allows his soul to be stretched rather than shrunk.

My friends, the struggles of life are unlikely to cease, but we can choose how we will respond to them. We can see ourselves as victims, bitterly resenting our affliction. Or we can seize the presence of Christ and

the power of God to see us through the struggle, be shaped and formed by it, and move forward as transformed and blessed children of God. May you find great blessing in the struggles of life. Amen.

Compassionate God, we stand in amazement at the depth of your love for us. You came in the person of Jesus to be with us, to share the joys and burdens of life, to companion us through the darkness and lead us into light. We draw near to you, O God, for our struggles continue and we need to feel you close by our sides.

We open our hearts to you, O God, that you might enter in and share the burdens we carry. Come and share the grief of loss, loss of loved ones, loss of dreams. Come, Divine Lover, and feel the pain of broken relationships; may your healing hand mend the brokenness. Come into our anxiety and fear; overcome them with peace and fortitude to face the future. Abide with those who are distraught in body, mind or spirit that they will not struggle alone.

Loving God, we mourn with you so much tragic loss of life. We share the heartache of many who are stunned by accidents, disasters, and the inhumanity of humankind. Forgive us for our cruelty toward one another. Remove the blinders that make us indifferent. May we grow in respect for the gift of life and use our energies toward enhancing life.

We thank you for the life of Coretta Scott King, for her faithful work on behalf of civil rights for all who suffer injustice. We admire her courage and perseverance in the face of threat, hatred, and death. Make us so bold to speak out on behalf of justice for all.

Although our hearts are sometimes heavy, O God, knowing that you are with us lightens our load, for you offer us companionship in the struggle, hope for the future, and courage to move ahead with faith. We pray with our brother Jesus, as he taught us to pray....

¹ Robert C. Morris, "Suffering and the Courage of God," *Weavings*, September/October 2002, p. 7.

² Ibid., p. 9.

³ Ted Loder, *Loaves, Fishes, and Leftovers: Sharing Faith's Deep Questions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2005), pp. 181-182.

⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), pp. 35-36.

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